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Anne Collett

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

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Submission of a Word or Rich Text Format file by email attachment to acollett@uow.edu.au. Image files should be high resolution tif format and submitted on compact disc if larger than 1mb. Please include a short biography, address and email contact.

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Gordon Bennett, Metaphysical Landscape II, 1990
Oil on canvas; 117.5 x 6.5; 35.0 x 35.0 cm each panel.
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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

ARTICLES
Liz Mondel, ‘V.S Naipaul: The Melancholy Mandarin’ 18
Anthony Bourke, ‘Lines in the Sand: The Personal and Historical Story of an Exhibition’ 34
Brenda Cooper, ‘Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s By the Sea’ 79
Sara E. Cooper, ‘Humorismo en Cuba: Bohemia Comics from The Year of the Revolution’ 116
Orna Raz, ‘“From Greenland’s Icy Mountains”: The West Indians and the Church in An Unsuitable Attachment by Barbara Pym’ 137
Mohammad Quayam, ‘Interrogating Malaysian Literature in English: Its Glories, Sorrows and Thematic Trends’ 149
Pauline T. Newton, ‘From Chempaka, the Muslim Tree of Death, to Scarf-Covered Banana Plants: Postcolonial Representations of Gardening Images in Tash Aw’s The Harmony Silk Factory’ 170

FICTION
Olive Senior, ‘A Father Like That’ 106

MEMORIAL ESSAY
Robert Sullivan, ‘Hone Tuwhare 1922–2008: An Extraordinary Poet’ 8

POETRY
Syd Harrex, ‘Egina’, ‘Walking Out in the Clare Valley’, 33, 73
‘La Fontaine de Vaucluse’, ‘Leaves’, 105, 136

REVIEW ESSAY
Anne Collett, ‘Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet’ 188

ABSTRACTS 194
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS 197
NOTES ON EDITORIAL ADVISORS 200
EDITORIAL

This issue brings together essays on writers and artists from New Zealand, the Caribbean, Australia, India, South Africa, Angola, Morocco, Zanzibar, Canada, the UK, China, Cuba and Malaysia. It is eclectic and yet many of the essays interrogate and reflect upon a similar subject: the self transported, transformed, translated. To translate, as Salman Rushdie points out in ‘Imaginary Homelands’, is to ‘bear across’ — to cross borders, or even, some essayists in this issue would suggest, ‘to bear a cross’. The act of translation is often an act of sacrifice, suffering and loss — the loss of self as constituted by country of birth, land, language, religion, food, literature, art, music, custom and culture. Personal histories and geographies of the familial and the familiar are disrupted, disoriented even disappeared by a crossing that is forced or chosen (whether freely or under duress).

Ouyang Yu remarks that ‘After China, it seems, the original integrity of my soul could no longer hold together but must break into pieces of self at fissures of intense cross-cultural conflicts’ (99). But Rushdie claims, on behalf of ‘the translated man’ that, ‘[i]t is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained;’ and that the writer who has been ‘forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties’ is released to describe the modern world ‘in the way in which all of us, whether writers or not, perceive it from day to day.’ (12–13) This ‘provisional nature’ of the modern world to some degree equates with Brenda Cooper’s notion of ‘shape-shifting fluid boundaries’ within which nothing is pure (94) and Tony Simoes da Silva’s ‘fluid modernity’ (60); but Simoes da Silva insists that the particularity of this (post)modern world that creates the condition of displacement and thus the need for self translation, be recognised and acknowledged for what it is. He claims that ‘the subject position of the refugee has shifted from being temporally-limited and geographically determined … to a subject position now intrinsic to power distribution, world economies and wealth management.’ (59)

In quite different circumstance, but one in which he too might be understood to be caught ‘on shifting ground’ (Rushdie 15) between the worlds of Maori and Pakeha, the poet Hone Tuwhare requests in ‘Wry Song’ that:

… the texture
and fissured lines in
stone temper my life-style

to another self, enduring:
less faceless.

For in the tumult of my
separate hells, pummelled
I have been beyond shine or
recognition.²
This tumult of separate hells may have nothing to do with nation, and everything to do with the personal and the poetic; but whatever its source, this issue pays tribute to the shine of Hone Tuwhare who died in January of this year. His was no reflected light, but the sun, ‘who lavish spread his gold around’. Unfortunately Tuwhare was right, Time is

a limiting, inhibitive, sponsor man
of greed, hunger, one-eyed
telescope and key-hole peeping —
armed with a foreclosure on your life

but Time’s foreclosure on poetry is less sure: Tuwhare’s words overflow his life, like the boisterous and tender energy of the sea of which he writes with such fond knowing:

There let the waves lave
pleasuring the body’s senses,
and the sun’s feet
shall twinkle and flex
to the sea-egg’s needling
and the paua’s stout kiss
shall drain a rock’s heart
to the sandbar’s booming.

The sandbar’s booming recalls Tennyson’s ‘Crossing the Bar’ and the poet’s wish for ‘such a tide as moving seems asleep/ Too full for sound and foam/ When that which drew from out the boundless deep/ Turns again home’. This issue also marks Hena Maes-Jelinek’s crossing. Hena (who died in July this year) was a founding member of the European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies; a rigorous, imaginative and generous scholar; and a woman of warmth, vibrancy and grace.

Anne Collett

NOTES


5 ‘Sea Call’, Mihi, p. 166.

Hone Tuwhare 1922–2008: An Extraordinary Poet

My connection to Hone Tuwhare is mainly literary and through the broad kinship of our Ngâ Puhi tribe. While working on my first poetry book, I had a copy of Mihi next to me so Tuwhare was guiding the longhand. I have very fond memories of the three readings which he very generously included me in while he was the Literary Fellow at Auckland University, and an evening spent on the town with Tuwhare still ranks as the best night of my life. Yet, as I say, my relationship with him was as a member of his reading fan-club. As well as being invited to write this memorial piece, I was privileged to be asked to edit an issue of the new zealand electronic poetry centre online scholarly journal Ka Mate Ka Ora dedicated to Tuwhare to celebrate his many artistic and literary contributions to the region. So far, most of the contributions to the journal have been poems of celebration which is the most fitting tribute of course, given the immensely uplifting and tender nature of his oeuvre. This essay is part of my own preparation for editing that issue where I will write an extended meditation on Tuwhare’s massive contribution to Maori, New Zealand and Pacific letters.

My first encounter with Hone Tuwhare was through a first year university assignment about his poem ‘We Who Live in Darkness’; a gem of a poem, it combines political and mythological themes that speak to a brotherhood wanting to overthrow a patriarchy. In my assignment I equated this with a call for sovereignty. Its footnote in Deep River Talk: Collected Poems says it is about the rebellion of the children of Rangi (the skyfather) and Papa (the earthmother) as if to dissuade us from its political referent. I strayed into that debating chamber with my stage one English lecturer who I am still grateful to for teaching us the text. I might have added that the poem is part of the cosmogonic cycle where the fecund nights, or ‘po’, are giving way to the world of light via the deity of the forest and humanity, Tâne Mahuta, who lies on his back and pushes his feet upwards against the skyfather thus separating the earth and sky. The mention of that deity reminds me of a great kauri tree bearing that name in Waipoua Forest in the South Hokianga, not far from our ancestral mountain Whiria, one of the pillars of Ngâ Puhi Nui Tonu which is close to Tuwhare’s birthplace. A great tree has fallen.

To stay with the political scope, Tuwhare’s fifth book, Making a Fist of It, published in 1978, foregrounds the Matakite Maori political movement through his involvement in the 1975 Maori Land March on Parliament, where the poet quotes one of revered leader Dame Whina Cooper’s speeches in ‘Rain-maker’s Song for Whina’, and one of his many enduring poems ‘Papa-tu-a-nuku (Earth Mother)’: 
Hone Tuwhare (1922–2008)
Silver gelatin print
Photographer Reg Graham, fl 1999
Reg Graham Collection,
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.
We are stroking, caressing the spine
of the land.

We are massaging the ricked
back of the land

with our sore but ever-loving feet:
hell, she loves it!

Squirming, the land wriggles
in delight.

We love her.

(‘Papa-tu-a-nuku [Earth Mother]’ 29)

Making a Fist of It assertively packs in the politics: the title poem is set in Apartheid South Africa and puts one of the foulest Dutch swearwords, Godverdamme, in the mouths of white diamond mine owners. ‘After 151 Days of Rain...’ empathises with New Zealand’s red letter 1951 waterside workers’ lockout (37); a Dunedin street march and demonstration in October 1977 is celebrated, referring to Prime Minister Robert Muldoon’s pillorying of Polynesian ‘ overstayers’ while a monumental poet — like the Maori warrior cast in bronze discussed later in this essay — Robert Burns, looks on (‘Street March and Demonstration, Dunedin 14 October 1977’ 36); there is a communist dialogue that refers obliquely to the aluminium company Comalco (‘Pigeons’ 38); a class conscious poem talks about social life in the capital, Wellington (‘Social Notes on Wellington’ 20); and Tuwhare makes an uncharacteristically blunt call for privateers to leave the land (‘Warawara, Pureora, Okarito’ 35), ‘Bastards:/ Stop your raping of the land. / Fuck off’. He achieves the political tone with characteristic good humour though, which I will discuss later in terms of Tuwhare’s panegyric sensibility.

I might still be rewriting the assignment I worked on in 1986, as if to prove to my lecturer that Tuwhare was indeed political, and not just suitably mythological. His very presence as an indigenous poet was political in the racially charged, homophobic, gender-split, British-leaning New Zealand of the 1960s and ’70s. He was a Maori in a Pakeha literary world. His great Polynesian contemporary, Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, made identity-yearning a central theme of his work, whereas Tuwhare revelled in voicing, à la Bakhtin, the diverse identities in New Zealand’s social chorus, or as Bill Manhire said in his essay, ‘Dirty Silence’, he was an expert ‘code shimmerer’, able to negotiate different New Zealand and Maori Englishes within a poem. Code-shifting is also a linguistic feature of endangered languages; Tuwhare stopped speaking Maori when nine years old after shifting to South Auckland, like many Maori who migrated to the cities. Our Nga Puhi tribal dialect too is mixed with the language of late eighteenth century, and early nineteenth century whalers and missionaries, as well as the high rhetoric of chiefly oratory embellished by song-poetry and chant, and the vernacular.
Until recently Tuwhare’s predominant political mode always seemed oblique to me. I had read *No Ordinary Sun*, and his selected and collected poems, and his later books such as *Shape-Shifter, Short Back and Sideways*, and *Oooooo.....!!!* I knew politics were there, but I always imagined they were a thing to be unearthed from his poetic. His first book’s title poem, ‘No Ordinary Sun’, mourns the death of a tree as it meets a ‘gallant monsoon’s flash’ of an atomic test in the Pacific. Tuwhare was a member of the Allied occupation force in Japan just after World War II, and even spent a brief time in Hiroshima in 1946, and so was well aware of nuclear devastation (Hunt 49). ‘No Ordinary Sun’ is also an environmentalist poem, which can be read politically. Yet the politics I was looking for referred to indigenous peoples’ struggles in Aotearoa and elsewhere.

To pick up the environmentalist thread first, though: this might be an ingenious reading of his many myth-centered pieces, where a natural symbol such as the tree in ‘No Ordinary Sun’, or a deity such as oceanic Tangaroa, or the sun itself as a benign alter-ego, embodies another voice in the poem allowing a textual chorus to hop from stanza to stanza like birds in a tree. It is as if Tuwhare had an unwritten manifesto, where each poem needed to contain at least one reference to a natural thing. I suggest it comes from a Maori world-view where the natural world is mediated by a greater set of conscious beings (the many deities) and each natural sign comes to represent that multi-layered consciousness.

A famous early example of this code shifting is the poem ‘To a Maori Figure Cast in Bronze Outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland’, published in his third book *Sapwood and Milk*:

I hate being stuck up here, glaciated, hard all over
and with my guts removed: my old lady is not going
to like it.

I’ve seen more efficient scarecrows in seedbed nurseries. Hell, I can’t even shoo the pigeons off

Me: all hollow inside with longing for the marae on
the cliff at Kohimarama, where you can watch the ships
come in curling their white moustaches

Why didn’t they stick me next to Mickey Savage?
‘Now then,’ he was a good bloke
Maybe it was a Tory City Council that put me here

They never consulted me about naming the square
It’s a wonder they never called it: Hori-in-gorge-at-bottom-of-hill. Because it is like that: a gorge,
with the sun blocked out, the wind whistling around your balls (your balls mate) And at night, how I
feel for the beatle-girls with their long-haired boyfriends licking their frozen finger-chippy lips hopefully. And me again beetling
my tent eyebrows forever, like a brass monkey with real worries: I mean, how the hell can you welcome the Overseas Dollar, if you can’t open your mouth to poke your tongue out, eh?

If I could only move from this bloody pedestal I’d show the long-hairs how to knock out a tune on the souped-up guitar, my mere quivering, my taiaha held at the high port. And I’d fix the ripe kotiro too with their mini-piupiu-ed bums twinkling: yeah!

Somebody give me a drink: I can’t stand it.

‘If I could only move from this bloody pedestal I’d/ show the long-hairs how to knock out a tune on the/ souped-up guitar, my mere [club] quivering, my taiaha [spear] held/ at the high port’. The poem literally appears to be stamping its feet and holding its arms in an effort to stay warm just like the statue who stands on a plinth with ‘… the wind whistling/ around your balls (your balls, mate)’. There is political irony in the title word ‘Chief’, and the statue’s officially cultured silence ‘… how the hell can you welcome / the Overseas Dollar, if you can’t open your mouth/ to poke your tongue out, eh?’ Tuwhare was probably familiar with Mao’s writing on the role of the artist, as he had visited China in 1973 sponsored by the New Zealand communist party (Hunt 117). He was even a party member until 1956. The ideological stance of his poetry, reflected in the working class voice of mateship, emphasised accessibility and egalitarianism right until the end. The choral range of this particular poem is characteristic Tuwhare: working class, masculine, loving romantic, Maori, Maoist, activist, nurturing environmentalist, comedic. The Maori activist in the poem has ‘tent eyebrows forever’, alluding to the tent embassy camped in front of parliament after the 1975 Land March, while the poet himself makes a veiled appearance reading from a pedestal to a mainly Pakeha literary audience, but he feels compromised by his audience and so is silenced. The shifting of language reflects a double consciousness where words deploy several messages for several audiences. It would be entirely possible, for instance, to read this particular poem as a humorous meditation on a cold day, or as political or artistic or cultural satire, either entirely singly or in a number of combinations. Few members of the poem’s audience would have immediate access to all the necessary information to appreciate its themes. For instance, the reference to the cliff at Kohimarama would only be familiar to Aucklanders who know the story of Bastion Point and the many struggles of Ngati Whatua there, and of the obelisk which is Labour Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage’s tomb that literally embodies a governing relationship, an expectation of Treaty equivalence in setting and dignity, rather than being placed as ‘Hori-in-gorge-at-/ bottom-of-hill …’. Yet the poem appeals to all New Zealanders by calling the beloved Prime Minister ‘Mickey Savage’. The self-deprecating term ‘Hori’ invites laughter, while the clownish ‘Hell, I can’t even shoo the pigeons off …’
speaks of powerlessness. Despite the glossary, which feels correct and reverent and even misleading (for example Kohimarama is glossed in *Sap-wood & Milk* as ‘a formerly fortified Maori village associated with Bean Rock and the Ngati Paoa tribe’ [41]), there is an expectation that the audience needs to be familiar with the references; that is, they need to belong to the society of heterogeneous voices that the narrator comes from. The text positively shimmers with polyphony: the extraordinarily adept juggling of registers into exuberantly lusty, cathartically heightened, savvy and mordant, cheerily vernacular, mock aristocratic; political, social, historical, geographical, personable, and cultural references; and the nearly casual line-lengths — a far cry from the high rhetoric of *No Ordinary Sun* more than a decade earlier — owes as much to prose as to public poetry, and also to an artist’s flair. The prosaic layout of the poem also contrasts with others in the publication such as the minimalist opening poem ‘Wind Song and Rain’:

A poem is
a ripple of words
on water wind-huffed

But still water
is a poem winded: a
mirrored distortion
of sky
and mountain
trees: and a drowned

face waiting
for a second wind
(a second coming?)

Ripple of words
on water

The cadence is far from minimal, echoing some of the cadences of the King James Bible — one of the few books Tuwhare had access to as a child. The register is not as highly charged as the *Song of Solomon*, or the *Psalms*, but the lyric could easily be sung. His much loved poem, ‘Rain’, which has a similar movement, was sung by musician Don McGlashan on the recently released audio compilation, *Tuwhare*. The ripples in ‘Wind Song and Rain’ speak of delicate connections, and of Ralph Hotere’s visual lines included in the book that ripple in colour and monochrome, as if waiting for the poet’s breath to move them. It also reminds me of Tuwhare’s humble and much anthologised praise-poem celebrating Hotere’s art, simply named ‘Hotere’:

When you offer only three
vertical lines precisely drawn
and set into a dark pool of lacquer
it is a visual kind of starvation:
and even though my eyeballs
roll up and over to peer inside
myself, when I reach the beginning
of our eternity I say instead: hell
let’s have another feed of mussels

*Like, I have to think about it, man*

When you stack horizontal lines
into vertical columns which appear
to advance, recede, shimmer and wave
like exploding packs of cards
I merely grunt and say: well if it
is not a famine, it’s a feast

*I have to roll another smoke, man*

But when you score a superb orange
circle on a purple thought-base
I shake my head and say: hell, what
is this thing called love

*Like, I’m euchred, man, I’m eclipsed?*

Hotere and Tuwhare share a close artistic friendship. With the rich relationship between visual and verbal arts in mind, I include this poem dedicated to Tuwhare that I wrote while on a visit to Italy researching some of the sites of the Maori Battalion. This poem comes from a new sequence, in honour of my late grandfather Massey Turi Sullivan who was a battalion member and of Tuwhare’s generation, entitled ‘Cassino: Città Martire’:

Rawiri/David

*for the late Hone Tuwhare*

I returned to Florence still on my own.
Sunday morning at the Accademia seated
next to David, writing into the tapa:

amazing or as Tuwhare said of Hotere:
speechless/euchred/eclipsed. David’s enlarged
hand which killed a giant holds the stone by his right
thigh. I cannot believe in the hair up top
or down below, but veins in his arms,
creases in his belly button, nipples and strength

I believe in. Even his testicles wield
believable sacks — like rocks ready to be thrown.
Pow! He stands next to a phallic stump. His belly

juts with mana: Michelangelo’s strut post-haka.
The thighs fetch slightly chubby hints
of a boy whose knees wear youthful caps.
Yet visitors play with the digital David next to the real one. His ribs are visible on his left — I count five — but don’t see any on his right except muscle. Adam? After moving I see one on the right. His face shows intent but also a reflected fear cut there facing Goliath.

The forehead slightly creases, eyebrows furrow. Again the cheeks get chubby. He holds the sling strap like a microphone to his closed mouth. Sinews in that hand ridge like a scallop shell for a Venus. The veins from his stone holding hand run all the way up his right arm to the neck. From here the strap looks like a regal sash — his only clothing which slips down his back. From the right there’s no fear in the face — just rugged courage. I can only admire this man.

I also promised in this brief essay about Tuwhare’s poetry that I would discuss his celebratory qualities. The sheer zest in his final book’s title, Oooooo....!!!, with its suggestive cover picture of a green-lipped mussel in an open shell, speaks of sexual appetite and life. Another autographed ‘oooh!’ is in the front-matter of his biography by Janet Hunt (perhaps it’s only in my copy) so the exclamation is life-affirming rather than haunting! It would be interesting to count the number of appearances by Tangaroa, lord of the ocean, or the sun, or Maui, or unnamed deities embodied in forests, rains, creeks and rivers in his poetry. Still I find it hard to keep this promise as his passing is indeed a loss, and so forgive me. He was the first Maori writer to have a literary book published in English, and he belongs to a pioneering generation of Oceanic writers that includes Kath Walker, and Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, before the next expansive generation of Albert Wendt, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Russell Soaba, John Kasaipwalova, Vincent Eri, Konae Helu Thaman, Jack Gilbert, Henri Hiro, Keri Hulme, Alan Duff, John Dominis Holt and many unsung others. In 1975 Ken Arvidson identified Tuwhare as a leading figure in the establishment of an oceanic literature with centres in Aotearoa, Papua New Guinea, and Suva. He confirmed that by publishing thirteen books of poetry, many with multiple editions, and receiving numerous literary honours. Through sheer talent and aroha he became a central figure in most discussions of oceanic writing, quite an achievement in a critical New Zealand environment which has strong scholarly biases toward narrative-based and non-indigenous literature. Eric Schwimmer’s recent article in the *Journal of the Polynesian Society* strengthens the case for Tuwhare’s centrality through an extended Bakhtinian reading of the poem ‘On a Theme by Hone Taiapa’ which was already analyzed by Chadwick Allen in *Blood Narrative*. 
In the end, I feel like finishing with a late Tuwhare poem in that exuberantly named last book that is humble and beautiful, and very simply political, about an earth-fortress or pā (83), noting an imperialist history yet still including ‘all’ New Zealanders into the earth-mother’s embrace:

I feel like a vulnerable
pā-site, sacked, by
an unforgiving enemy
force & razed to a level
unbecoming, to a warrior-force,
but—freed at last,
to accept—with humility—
the earth-smelling pungency
of that Grand Dame—mother,
of us all: Papa-tu-a-Nuku:
our Earth-mum.
[Lie in peace great chief. Sleep on, sleep on. You have become a star. You will shine forever.]

Robert Sullivan
Ngā Puhi Nui Tonu, Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Raukawa, Galway Irish.

NOTES
1 Ralph Hotere has, like Tuwhare, an iconic status, being recognised as New Zealand’s greatest living visual artist.

WORKS CITED


Like it or not, Naipaul’s work represents an important postcolonial impulse/response that begs to be understood and interpreted. 
Selwyn Cudjoe (Cudjoe xiv)

I long to be happy, I still have a great instinct towards great happiness and delight and pleasure. And the idea was that the work would absorb and obliterate all my distress, continually.
V.S. Naipaul (Rowe-Evans 59)

V.S. Naipaul is often appreciated for his artistic sophistication and insight but criticised for perpetuating colonialist discourse in regard to England and the Third World. This essay seeks to explain, in particular, his textual responses to England and India, two cultural regions that have exerted profound and sustained influences on his literary and psychic development. It argues for the value of a psycho-biographical reading of Naipaul’s texts in order to ascertain what it may reveal about the enigmatic complexity of his cultural loyalties. To date, postcolonial studies has shown a preference for social and political readings, but such analyses tend to focus critics on the contentiousness of Naipaul’s writings — on what he has written, rather than why. I contend that it is important to ask ‘why’ because Naipaul’s view of the world is inextricably tied to his colonial subjectivity.

Naipaul’s colonial subjectivity is not in question, of course. Many critics acknowledge the colonial conditions that have contributed to Naipaul’s fiction and travel narrative, but few have produced detailed analyses of those conditions and attempted to locate his work in its historical context. Of those few, Selwyn Cudjoe argues that Naipaul ‘must be understood as a product of his history and his time’ and seeks to locate his work within the Caribbean tradition from which it arose (Cudjoe 4, 5). Similarly, Vijay Mishra has argued that Naipaul’s texts are allegories of diaspora (Mishra 191, 214), and he comes closest to a detailed examination of the historicity of Naipaul’s writing and his textual themes. Both of these critical analyses explain, among other things, Naipaul’s flight from the West Indies to London as a young, aspiring writer and assist a cursory understanding of Naipaul’s antipathy toward the Third World generally, but they do not shed light on the degree of aversion he displays in his texts toward India, the home of his ancestors. Neither do they explain why Naipaul implicitly absolves England of culpability in its imperial ventures.
In an attempt to understand this aspect of Naipaul’s complex literary persona, this essay will begin by looking into his texts to trace the influences of India, the culture and the geographical region that his forebears left behind, and England, the culture and geographical region to which he directed his energies and loyalties. It contends, firstly, that both India and England were constructed as myths in Naipaul’s mind as a result of his displacement into an in-between region — Trinidad — that neither he nor his community embraced as ‘home’. It then proposes that Naipaul’s texts can be read as melancholic expressions. This reading is grounded in Freud’s theory of melancholia and Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

Indian presence in Trinidad was the outcome of England’s recruitment drives for post-slavery labour in the West Indian sugar plantations. Members of Naipaul’s grandparents’ generation were part of the Indian response to these drives which took advantage of disrupted Northern Indian communities made vulnerable by drought and social change. Having been irrevocably altered by the experience of indenture, Naipaul’s family remained in Trinidad, struggling to find a new balance between Indian tradition and the demands of cultural reconstitution in a colony. By the time Naipaul was born in 1932, India had become an almost-forgotten presence, deep and remote in memory. He would later speak of this India as an area of darkness that he could not penetrate (Naipaul 1964 275). When it was recalled, according to Naipaul, it was in terms of decayed splendour: India had been, for instance, ‘a dismal, dusty land, made sadder by ruins and place names that speak of ancient glory … like Ayodhya’ (Naipaul 1972a 36). In his version, the degrading circumstances of Indians signing up for indenture had little if anything to do with the British, but with escape from a sense of ruin receding into a very distant past.

Against this sense of decay and encroaching extinction, and as a remedy for the fear it invoked, Naipaul developed a reverence for writing as one, if not the only, vocation of nobility. He was influenced in this by his father who (unusually at the time in Trinidad) had chosen journalism as a career and who had passed on his own incomprehensible fears of loss and associated remedy. Naipaul says: ‘And what is astonishing to me is that, with the vocation, he so accurately transmitted to me … his fear of extinction. That was is subsidiary gift to me. That fear became mine as well. It was linked to the idea of the vocation: the fear could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation’ (Barratt 84).

Naipaul’s own colonial English education consolidated his veneration of England as the cultural centre of writers. His desire to become a writer, however, was less to do with a desire to actually write than it was to do with an internalisation of the exalted opinion empire held of its own literature and its writers; and because he understood that the better the command you had of a culture’s text, the more likely you were to be embraced by it. He recalls: ‘when one was young one behaved as though there was God — that God was publisher, editor and critic,
and if you were good, regardless of your background and your themes, you would be received into the pantheon of writers’ (Hamner 1979 53).

Naipaul’s desire to be embraced into the pantheon of England’s writers can be understood as a psychological imperative, and is revealed by deploying Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject and Freud’s theory of melancholia. If, for the purposes of this analysis, we accept Freud’s theory of the psyche as it is defined in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, and we augment its use in studying the individual’s concept of his or her place in the primary social unit, the family, to a deployment for how it might elucidate Naipaul’s concept of his place in the broader social arenas of ethnicity/race/nation, then Naipaul’s biographical expressions become expressions of melancholia.

To enable an exploration of Naipaul’s textual melancholy, India is posited as Naipaul’s id, the deepest part of his unconscious self, the place of origin and myth, the place out of which his family reconstituted an identity consistent with the external reality of Trinidad. Trinidad functions as his ego, under the influence of English mores and values. England, then, is Naipaul’s superego, and out of this relationship between his ego and superego, in opposition to the unruly forces of the id, or, in terms of the parallel we are working with, between Trinidad and England, in opposition to the destitution of India, Naipaul develops an ego-ideal — to be a writer in the tradition of the English greats — that is entirely consistent with the textuality of empire.

Kristeva’s theory of the abject, as it is discussed in *Powers of Horror*, allows us to understand that in the opposition between the superego and the id, the superego’s formation of an effective ego-ideal is critical to its defence against the abjection of the id. Naipaul’s identification of India with destitution and abjection, and of England with writing and nobility, underscores the necessity of his move to London in order to avail himself of the nobility that writing from the metropolitan centre offers. Therefore Naipaul’s dependence on the metropolitan centre is not just an outcome of underdevelopment in the colonial periphery, in that he is drawn to the intellectual and material opportunities that it provides, but more a matter of psychological survival, in that London will award him the nobility of writing that will hold at bay the abjection that always threatens.

It can be understood, also, that the more wonderful his new ego-ideal of being a writer in England appeared to be, the more the threat of abjection loomed, and I submit that this is a phenomenon linked to the geographical separations of his psyche. What I mean is that Naipaul’s psychic development in Trinidad was grounded in an ‘in-between’, knowable and fixed location subjected to opposing cultural forces of which he had no tangible experience. Neither India nor England could be submitted to a ‘reality check’ and so took on extraordinary mythical proportions. There also appears to have been an assumption when he left Trinidad that when he arrived in London he would finally feel ‘at home’ in the world, not only because he perceived that London fostered writers, but also because
of a perception that London was that real and actual heart of civilised society for which he longed and of which Trinidad was only a copy. Unfortunately for Naipaul, he became painfully aware that his fantasy — the one in which England would work its magic, embrace him and make a writer out of him — was a long way from being realised and he also realised that London was ‘something less than the perfect world [he] had striven towards’ (Naipaul 1987 121). He says: ‘I came to London. It had become the centre of my world and I had worked hard to come to it. And I was lost. London was not the centre of my world. I had been misled; but there was nowhere else to go’ (Naipaul 1991 416).

It is evident from various texts that after so many years of desire, his disorientation at finding the real England different from his fantasy threatened his ambition and had him casting around for explanations, but it becomes increasingly evident from the myriad of Naipaul’s recollections that despite his initial shock, he is less inclined to fault England for its failure to deliver him a writer’s paradise than he is disposed to blame his own colonial imperfections. He acknowledges that in London he is confronted by feelings of colonial marginality, incongruity and inferiority, confessing that: ‘[o]ne of the terrible things about being a Colonial … is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know’ (Rowe-Evans 40), but he appears to suffer no frustration that the ‘second-hand’ (Naipaul 1979a 57) society from which he hails is the product of imperialism. Indeed he is at pains to reassure his audience that he harbours England no ill-will: ‘I like London … it is the best place to write in’ (Naipaul 1979b 12).

Undoubtedly there is an element of pragmatism in his response given that Trinidad cannot compete with London’s commercial apparatus for the publication and promotion of books, neither can it offer a reading audience. However, once Naipaul was confronted with the reality of England and became reconciled with the need to create his own writing career rather than have it bestowed upon him, why did he not, at that point, form a more critical view about English cultural value generally; why, for instance, does he not question the role of Britain in the displacement of his family from India to Trinidad, and why, in a postcolonial milieu of reckoning by the majority of ‘postcolonial’ writers, has he produced books that are remarkable for positing India as hapless, decaying, and deserving of foreign invasion? ‘Every discipline, skill and proclaimed ideal of the modern Indian state’, he says, ‘is a copy of something which is known to exist in its true form somewhere else’ (Naipaul 1972b 90) and, ‘[e]ighteenth-century India was squalid. It invited conquest’ (Naipaul 1964 216). He sees ‘ruin on ruin’ (218) and futility (238). He accuses Indians of banality, simplicity, inadequacy and intellectual failure (Naipaul 1972b 79–90). He declares that the misfortune of successive invasions in India is that they have slowed down the rate of decay: ‘It is as if successive invasions, by the reaction they provoked, that special Indian psychology of dependence, preserved an old world which should have been
allowed to decay centuries ago’ (96–97). This is indeed moral censure stretching into the distant past.

England, on the other hand, is portrayed in an entirely different light. Tellingly, there is no rancour towards the English for their oppression of Indians:

We had been slaves for centuries, and when the independence movement started we had to have some tonic — that we were not as bad as the British had called us. To gain our self-respect, we started thinking we had a very ancient civilization — and of course there’s some truth in that. But then it also had its weaknesses that made us slaves for a long time. (Naipaul 1991 416)

It is not that Naipaul fails to see England’s part — he recognises it readily enough — but that he censures Indians for their own subjection. Naipaul accepts Britain’s role as conqueror as inevitable, not only because Indians are unworthy to govern themselves, but also because Britain is a most worthy governor: ‘No other country was more fitted to welcome a conqueror; no other conqueror was more welcome than the British’ (Naipaul 1964 226). He speaks nostalgically of the Raj, describing it as a ‘tremendous achievement’ (213) and defends British narcisism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as ‘justifiable’ (209). He does agree that the British pillaged the country thoroughly and contributed to the irrevocable decline of local Indian manufacture and craft and owns that perhaps the British are responsible for Indian artistic failure and Indian bewilderment, but he says that this has to be accepted because ‘[i]t was a clash between a positive principle and a negative; and nothing more negative can be imagined than the conjunction in the eighteenth century of a static Islam and a decadent Hinduism’ (223). He adores the railways of the Raj, as many do, but laments that a ‘service so complex and fine deserves a richer country, with shining cities organised for adventure’ (237). Even India’s landscape fails an internalised romantic standard.

The beginnings of an understanding about Naipaul’s cultural loyalties are found in a comment made by Naipaul himself: ‘in my attempts to come to terms with history, my criticism, my bewilderment and sorrow, was turned inward focusing on the civilisation and the social organisation that had given us so little protection’ (Naipaul 1991 399), and the centre of the answer lies in understanding that Naipaul’s assessments of England and India are less about political and social realities than they are about himself. Kapur expresses it particularly well:

it should be clear, at this late stage in Naipaul’s career, that the value of his work does not rest on his political analyses. To read the works solely as political or historical narratives is to do them an injustice, to refuse to consider them on their true merits. Their grand sweep notwithstanding, Naipaul’s books have never really been about politics or history. His chronicles have been profoundly personal; his political stands should be read for insight into Naipaul himself, as autobiography. Naipaul’s manifold insecurities are imprinted on every outlandish judgment and every flawed political analysis. (Kapur 1998 57)

Haydn Williams observes that although Naipaul’s search to find his lost imagined India has proved to be in vain, his voyages to India have proved to
be immensely fruitful for self-discovery. Any disillusionment he has felt has ultimately been with himself (Williams 359–60). This can be seen in his texts as slippages from criticism of India to criticism of himself. He says: ‘[the] idea of ruin and dereliction, out-of-placeness, was something I felt about myself’ (Naipaul 1987 19).

It is clear that Naipaul is inclined to deal with his bewilderment and sorrow by turning inward with his criticism. What he finds to criticise is that which he sees when he turns to India: abjection — the very thing that opposes his ideal of nobility. The tragedy is that Naipaul’s apprehension of abjection — that is, both his fear and cognisance of abjection — and the consequent formation of his desire to be a writer (the means to attain nobility with which to resist it), both have their origins in England’s imperial intrusion into India, and only England can assist him to become a writer. England is both the cause and remedy of his need; England is responsible for the life in Trinidad that resulted in the shaping of his fantasies of India and England. When he arrives in London and discovers his fantasy of a writer’s paradise shattered, he finds himself in a double-bind. How is he to deal with his bewilderment and sorrow? If he directs his grief outwards towards England he risks alienating the writing industry that he needs more than ever to assist him in his quest to be a writer. There is no question of returning to Trinidad. According to Kristeva’s theory there is no question of abandoning his ego-ideal for to do so will leave him floundering in utter abjection. The alternative, according to Freud, is to turn his grief inwards, and there he beholds the abjection of India. It can be understood, consequently, that whether he turns his grief towards England or towards India, the same psychological abyss threatens him.

In his subsequent journeys to the real India, then, he sees only the abjection that he expects to see. This is born out in the acute revulsion he expresses, wherever he goes during his first visit, about grime and excrement. Kristeva identifies abjection with the body’s rejection of unwanted matter as a symbol of loss and death and says: ‘it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (Kristeva 4). Given that Naipaul is a composite man made of disparate cultural parts, his sense of wholeness, completeness, order and identity is precarious and easily disturbed. At the first disturbance to that vision his very identity is in question, and as his comments over the years suggest, the question mark remains. He insists that he belongs nowhere, that he has no political affiliations, that he is homeless. He has almost glamorised the condition of exile, which again, according to Kristeva, is a feature of abjection. Permit me to quote Kristeva at length:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter — since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichaean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing
to know his abjections is not all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

Instead of sounding himself as to his ‘being’, he does so concerning his place: ‘Where am I?’ instead of ‘Who am I?’ … A devisor of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines — for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject — constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved. (8)

Thus we can see that, beset by abjection, Naipaul is fundamentally concerned with where he does or does not belong. It is a matter of ‘place’, which helps to explain why, when he arrived in London, he was so bewildered when it turned out to be a place other than he expected, and when he discovered that as a colonial he did not really belong.

Notwithstanding his claim to homelessness, however, Naipaul did make a choice after he arrived in London. There is a fundamental difference between the two courses of psychological action that were open to him (that is, whether to turn his grief outwards or inwards) that explains his decision to be loyal to England. By turning his grief inwards, he could remain in London and still pursue a writing career of sorts — the psychological implications being that while he must always feel the pressure of encroaching abjection, he has at least the writer’s nobility with which to resist it. There is a price to be paid for his decision though, and it is here we negotiate between Kristeva’s theory of abjection and Freud’s theory of melancholia.

Firstly, I wish to restate from a Freudian perspective just how important it has been for Naipaul to pursue his desire to be a writer. Freud explains it like this:

The development of the ego consists in a departure from the primary narcissism and results in a vigorous attempt to recover it. This departure is brought about by means of the displacement of libido to an ego-ideal imposed from without, while gratification is derived from the attainment of this ideal. (Freud 1952 410)

Freud makes it clear that once an ego-ideal has been formed, healthy development of the ego requires the attainment of that ideal. I have demonstrated that Naipaul’s particular ideal was formed as a result of the influences of his colonial circumstances — the disruption of Indian tradition juxtaposed against both his father’s love and his colonial education that privileged the English text. It follows that attainment of his ambition to be a writer is crucial for his psychological health. Naipaul is in no confusion about this. Doubts that he can attain his ambition initially arise when he arrives in London where he is confronted by his sense of alienation from the Oxford literary tradition and his feelings of inadequacy as a writer in that tradition. Sensing that he has been ‘tricked’ by England, Naipaul is confronted by a threat to his ego-ideal. England, no longer his trusted ally, has become a
‘confidence trickster’. He cannot be angry at England because even if he creates a writing niche for himself (and he does), he cannot risk alienating the publishing industry and the audience that England provides. If he cannot be angry then he cannot grieve the betrayal.

Freud also makes it clear that the sufferer of an intangible loss needs to grieve as he or she would for a tangible loss, in order to release the ego from its libidinal attachment. If the work of grief is delayed or obstructed, however, the sufferer becomes trapped in a state of melancholia. Some of the more salient features of melancholia will be addressed here in turn. The first is the turning of blame away from the perpetrator of the betrayal onto the sufferer’s own ego — or, in Naipaul’s case, the disinclination to call attention to England’s faults and instead draw attention to the faults of Trinidad. As his melancholia deepens, however, he looks beyond his ego and finds fault with India, which, as his id, is the very core of his being. Naipaul is not blind to England’s faults, neither is he blind to the benefits it has reaped as an imperial power at the expense of its colonial territories. He simply does not censure them. Rob Nixon observes that ‘when Naipaul finds occasion to criticise England, he does so not to tax it with the imperial past or with abuses of metropolitan power, but to lodge contrary complaints: that the democratic ambitions of the postimperial welfare state betray the best English values and hasten national decline toward a third world level of degeneracy’ (Nixon 23). Note the following passage from The Enigma of Arrival:

To see the possibility of, the certainty, of ruin, even at the moment of creation: it was my temperament. Those nerves had been given me as a child in Trinidad partly by our family circumstances: the half-ruined or broken-down houses we lived in, our many moves, our general uncertainty. Possibly, too, this mode of feeling went deeper, and was an ancestral inheritance, something that came with the history that had made me: not only India, with its ideas of a world outside men’s control, but also the colonial plantations or estates in Trinidad, to which my impoverished Indian ancestors had been transported in the last century — estates of which this Wiltshire estate had been the apotheosis.

Fifty years ago there would have been no room for me on the estate; even now my presence was a little unlikely. But more than accident had brought me here. Or rather, in the series of accidents that had brought me to the manor cottage, with a view of the restored church, there was a clear historical line. The migration, within the British Empire, from India to Trinidad had given me the English language as my own, and a particular kind of education. This had partly seeded my wish to be a writer in a particular mode, and had committed me to the literary career I had been following in England for twenty years. (Naipaul 1987 52)

It is clear that Naipaul has a good grasp of England’s role in his own history, and it is clear that he understands that the Wiltshire estate is one of many that made its fortune out of the West Indies, but he is content to make observations about England’s imperial wealth without passing moral judgment — something few other postcolonial intellectuals, if any, can condone. As noted earlier, Naipaul does not exercise anywhere near the same restraint when it comes to India. He
feels free to use such adjectives as ‘weak’, ‘absurd’, ‘dark’, ‘wounded’, ‘sick’ and ‘inadequate’ in relation to its culture and society. If, as it is suggested, he is turning his blame inwards, then his self-abasement is truly frightful. One can see the spiral that he is in, for in order to ‘save’ himself from abjection, he needs to write, but when he writes, he can only write of what he knows — and so he must constantly look at what he is running away from.

There is another aspect of melancholia, however, that asserts itself as both a symptom and a precondition. Freud explains that loss in a relationship is an opportunity for ambivalence about the relationship to come into the open. The internal conflict created by the ambivalence in the mourner is dealt with, as we know, by the turning of blame away onto the sufferer’s own ego as if he or she is responsible for the loss, thereby protecting the relationship, and it is this that distinguishes mourning from melancholia. The ambivalence towards the lost love continues to exert itself by tormenting the lover with the illness of the sufferer’s self-debasement (Freud 1957 160). As I understand Freud’s thesis, the person to whom the ambivalence is directed may or may not be aware that they have created suffering because they are not being held accountable. They are, however, generally within range of the melancholic’s actions — that is, they can be affected by what the melancholic may or may not do. The melancholic will use this advantage to create difficulty and discomfort in the life of the lost love in indirect ways. Perhaps the sufferer will endlessly draw attention to their dependence and victimhood; perhaps they may even attempt suicide. Some may be inclined to feel that Naipaul’s attacks on the Third World are a form of identity suicide; Naipaul’s victimhood as a homeless person is well documented but what I particularly wish to draw attention to is the way in which Naipaul resists the textual authority of England even while he defers to its traditional magnificence.

Naipaul’s texts contest English textual authority in subtle ways, one of them apparent in the way he begins to hybridise the genres of autobiography, fiction and travel narrative. Elleke Boehmer observes that ‘the hybridity of a migrant’s art may well signify a freeing of voices, a technique for dismantling authority’ (Boehmer 238–39). Homi Bhabha has described a ‘space of the adversarial’ within which pressure can be exerted along the boundaries of authorisation (Bhabha 1985 152). This space develops as the result of the ambivalence that is inherent in colonialist discourse:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of a hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (154)

In regard to Naipaul, I am suggesting that in allowing or producing a space for intervention, the ambivalence of colonial authority provides an opportunity for
V.S. Naipaul: The Melancholy Mandarin

Naipaul to display his own melancholic ambivalence in a manner that does not put his career at risk. He does not use the space to exert pressure on the legitimacy of colonial power as such, but he does exert pressure ‘along the boundary’ of the authority of the English text — not the authority of its content, but the authority of its form. Naipaul’s ambivalence becomes apparent in aesthetics.

Bhabha proposes elsewhere that the most effective forms of resistance to established power structures are those that slightly alter the language of authority. He speaks of engaging in ‘sly civility’ and splitting the language of authority to return it in a ‘just-slightly-altered-state’ (Mitchell 81). I am not proposing that Naipaul is consciously engaging in ‘sly civility’, but I am suggesting that in slightly altering established genres of writing he is engaged in a subtle form of textual subversion, consciously or not.

Naipaul is conscious that in finding his own voice as a writer, he has had to depart from the traditional narrative form. The novel, he agrees, is the most suitable literary form for dealing with emotions, impulses and moral anxieties, but it ‘works best within a confined moral and cultural area, where the rules are generally known’ (Naipaul 2000 49). His difficulty has been that a successful novel is based on an assumption of a shared history and a shared understanding of society between writer and audience. From the very beginning in London, Naipaul has been acutely aware of the restrictions that this has imposed on him: ‘It is an odd, suspicious situation: an Indian writer writing in English for an English audience about non-English characters who talk their own sort of English’ (Naipaul 1979b 8).

It is not that his English audience is a stranger to fiction about the orient — ‘people have been used to reading about non-Europeans through European eyes. India, with the vision of Kipling or Forster, of J.R. Ackerley or John Masters, is best-selling territory’ (8) — but that notwithstanding his colonial education, he is a foreigner with a colonial-Hindu background (134) and a colonial-Hindu set of cultural references. The problem of being ‘almost the same but not quite’ or ‘almost the same but not white’ (Bhabha 1984 130) has been real enough to put limitations on his subject matter, and for this reason he feels that he has exhausted the novel form quickly.

Naipaul has decided that travel and writing of travel will solve his dilemma — perhaps in the travel book he can more easily instruct his audience; perhaps he is freed from the tedium of constructing plots for an English audience in incongruous settings; perhaps, as he has intimated, he is lured by the glamour of travel (Naipaul 2000 29). Most certainly, as a deject and a stray, he has no alternative but to travel. However, he has struggled to find his voice within this genre as well.

Part of this struggle has been because of his uncertainty of how to proceed in a genre that has not provided him with role models — that is, he is not a traveller like other travellers before him. These others, Huxley, Lawrence and
Waugh, wrote at a time of empire with the assurance of imperialism, ‘using the accidents of travel to define their metropolitan personalities against a foreign background’ (Naipaul 2000 29). Naipaul has discovered that even though he starts from Europe and returns to London to write, when he travels he is visiting areas of the world that are similar to his own background, or, he is travelling to his ‘un-English’ fantasy of India and thus his view, unlike the others, is of the ‘insider’. Again, as he finds when he writes novels, he is writing from ‘inside’ his own experience to an audience that he is ‘outside’ of. He is plainly nervous about being a trailblazer, unhappy about the ‘rawness of [his] nerves as a colonial travelling among colonials’ (Naipaul 1979b 140–41). He would, quite simply, rather be an Englishman. Things would be so much easier:

in many practical ways, things are harder for the writer who comes from an undeveloped society. Apart from the sheer difficulty of getting away, in order to get started at all. I can’t help thinking that I might have had much greater success, been much better understood as a writer, if I had been born in England. As it is, one has no cultural attaches [sic] in a hundred countries pushing one’s work. (Rowe-Evans 61)

As far as Naipaul is concerned, it is England that has misunderstood him and England that has failed to embrace him as its own.

Naipaul expresses another difficulty with writing travel literature that I believe is linked to his insecurity about his ‘place’ in the writing world and that is to do with his narrative presence in the text: ‘I had trouble with the “I” of the travel writer; I thought that as traveller and narrator he was in unchallenged command and had to make big judgments’ (Naipaul 2000 31). He is confused about the degree of authority he should assume and of how visible he should be in the text. He is nervous of displaying too much of his colonial incompleteness, but as his texts are compulsively more about the internal Naipaul than they are about external matters, he is uncertain of how to proceed. He has no role models. He cannot hide behind fictional characters. He feels unwanted, but he needs England. What can he do? He can redesign the rules of genre and use them in his own unique way: he can assert a certain amount of travel writer’s authority and glamour, he can retreat into fiction, and he can continue in his journey of self-discovery, all within one book. His fiction and nonfiction also inform each other, as Peggy Nightingale points out:

Naipaul’s fictional and nonfictional writings are closely interrelated, complementing and enhancing one another. Interestingly, much of the time the novelist Naipaul continues to work towards the conclusions which are explored in subsequent fiction, while the journalist Naipaul observes the scenes, characters, and situations which provide the raw material of the fiction. (58)

By resisting the ‘rules’ of genre, Naipaul is using the ‘adversarial space’ of which Bhabha theorises; the place opened up by the ambiguity of colonialism. Naipaul, as he admits himself, is an incongruous figure in England. He is a writer in England because of colonialism’s own ambiguity about educating and then
containing its own colonial subjects. He has been given the opportunity to write, but no sense of belonging to a writing community. In his attempt to resist the constrictions, he has found a ‘weak spot’ in textual authority that has given him some room to move as a writer.

Naipaul’s blending of genres is particularly evident in *The Enigma of Arrival*. It is undisguisedly autobiographical, although to what degree it is difficult to say simply because it has been officially designated a novel. Certainly there are many passages that bear a striking resemblance to Naipaul’s own life and circumstances, and as they are spoken in the first person there is the feeling of slippage between fiction and non-fiction that one does not expect in a novel. It is apparent, however, that he is his own subject: ‘I had as it were — and as had happened often before — become one of my own characters’ (Naipaul 1987 151).

There is something else that is noteworthy in *The Enigma of Arrival*. Naipaul is an observer in this book, of an unfamiliar environment and unfamiliar people, and even self-consciously an observer of his own observations — as he is in all his books. In *The Enigma of Arrival*, however, his gaze is directed at the English, in a part of England that still retains some vestiges of imperial glory. As he details, he settles into a cottage on a Wiltshire estate in order to write, within the grounds of a grand house, in which resides a Lord who is descended from those who made their fortune in the West Indies. Naipaul reflects that the very processes that enabled the establishment of this estate also gave him the language and education that brought him here. His presence in the cottage is unlikely, but one gets the feeling from his writing that he spends a rather delicious time quietly observing the seasonal activities of the staff and the neighbours. By writing about them in this book, and simply by being present in the valley, he is upsetting the established order of imperial England:

a man from another hemisphere, another background, coming to rest in middle life in the cottage of a half neglected estate, an estate full of reminders of its Edwardian past, with few connections with the present. An oddity among the estates and big houses of the valley, and I a further oddity in its grounds. I felt unanchored and strange. Everything I saw in those early days, as I took my surroundings in, everything I saw on my daily walk, beside the windbreak or along the wide grassy way, made that feeling more acute. I felt that my presence in the old valley was part of something like an upheaval, a change in the course of the history of the country. (19)

He is also upsetting imperial order by studying the English in their own setting, and reporting back to his readership in much the same way that travel writers and anthropologists of Empire did about the Orient. Boehmer explains that in the ‘scrutiny of the colonised by the coloniser, there was much the attitude of the voyeur as well as of the map-maker’ (Boehmer 71), and what we see in *The Enigma of Arrival* is Naipaul returning the imperial gaze. He risks being perceived as impertinent but he finds the role of voyeur irresistible. Accordingly, he speaks of his landlord with deference, somehow managing simultaneously to draw attention to the decrepitude of the estate and its inhabitants. This is indeed
a subtle display of ambivalence. Whether Naipaul is or is not cognisant of his psychological or textual ambivalence towards England, he has created a unique niche for himself a writer, slightly altering and sometimes reversing the textual traditions of the nation that seduced him and betrayed him, without creating a rift in the relationship between them.

Naipaul remains an enigmatic literary figure. Conscious of his colonial marginality, he has struggled with England’s ‘betrayal’ and the consequent threat to promised nobility. Without it, innate abjection has threatened to overwhelm him. In a situation such as this, Freud proposes that if the sufferer of loss cannot direct his or her grief outwards by placing blame onto the source of the loss, whether it is because the loss is unconscious, or because blame must be withheld for pragmatic reasons, then blame will be directed inwards. It is evident from Naipaul’s texts that this is precisely the behaviour that he has engaged in subsequent to his initial disappointment in London. Unable to abandon his ego-ideal of writing, he has created a writing niche for himself through sustained and concerted effort but, dependent on the metropolitan centre for its publishing industry and its readership, and conditioned to privilege English culture through his formal and informal education, he turns inwards any criticism he is inclined to make, blaming his imperfect colonial origins on innate Indian abjection. On England’s contribution to his distress he remains coy.

The ‘Indian trilogy’ demonstrates Naipaul’s continued fascination with his own distant past, for India is the place he is drawn to visit repeatedly and yet flee from in distaste, notwithstanding his attempts at objectivity in A Million Mutinies Now. His incessant travel in order to find writing material is a symptom of his concern with where he should be and what he should know in order to avoid the ever-present danger of abjection. He must travel, and he must write, chasing the elusive nobility that will save him from abjection but, always turning inwards and backwards in order to protect his relationship with England, and able only to write about the colonial worlds from which he comes, he is caught in a predicament: in order to hold abjection at bay, he must continually bear witness to his own abjectness.

What could be regarded as a miserable situation is somewhat relieved by Naipaul’s flair for manipulating textual genre to suit his own needs, and in this way he exerts pressure on the traditional authority of English text in a subtle and creative way. Bhabha has provided a useful model for understanding the space in which Naipaul can express his ambivalence about England in slight, artful alterations of textual tradition. Bhabha explains an ‘adversarial space’ opened up by the ambiguity inherent in colonialism’s practice of educating colonial subjects. Neither wholly of England’s textual tradition, nor wholly outside of it, Naipaul has occupied this space in order to express his own ambiguity. The ambiguity is perhaps most poignantly expressed in his elegiac The Enigma of Arrival, in which, in the midst of nostalgic expressions of lost empire, he returns the colonial gaze.

The purpose of this reading is not to suggest that Naipaul is an imperial victim who is to be excused from holding Indians wholly accountable for their
own colonial subjection, but to suggest that although Naipaul appears to absolve England of imperial culpability, his texts demonstrate the destabilising effects of colonial projects in the lives of indentured Indians in Trinidad; that his texts are a lingering legacy of England’s intrusion into India.

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Syd Harrex

EGINA

The island’s white-washed villas
are semi-blinding in the sun;
others painted in pastel colours
converse with their green gardens,
their orange and lemon orchards
garrulous with unchecked grass.

Elderly ladies in black shawls
accept an invitation from Hades
to drowse in the shade of cypresses,
while their men-folk in quay-side cafes
sip coffee and ouzo, and stretch a joke
the length of a summer afternoon.

Even the cemetery dead partake
of the town’s affairs (their marble
graves like icing on wedding cake),
as through the eyes of their formal
photographs, they soliloquise
on business and bliss in the after-life.

The xylophone feet of phaeton
horses echo down the street that takes
us out of town through fig-tree fields
of scarlet poppies, yellow daisies, stems
with pale-blue pre-Raphaelite eyes;
Nature that always, that never dies.

I stroll for a mile, rest by a wall;
think of all I lack in accurate speech,
even to mime so clear a miracle
as dappled sunlight on a white wall.
Thus mute and meek, I want to do some thing
outlandish, freakish. Jump across the wall
and disappear entirely through the mirrors
of my own eyes, like an Indian fakir,
being the other side of sight just once
before I gratify some undertaker.

(from Atlantis and Other Islands, 1984, Dangaroo Press, Mundelstrup, pp. 24–25)
My great-great-great-great-grandfather Philip Gidley King, Second Lieutenant to Captain Arthur Phillip had arrived in Botany Bay on HMS Supply, landing at Yarra Bay. On the 19th January 1788, both Phillip and King walked across the hot sand, in uniforms most unsuitable for the January heat. As they searched for water, they had the first encounters with Aborigines. On the first evening in Port Jackson on the beach with Aborigines at Manly Cove, Captain Arthur Phillip wrote: ‘As their curiosity made them very troublesome when we were preparing our Dinner, I made a circle round us; there was little difficulty in making them understand that they were not to come within it, and they then sat down very quiet’ (qtd in Smith 16).

King would document several of these early encounters over the next few days. The other better known journal writers such as Watkin Tench, David Collins and John Hunter were on the other First Fleet ships, days behind HMS Supply. King’s accounts (and his later account of the settlement of Norfolk Island) were subsumed into the published journals of other writers. John Hunter for example, included material from King’s diary without acknowledgement which made it impossible for him to be published himself. King felt cheated about this and his annoyance and difference of opinion is obvious in his annotations in his personal copy of Hunter’s journal. This remained in the family for several generations, was purchased by a noted collector, and then auctioned in London several years ago.

I have been involved in Aboriginal art as a curator and gallerist for over twenty years. I was fortunate in the mid to late 1980s to meet or work with an extraordinary generation of emerging artists and curators including Gordon Bennett, Tracey Moffatt, Michael Riley, Brenda Croft, Hetti Perkins and Djon Mundine. I have always been especially interested in works that specifically address indigenous/settler first encounters as they have provided an Aboriginal perspective which is markedly absent from historical accounts.
Gordon Bennett

*Australian Icon (Notes on Perception No. 1)*, 1989

Oil and acrylic on canvas

76 x 57 cm

Private Collection

Reproduced by permission of the artist and Milani Gallery
In the lead up to the Bicentennial of 1988 there was an unprecedented interest and growing awareness of Aboriginal issues and sensitivities. *Lines in the Sand* includes several works that were produced at this time in response to the events being celebrated or boycotted. For example, in Tracey Moffatt’s short film *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987) colonial and contemporary contexts are juxtaposed through the subversion of point of view and power as she inserts a female Aboriginal perspective into the official historical narrative: Aboriginal girls climb up onto the decks of the first ships, or score a ‘Captain’ in Kings Cross. Gordon Bennett’s paintings of this period such as *Australian Icon (Notes On Perception No. 1)* (1989) and *Study for Possession Island* (1991) challenge the orthodox Australian histories, or investigate an Aboriginal identity within a post colonial framework, reinserting an Aboriginal presence in the Australian narrative in an act of reclamation. In *Metaphysical Landscape II* (1990) [see cover] Bennett has appropriated a section of Joseph Lycett’s 1824 aquatint *North View of Sidney*, transforming (re-informing) the image from an Aboriginal perspective, complete with the visual pun of a Xanthorrhoea (or Black Boy), a plant of great use to Aborigines, of which Lycett was probably not aware. Brenda Croft’s photograph of 26th January 1988 reminds us of the unprecedented pan-Australian united Aboriginal opposition to 1988.

Although my colonial ancestors were involved in the dispossession of Aboriginal people, ironically it has been the genuine interest of friends like Tracey Moffatt, Michael Riley and Hetti Perkins in my own family history, which encouraged me to do further research and to be less self-conscious about it. This culminated in the exhibition *Flesh & Blood: A Story of Sydney 1788–1998*, at the Museum of Sydney in 1998, which explored the contribution of various family members to the origin and growth of Sydney. The exhibition was designed to make people think about their own family contributions to where they live, and about how communities and cities develop.

It struck me forcefully at the time that while my own history was well documented and relatively easy to research, little seemed to be known about...
the Aboriginal people or their descendants, who were dispossessed, or died, so quickly in the Sydney region after 1788. I was fortunate to meet Keith Vincent Smith who had written the pioneering biographies of Bennelong and Bungaree, and I discovered that a few people knew a surprising amount about the Eora people and were doing extraordinary research, including reconstructing the language. This resulted in the 2006 Mitchell Library exhibition *EORA: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney 1788–1850* co-curated by Keith Vincent Smith and me. While it included extensive material, all existing vocabularies of Eora words, and many accounts, quotes and representation of Aboriginal people, their voice and perspective remained more elusive than I had anticipated.

To counter this, I wanted to try to personalise, where possible, specific relationships or encounters between my family and Aboriginal people, as documentation does exist in some instances. My starting point was my ancestor Philip Gidley King in Botany Bay in 1788. This research has culminated in the exhibition *Lines in the Sand: Botany Bay Stories from 1770*, staged at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre in the Sutherland Shire, which extends to the southern side of Botany Bay. The exhibition, in which selected colonial, contemporary and local artists respond to the events of 1770 and 1788, provides the opportunity to reflect on a pre-1770 Aboriginal existence and its subsequent loss; the meeting of two entirely alien world views; the Enlightenment’s search for knowledge about the diversity and connectedness of the world’s flora, fauna and people; and the weaving of foundational narratives, including a counter narrative of resistance. *Lines in the Sand* illustrates how Aboriginal voices — and the artists have been the most articulate — are being inserted back into the Australian narrative.

Botany Bay was a contested and paradoxical site from the beginning with the Aborigines calling out ‘warra warra wai’ (‘go away’, ‘begone’) which was
Installation shot showing work by E. Philips Fox and Daniel Boyd

interpreted as ‘welcome’. Both the leading explorer (Cook) and botanist (Banks) of the day were wrong about the suitability of the site to support a colony, but there was an urgent need to establish another site for convicts due to the American War of Independence; fierce strategic and economic competition with the French, Spanish and Portuguese; and the need for a naval and supply base.

*Lines in the Sand* contains iconic representations of the events in Botany Bay such as E. Phillips Fox’s *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay 1770* (1902), but also responses to the events and their representation by contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Daniel Boyd, Dianne Jones, Brenda Croft, Tony Albert and Clinton Nain. These artists often seek to redress the omissions or perspectives, viewing their work as educational and a long over-due correction of the historical records.

Daniel Boyd questions the romantic notions of colonisation, and as illustrated in his painting *Captain No Beard* (2006) in which Fox’s image of Cook is replicated with an added black eye-patch, sees such behaviour as more akin to piracy. He says ‘it’s very important that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders continue to create dialogue from their own perspective to challenge the subjective history that has been created’ (online). Boyd and Dianne Jones were both provoked, shocked and like many Aboriginal people, insulted by the National Portrait Gallery’s purchase of the John Webber portrait of Captain Cook for $3.5 million in 2000, at a time when the Howard Government was refusing to say sorry to the Stolen Generation. The bark painting *Too Many Captain Cooks* by the late Paddy Fordham Wainburanga from the Northern Territory provides a
unique opportunity to see how the story of Captain Cook has been incorporated into Aboriginal mythology, and how Aboriginal story-telling and art differs conceptually from Western representational structures.

King records encountering a large group of Aborigines up the George’s River, at a place he named ‘Lance Point’ where spears were thrown at his party. This name did not subsequently appear on any maps, but later as Governor he did much naming and claiming, as did his son Phillip Parker King who was the famous first ‘Australian’, for completing much of Mathew Flinders’ charting and (re)naming of the north west of Australia. He was accompanied on the 1817–1818 journey by Bungaree who had been the first Australian to circumnavigate Australia in 1803 with Mathew Flinders. Later as Governor, Philip Gidley King placed a reward on the resistance leader Pemulwuy’s head, which he subsequently sent to Joseph Banks, and several artists reference this in the exhibition. While obviously I find this horrific and inexcusable, this is not the place to discuss in detail the records of my ancestors in relation to Aboriginal subjects. Joseph Banks, who had been influential in the appointment of all the early governors, asked for heads to be sent to him. Both King and Bourke were in the colony at a time of expansion and land acquisition, and there was inevitable frontier conflict. Both men were products of their time, with daunting responsibilities, and despite overall good intentions, handled these issues no worse than anyone else. Indeed many of the issues remain as unresolved today.
The artist Nathalie Hartog-Gautier illustrates the diverse narratives attached to Botany Bay, and in the exhibition she superimposes botanical images over the hand written last pages of the diary of her countryman Laperouse. In a demonstration of how competitive it was at that time, in January 1788 he attempted to enter Botany Bay in unsuitable weather as Phillip rather uncharacteristically and recklessly sailed out for Port Jackson.

Captain Phillip’s instructions from King George III were ‘by every means possible to open an intercourse with the natives and to conciliate their affections’ (Barton 119). By contrast, after a recent encounter in Samoa where several men had been killed, Laperouse built and defended a stockade on his arrival. As he
spoke French, Philip Gidley King was sent from Sydney Cove by Phillip to visit on board with Laperouse, and he described how well equipped for scientific endeavour the La Boussole and L’Astrolabe were. In fact Laperouse said he ‘could not think of any article that he stood in need of’ (Fidlon & Ryan 9). In this and future contacts with the French, King’s relations appear to be a mixture of camaraderie, diplomacy and espionage. King was one of the last people to see them alive before they were shipwrecked in the Solomon Islands.

The beach has been the prime location of most encounters in the Pacific and there are many lines in the sand in the exhibition and in our history: literal lines of sand and soil for over 5,000 years in the 1970s Kurnell midden; site specific environmental lines of protest relating to sand mining; the filming of 40,000 Horseman (Charles Chauvel, 1940) in the Kurnell dunes; the sand in Daniel
Boyd’s Endeavour installation *Untitled* (2006); or David Gulpilil’s reclamation of the beach at Bondi in Tracey Moffatt’s *The Movie Star* (1985). Mapping of the coastline was another form of line that would lead to surveying, naming, claiming and colonisation. In Tasmania there was the infamous 1830 Black Line designed to expunge the Aborigines from their homeland. Mervyn Bishop’s 1975 photograph of then-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring soil into the hands of Vincent Etching Lingiari reminds us of the earlier and prolonged courageous stand by Aborigines in the Wave Hill Walk Off that helped give birth to the Land Rights Movement.

In the exhibition, photographs of people on the cliffs at Botany Bay ‘silenced, blinded and rendered deaf’ by the Australian flags over their faces, were eerily prescient of the Cronulla riots. [See *Untitled*, boatpeople.org] Boatpeople.org formed in 2001 as a response to the Howard Government’s expressions of nationalism and xenophobia, particularly in relation to refugees. Guan Wei’s *Echo* (2005) contains nine appropriated images of Europeans exploring in the Pacific Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Wei has ‘reconstructed’ these images into a very well known Chinese intellectual landscape painting that illustrated the harmony between nature and humankind. He is commenting on how ‘otherness’ came to be portrayed, and the painting is an attempt by Guan Wei to ‘introduce a fresh approach where historical analysis develops in a non-
linear, trans-cultural and multilayered way’ (42), a ‘reminder that we are living in an historical arena where cultures from many regions and races are much more integrated than in the past’ (42).

It is not surprising that these events and encounters have constructed different national psyches for Australia’s indigenous and non-indigenous people. Perhaps as Australians we have now reached yet another line in the sand historically — the apology from a new Federal Government (in February 2008) provides another opportunity to reconcile our shared histories and futures, and to acknowledge and understand just what happened that day on the beach in Botany Bay in 1770.
Guan Wei

*Echo*, 2005

Synthetic polymer painting on canvas

42 panels: 273 x 722 cm (overall)


Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

Reproduced by permission of Viscopy
ARTIST’S STATEMENT: GUAN WEI

Each time I look in European and Australian history books for the colonial period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, I am struck by the portrayal of European captains and soldiers fighting against sea storms, monsters and fierce natives in their attempts to explore and expand their nation’s territories. When we learn of Columbus, Magellan or Captain Cook, their bravery and heroism is impressed upon us. The notion of ‘otherness’ is emphasised throughout European colonial history. Historical museums, no matter whether in Europe, the United States or Australia, employ categorised representations of ‘African’, ‘Arab’, ‘Aboriginal’ or other non-European races, based on anthropological knowledge acquired and developed by Europeans through colonial expansion. These representations focus on differences, which are defined from the viewpoint of the European. In fact, ‘otherness’ led to primitive models that served as a reference system to help Europeans discover and revisit their own history. ‘Otherness’ somehow became identified as wild and uneducated, in comparison to the grace, education and virtue of the Europeans. It is difficult for us to find the truth about colonial history because we cannot reconstruct it objectively. Typically we have only narratives, most of the time twisted explanations, about past events. In my painting, *Echo*, 2005, I appropriated nine images of Europeans exploring the Pacific Ocean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including Captain Cook’s landing in Australia. I reconstructed these related images and grafted them onto a famous, ancient Chinese ‘intellectual’ landscape painting. This painting by Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715), a great scholar and artist of the early Qing Dynasty, represents the highest aesthetic achievement of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China. The aesthetic value of such a famous Chinese intellectual painting is the harmony between nature and humankind, as well as the abstract expression of the individual’s spiritual pursuits. However, when Captain Cook and his soldiers emerge from the wild seascape into such harmony, their courage and ambitious heroism is immediately swallowed and diminished. In fact, in such a scene, these historical European heroes become more like a group of brutal bandits. Traditional historical analysis develops in a linear and continuous manner. However, I would like to introduce a fresh approach where historical analysis develops in a non-linear, trans-cultural and multilayered way.

*Echo* is not about Australia’s history being revived in an ancient Chinese intellectual painting. Rather, it is a reminder that we are living in an historical arena where cultures from many regions and races are much more integrated than in the past. We need to improve our communication and understanding across cultures to review and transcend ‘otherness’ and search for a new universal value in human life.

Guan Wei
ARTIST’S STATEMENT: NATHALIE HARTOG-GAUTIER

Botanical subjects are metaphors for past and recent history. They are references to mythology, symbolism and ideas of man’s relationship within the natural and man-made landscape. During my research into Laperouse’s voyage, a few aspects fascinated me: the objects taken on board as gifts; the instructions for the collection of botanical specimens; the historical context of the eighteenth century; and the voyage’s rediscovery of nature and the natural landscape. Many books of that time testify to the search for an Arcadia. In the process of making the artworks, I was thinking that nothing changed very much. We are still travelling to discover other cultures, we still collect, we still trade.

Through my series of artworks, I looked at my personal journey to Australia, a new language, new landscape, and new cultural and historical backgrounds. At the same time, it was the discovery of a country with its own duality. Botany became a metaphor to explore distant and recent history. Like man, nature also travels, colonises and kills. What is collectable in one culture becomes a parasite in another. The garden has become globalised: we don’t know where the majority of plants come from. During his stay at Botany Bay, Laperouse would have collected botanical specimens. But Laperouse’s two frigates disappeared and with them the botanical collection. I am left to speculate: what would Laperouse have collected? As a migrant to Australia, I became the explorer and wandered in the fascinating and strange Australian landscape: the unique blue of the Eucalyptus leaves’ camouflage for the multicoloured lorikeets; the Banksia so gracious in its ruggedness; the Grass Tree with pieces of its trunk looking like the shell of an insect; the Casuarina so feminine when it flowers.

Like a botanist I studied the plants. Frottage and a magnifying glass were my ‘gardening’ tools as well as the use of modern technology to enlarge botanical specimens. I used a very fine 8 gsm kozo paper over each image, a very transparent paper allowing me to connect ancient and recent history. The texts over each specimen are the last four pages of Laperouse’s diary of his arrival at Botany Bay. His last words were ‘in the next chapter’. I am re-writing that last chapter.

Nathalie Hartog-Gautier
Nathalie Hartog-Gautier
*Banksia (Banksia serrata)*, 2005
Inkjet print
112 x 80 x 6.5 cm
Courtesy the artist
Reproduced by permission of Viscopy
ARTIST’S STATEMENT:
PADDY FORDHAM WAINBURRANGA

This painting is Captain Cook’s song the way the Rembarrnga people know it from a long time ago. Captain Cook was around during the time of Satan. Everybody knows Captain Cook. Old people, not young people. You’ve got to have a lot of learning to know Captain Cook. More culture. I can sing it now for this bark painting. This is the way his song goes. Captain Cook came from Mosquito Island, which is east of New Guinea. He came with his two wives, a donkey and a nanny goat. He was a really hard man, he had a hard job to do when he came to Sydney Harbour. He had his business building his Burrupa — his boat. In more recent times when boars came, it came from Murldi-Macassans in white man’s language. But the first boat came from Captain Cook. From the earliest days Satan lived there too. We call Satan Ngayang. It’s the same as a devil. He lived on the other side of the harbour on Sydney Island. The other side of the harbour is called Wanambal. Satan has feet like a bullock’s He’s got horns see? He had long nails on his fingers. He also had a devil bone to fight with.

Captain Cook worked by himself on his boat, he used to always be working on his boat. He would always come back and have his dinner after working on his boat, then he would go to sleep. But he didn’t know that the Ngayang was always sneaking up behind his back while he was working. The devil had been talking to his two wives. One day Satan came behind his back to the wives and said ‘I’m going to kill Captain Cook and take the two of you over to that other island. See, over there. You two have to come over with me’. Satan said to them ‘You dig a well and cover me up with dirt. When he comes back to eat his food I’ll come out behind him, out of the ground’. When Captain Cook came back to eat his supper, he didn’t know, and then Satan, Ngayang, came out and poked Captain Cook in the back with his bone. Captain Cook said ‘I know you. You’re Satan behind my back. I’ll turn around and look at you Satan’. Satan said ‘I’ll fight you and kill you and take your two wives’. ‘All right, we’ll fight,’ said Captain Cook. Satan said ‘Have you got power (magic)? If you want to fight me you have to be a clever man!’ ‘No I haven’t got power.’ Captain Cook only had a stone axe. ‘You put that bone down, and I’ll put down the axe. We’ll wrestle, hand to hand.’

So they fought. At first Satan was winning. He threw Captain Cook against the boat he had built. But then Captain Cook grabbed the devil by his throat, he wrapped his arm around his neck and broke it. The Ngayang couldn’t move. He was dead. Captain Cook then grabbed the devil by the scruff of his neck and through his legs and chucked him into the ground — into a hole — as a punishment. The devil was in the hole in the ground. The hole in the ground is this side of the water. Here. And motor cars go through there now and come out on the other side of the Harbour at Wanambal.
Paddy Fordham Wainburranga
*Too Many Captain Cooks*, 1987
Bark Painting
Private Collection
Reproduced by permission of Viscopy
After the fight, Captain Cook went back to his own country, to Mosquito Island. We don’t know what happened there. Maybe all his family were jealous. But they attacked him with a spear. That’s the spear in the painting — his own people attacked him. Captain Cook came back to Sydney Harbour then, and he died from the spear wounds. The old man was sick and he sat down with everything he had and died. And then he was buried there in Sydney Harbour. Underneath, on the island.

I’ve finished with the story of the old Captain Cook. I’m talking now about the new Captain Cook. When the old people died, other people started thinking they could make Captain Cook another way. New people. Maybe all his sons. Too many Captain Cooks. They started shooting people then. New Captain Cook people. Those are the people that made war when Captain Cook died because they didn’t care, they didn’t know, all those young people. They are the ones who have been stealing all the women and killing people. They have made war. Warmakers, those new Captain Cooks. They fought all the wars. Warmakers. They fought.

The olden time Captain Cook is dead but all the new people have made trouble. The old Captain Cook died a long time ago, but new Captain Cook shot people. They killed the women, these new people. They called themselves ‘New Captain Cooks’.

I’ve got to tell about the warmaking people. The ones who made war. The new ones. They just went after women. All the new Captain Cooks fought the people. They shot people. Not old Captain Cook, he didn’t interfere or make a war. That last war and the second war. They fought us. And then they made a new thing called ‘warfare’. All the new Captain Cooks came and called themselves ‘warfare mob’. They wanted to take all of Australia. They wanted it, they wanted the whole lot of this country. All the new people wanted anything they could get. They could shoot people. New Captain Cook mob! But now we’ve got our culture back. That’s all. That’s the story now.

Paddy Fordham Wainburrranga
Post Exhibition: Reflection on Installation and Reception

The title of the exhibition took on new meanings over time, particularly as Kevin Rudd subsequently replaced John Howard as Prime Minister, and apologised to the Stolen Generation. In her opening address Hetti Perkins, curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, said ‘let’s hope the title that this outstanding exhibition has been given, “Lines in the Sand”, is prescient in marking a moment where we as Aboriginal people have emerged out of the political wilderness of the past decade’. She also quoted her father Charles Perkins: ‘we know we cannot live in the past, but the past lives in us’. She also observed that the participating artists’ minds remained uncolonised.

Daniel Boyd’s installation *Untitled*, the model of the Endeavour ship in concentric circles of actual Botany Bay sand, grew to become the central metaphor for the exhibition: the ripples/repercussions from the events of 1770 that we are all still living with today.
On entering the gallery visitors were greeted with an Aboriginal language, songs and clapsticks of Paddy Fordham Wainburrranga, telling the story on film of his bark painting *Too many Captain Cooks*, which provided insight into Aboriginal mythology, historical perspectives and art making.

The classic white cube or rectangular space of the Hazelhurst Gallery was divided into 1770 and 1788 sections. In the 1770 section, no-one could have accurately predicted the complementary effect of placing E Phillips Fox painting, *Landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay 1770* (1902), side-by-side with Daniel Boyd’s appropriated version of it, *We Call Them Pirates Out Here* (2006).

I had intended at either end of the gallery to evoke the openness of Botany Bay, or the ocean, not have any constraining interior walls, and this was more successful than I had anticipated. On another wall from the large Fox and Boyd paintings, I hung Guan Wei’s *Echo*, borrowed at considerable expense from the Queensland Art Gallery. Based on a famous Chinese painting (Wang Yuanqui [1642–1715]), apart from the painting’s contribution to the ideas implicit in the exhibition articulated in his artist’s statement and referred to in my essay, it provided a Pacific context for Cook and the exhibition, and dramatically opened up that wall and the space with its beautiful and monumental panorama of the sea, land, mountains and the sky.
As a curator I had to negotiate various installation limitations. Many of the smaller colonial works on loan from the Mitchell Library required more intimate spaces, and some items had light restrictions, while films and videos (including Michael Riley’s *Eora*, Tracey Moffatt’s *Nice Coloured Girls*, Deborah Kelly’s *The History Wars*, and Don Featherstone’s *Babakiiueria*), could only be installed on interior walls.

As a consequence I created smaller spaces in the centre of the gallery, and inadvertently, they ended up feeling like darkened ‘cabins’ from which you emerged onto the ‘deck’ and expansive views. Also inadvertent was that walking down the sides of the gallery to either end felt like the narrow side decks of a ship. I created a small area which was my exhibition within an exhibition, and contained a selection of colonial works I own, and references to my First Fleet ancestor and the ensuing generations, to evoke the repercussions from 1788. I also
had a pin board, with newspaper clippings and scans of works I did not include but considered, and display cases of references books, photographs etc. I wanted to have a ‘master cabin’ feel about this section, but it was less evocative than my accidental ‘cabins’, although people loved this informal archive, especially a poster of everyone on the First Fleet.

I wove my family narrative throughout the exhibition as a reminder that these first contacts were not events that happened a long, long time ago to anonymous people, and indeed the exhibition demonstrated that more of the Aboriginal participants will probably be identified through further research in the future.

Juxtaposing colonial and contemporary, indigenous and non indigenous art breaks up a linear telling of history, and appropriated artworks have the effect of bringing the past into the present. Examples include Tracey Moffatt’s Nice Coloured Girls film with its context of colonial art, on a screen near Mitchell Library material of PG King’s journal and early etchings. Clinton Nain’s Two Native Dancing which apes an early drawing attributed to King, was also hung in this installation, alongside an early broadsheet c 1790, ‘A description of a wonderful large wild man, or monstrous giant, brought from Botany Bay’.
Jonathan Jones in his *A View of Botany Bay*, executed in red beads that echo the baubles and beads offered to the Aborigines, referenced a 1789 etching. When Jones came to install the work, he wanted to include the original etching and to link the two images wanted to axe into the walls the way Aborigines would make foot-holes to climb a tree to hunt possums etc. This gave conservators delivering work from various institutions palpations, and there were several protests written in the Visitors Book about the tax payer not having to pay for this wilful vandalism of the gallery.

The Sutherland Shire, in which the Gallery is situated, is middle class and conservative, home to the Cronulla riots, and flag waiving nationalism. The Federal electorate of Cook was retained by the Liberal (Conservative) Party. A woman was heard to say ‘how often do we have to say sorry?’ Attendances of over 6,000 people were above average for a regional gallery with a strong community following, and favourable comments outweighed any negative ones in the Visitor’s Book, although G. Smith commented ‘Too much “intellectualism” not enough truth’.

The obsessive and international following Captain Cook still generates was evident. I invited his great-great-great-nephew who lives locally to the exhibition, but he may have felt like the local historian who thought I had desecrated Cook
Most outer Sydney regional galleries have difficulty attracting the inner city art aficionados and need some press coverage and information to decide whether to make the one-hour journey to the gallery. It is the same with inner city living Aborigines. Many did make the effort however. The gallery advertised quite broadly, but competitive as it is, I was disappointed in the lack of media interest, as there were many different angles to examine, and some basic national issues being addressed. Most publicity these days seems publicist driven. The Daily Telegraph ran a good photograph of Daniel Boyd working on his installation, and a succinct summary of the exhibition. John MacDonald favourably reviewed the exhibition in The Sydney Morning Herald, unfortunately the day before it closed, describing it as ‘an extraordinary collage of ideas — a patchwork quilt of diverse, competing tendencies, where artist-activists and the scientific detachment of the white explorers and settlers meet in one imaginary summit’ (17).

NOTES
1. Lines in the Sand was held at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery 28th March–11th May 2008; curated by Anthony (Ace) Bourke.

WORKS CITED


Refugees, the human waste of the global frontier-land, are the ‘outsiders incarnate’, the absolute outsiders, outsiders everywhere and out of place everywhere except in places that are themselves out of place — the ‘nowhere places’ that appear on the maps used by ordinary humans on their travels. (Zygmunt Bauman 2004 80)

I

This essay takes up the above assertion by British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in *Wasted Lives* (2004a), to examine a number of works concerned with the representation of refugees and their experiences in contemporary society. Bauman’s view of refugees as ‘outsiders incarnate’ is especially relevant in the context of what he argues is a subject position synonymous with the increasing intertwining of economic globalisation and international conflict. These are the people whom, drawing on Giorgio Agamben’s thinking, Bauman refers to as an “‘underclass” … who have had their “bios” (that is, the life of a socially recognised subject) reduced to “zoë” (purely animal life, with all its recognisably human offshoots trimmed or annulled)” (2004b 39). For Bauman the refugee is best defined today as part of a continuum with, and encapsulating, a panoply of, identity categories such as ‘economic migrants’, ‘illegal migrants’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘illegal refugees’, ‘certified refugees’, ‘displaced person’, ‘stateless person’, perhaps even ‘terrorist’, and represents in this brave new world the subject position that best captures modernity’s ever-evolving impetus. Such an approach parallels similar usage by other social scientists such as Giorgio Agamben (2003), Paul Gilroy (2006) and Peter Nyers (2005), and the *Journal of Refugee Studies* which describes its remit as a concern with ‘all categories of forcibly displaced people’. Furthermore in its 2006 report, the Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that ‘[m]odern migratory patterns make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between the various groups on the move’ (24). The refugee, broadly defined, therefore today constitutes modernity’s underbelly, a subject position inextricable from a political unconscious where it both challenges and gives new meanings to the function of the nation-state. As Agamben puts it: ‘If the refugee represents such a disquieting element in the order
of the nation-state, this is so primarily because, by breaking the identity between
the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings
the originary fiction of sovereignty into crisis’ (2000 20). The paradox lived by
refugees each moment of their existence is that while they lack an identity, while
they seek a shred of meaning and often of purpose, they need not worry about
having too little meaning, for as refugees they mean always — already — too
much, an excess of accreted meanings.

Through a reading of a number of selected texts, this essay considers the
treatment of refugees in contemporary literature and film within what it identifies
as a growing thematic preoccupation in contemporary world culture with a
‘refugee subject position’. I do not claim here that the treatment of refugee
themes in literature is either new or recent, for it has long been central to writing
and art more generally, usually through a concern with the experience of exile
or of migration but also with the nation. Agamben’s thesis, for example, on the
role refugees play in the formation of the nation-state only reiterates how the
condition of refugees has been part of Western textual culture since the days of
Homer. More recently, both Benedict Anderson, in what remains one of the most
influential studies of nationalism, Imagined Communities (1983), and Jacques
Derrida in Specters of Marx (1994) and On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness
(2001), have traced the existence of stateless persons as integral to the emergence
of the nation itself. Anderson’s well-known work is especially relevant here
because it centres on the role of the printing-press in the making of the nation
as an affective community of peoples, thus highlighting the importance of the
textual in the making of the national entity. Even earlier, Sigmund Freud (1963)
too made the point that it is always possible to unite the most disparate group of
people, provided they are given a focus for their fears of the other.

What has changed, if indeed it is change in the treatment accorded refugees
within contemporary culture, is that the refugee is increasingly accepted as
a ‘fully-fledged subject position’. My concern in this essay emerges precisely
from the way in which the subject position of the refugee has shifted from being
temporally-limited and geographically determined — the refugee would remain
outside his or her place of residence for a limited period and would always be
conscious of the possibility of a return home — to a subject position now intrinsic
to power distribution, world economics and wealth management. To this extent
the growing visibility of refugees as ‘themes’ or ‘characters’ in contemporary
culture highlights the intertwining of material and symbolic cultural production.
To return once more to Bauman, in a fast globalising world ‘millions of refugees
and migrants … [are being turned] out in a fast accelerating scale’ (2004b 12). My
discussion focuses in particular on Indian novelist, Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance
South African writer, Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s Skyline (1999) and an overtly
autobiographical novel by an Angolan writer, Simão Kikamba, Going Home
However, passing reference will be made to novels such as South African Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup* (2001), Moroccan Mahi Binebine’s *Welcome to Paradise* (1999 in French; 2004) and Australian Nicholas Jose’s *Original Face* (2005). This eclectic selection aims on the one hand to bring into relief the point made earlier that the concern with refugees is now especially pronounced in visual and literary narratives throughout the world; but it is also aimed at juxtaposing a range of broad imaginings of the condition of refugees in today’s world as part of a larger debate about the political function of literature. While I am conscious that the novels constitute merely individual articulations of each writer’s perspective on the refugee phenomenon in contemporary society, I see them overtly intervening in complex debates about politics, human rights, ethics and literature.

II

Indian novelist Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* is not a novel about refugees in the strict sense that characterises the works of Schonstein and Kikamba, or even Frears’ film. Desai’s novel tells the story of a small group of individuals living in a remote Himalayan village, and of the way they are brought face to face with a world they thought they could keep at a distance. This is the shabby, apparently unexciting and deceivingly safe world the novel’s main character, Biju, a young Indian man, abandons to journey to the USA on fake identity papers, a decision that suddenly places him along a fluid refugee continuum. To the American authorities Biju would fall neatly into the definition of an economic immigrant, but his new life in New York is almost a text-book illustration of a fluid modernity as defined also by Bauman in *Liquid Modernity*. Although Biju’s desire for self-improvement accords with modernity’s ideological call for endless self-improvement and progress, it leads him to break another of modernity’s sacred precepts, the inviolability of the nation state. It is as a result of this latter infringement that he finds himself defined as one of a mass of an ‘itinerant underclass’, to borrow Graham Huggan’s view of the multitudes caught in the vortex of globalisation (Huggan 15) in which subtleties of legitimate or illegitimate claims to protection are overwhelmed by louder discourses of fear and alterity. The novel offers a particularly topical portrait of the complex ways of being a refugee in today’s modern world, as defined by Bauman and others — as migrant, legal or otherwise; asylum seeker; exile; marginalised self. For in the semi-legal world that Biju inhabits in New York he regularly comes into contact with people whose status cuts across one or more dimensions of refugee identity in its broader definition. Although a survivor in the way that is second nature to refugees, Biju himself negotiates smartly but anxiously among the multiple identities available to the refugee qua illegal immigrant, asylum seeker, itinerant. However, such deftness comes at great cost to his selfhood. At its most superficial level, this involves a constant flux between acts of literal mimicry and moments when he struggles to reaffirm and ‘salvage’ his Indian self. In one sense, his move to the USA places his ‘original self’ as Indian into abeyance without entirely
denying him its meaning. Unlike other fellow Indians, Biju refuses to succumb to ‘American’ ways such as hamburger-eating. However, while his new self in New York has almost cut him off from his family and homeland, he is luckier than many who pay a much higher price to acquire their ‘refugeness’ (Nyers 2006). In part, the novel’s impact resides in its depiction of Biju’s epic battle to stay true to his Indian self while making his way in the globalised setting of New York.

Recent works such as British filmmaker, Stephen Frears’ Dirty Pretty Things and Australian novelist, Nicholas Jose’s Original Face, for example, depict a rather different world where refugees will do pretty much anything to exchange the ‘real selves’ signified by their names and original documents for the sake of residency in the UK, in the USA or elsewhere in the developed world. In Jose, this means a gruesome excision of a human face and the potential multiplication of people with the same names on their fake documents. Frears’ film depicts a similarly disturbing trade in selves and passports where no price is ever too high as desperate people strive to enter the modern world of ‘making business’, in the words of another refugee figure, in Gordimer’s The Pickup (62). In London, struggling to save the life of a man brought close to death by a kidney removal gone wrong, Frears’ Olesungun Okwe, the Nigerian-trained doctor, requests the Somali’s relatives to ‘Ask him how much he got for his kidney’. The reply, when it emerges through a mix of pained facial expressions and Somali translated into English by a young girl is a masterstroke in understatement: ‘He’s English now’. Okwe’s angry, cynical response, ‘He swapped his insides for a passport’, is the kind of line Bauman, Agamben and Frears will understand and speak — aquiver with virtuous rage at the ways of a world where human lives are increasingly no more sacred than the latest fashion gadget. The notion of an ‘outsider incarnate’ gains suddenly a wholly morbid new meaning. Yet, as Frears’ film makes clear, for many people this is one of the few ways out of the miserable life allocated them. For the sociologist, the philosopher, the filmmaker and the novelist — perhaps for the literary critic, too — such base trade in human life makes a mockery of being human yet, from the perspective of those swapping their insides for legal documents, the price is worth paying. The sad irony that most of these texts highlight is that for the refugee the documents often result in very little improvement in quality of life. Frears’ film overtly links the harvesting of organs from the bodies of anonymous individuals to their own desperate quest for fake identity documents that will make them ‘real’ once again.

Yet, for many sans papiers the new documents that prove one’s legal status often are also the last link to an older self, the self that left home ‘a Romanian’, ‘a Senegalese’, ‘an Iraqi’, ‘a Colombian’. Given the fluidity of the (post)modern world, increasingly such selfhoods are lived tremulously, forever on the threshold of other selves, both past and future, all more or less real. ‘The future’, Bauman declares, ‘has always been uncertain, but its capriciousness and volatility have never felt so intractable as they do in the liquid world of “flexible” labour, frail human bonds, fluid moods, floating threats and an unstoppable cavalcade of
chameleon-like dangers’ (2004b: 67). His view is that to be a refugee constitutes the very core of that process, a mass of anonymous humanity permanently displaced, forever in motion.

In Desai’s novel this fluidity is seen in the waves of ‘Mexicans, desis, and Pakis’ in New York, replaced in Paris by ‘Algerians, Senegalese, Morrocans’ (23), and elsewhere by Mozambican, Ukrainians and Nigerians. They are all interchangeable and recognised mainly by the cheap labour they provide and their desperately aimless lives. In a novel marked by a pronounced concern with the wasteful ways of modernity’s treatment of human beings, Desai shines a light into the dark recesses of contemporary capitalist culture. For despite their numbers, Biju and the mostly male groups of people with whom he competes for poorly paid jobs and flea-ridden beds shared round the clock, remain invisible to most New Yorkers whose lifestyle they support — an apt comment on Nikos Papastergiadis view that, ‘[c]ountless people are on the move and even those who have not left their homeland are moved by this restless epoch’ (2). This is a point Frears also makes in Dirty Pretty Things, that while the politics of the nation-state configure refugees outside its concerns and responsibility, and against its interests, in fact they have become intrinsic to the everyday life of the nation-state’s lawful citizens. Echoing Bauman, Frears, like Desai, exposes the materiality that underpins the presence of refugees in the modern world. Thus, in reply to a query put to him by the man who buys the body organs from the Spanish concierge turned organ dealer, Sneaky, ‘How come I’ve never seen you guys?’, Okwe observes: ‘We are the people you never see. We wash your cars, clean your houses, suck your cocks’. Lives lived largely out of view, they are indispensable to the lifestyle afforded the citizens of London, New York or Paris. If Frears appears to underplay the reasons why individuals such as Okwe now hide in London or Paris, in the process avoiding dealing with cause of their increasingly desperate attempts to gain passage to the USA, it may be argued that the film is as much about the wrongs of world politics as it seeks to show the consequences endured by human beings caught up therein.

Indeed, Desai herself also is careful to distinguish between those Indians and fellow ‘third worlders’ who live in New York out of desperation and those brought there by well-stuffed bank accounts. At its most self-righteous, The Inheritance of Loss posits that even the wealthier, better-educated Indians who now frequent the upmarket hamburger houses in New York where the likes of Biju work illegally, have compromised their Indian identities for the sake of a greater slice of modernity. Since, to many of the Americans they meet the colour of their skin will indelibly mark them as outsiders, they share a ‘refugeeness’ which is associated essentially with being born in the ‘third world’. They wear it each time they step out in New York, in London, in Sydney and they often exploit it to their advantage. To this extent they are caught within a common perception that all ‘brown people’ are naturally deprived and oppressed and desperate to be
here, there, somewhere. But unlike Biju, frequently this is a perception they can manipulate in the same way that they trade the skills and currency that allowed them legal entry to the ‘First World’.

The contrast in Biju’s position could not be more dramatic. Having moved to New York in search of a better life for himself and for his father, his closest surviving relative, he expends an incredible amount of energy to get out of India only to waste his life in the bowels of a voracious and uncaring modernity. For here ‘India’ signifies simply the source of people such as Biju, those multitudes the American and European print media see as a menace to the developed world. These are the people who, like Biju, exist in a state of legal, political and personal limbo: citizens of countries where, for various reasons, they cannot live and who are living in countries where they are not welcome. However, the tenacity Biju displays in trying to get out of India offers a wider comment on contemporary imbalances between nations and peoples. On the one hand it brings into relief the futile existences of millions of people the world over, treated as the flotsam of modernity; as the narrator remarks at one point: ‘Biju changed jobs so often, like a fugitive on the run — no papers’ (73). Elsewhere the narrator describes his daily existence: ‘At 4.25 AM, Biju made his way to the Queen of Tarts bakery, watching for the cops who sometimes came leaping out: where are you going and what are you doing with whom and what time and why?’ (75). As an illegal immigrant, Desai’s Biju and countless others like him in the developed world exist fully outside the protection of the state yet he is central to the economic forces that keep it afloat. This is Bauman’s point when he speaks of ‘outsiders incarnate’ (80) as indispensable to the present nation state, a ‘globalisation of the powerless’ (Wells 15) that constitutes the obverse of that other, flashier, globalisation. As noted earlier, they constitute merely the latest source of cheap and expendable labour that fuels the cyclical nature of capitalist economic structures.

Biju’s story highlights also the difficulties faced by so-called developing nations confronted with the ever-growing drain on their human and material resources, as the best and brightest of their citizens opt for living elsewhere. There is a certain irony, no doubt intentional, in the way Desai’s novel juxtaposes the desperate efforts Biju and other young Indian men devote to the task of migrating to the USA and the benefits that modernity, through capitalist expansion, is said to be in the process of bestowing on India and all Indians. In fact, this is an aspect reflected in all the various texts I refer to here. It is a point made more forcefully by anti-globalisation and postcolonial theorist-activists such as Vandana Shiva (2000; 2002) and novelist-activist Arundhati Roy (1999; 2001). Speaking at the ‘Pan African Conference on Brain Drain’ in 2003, Phillip Emeagwali, for example, noted that ‘[w]hat few realise is that Africans who immigrate to the United States contribute 40 times more wealth to the American than to the African economy. According to the United Nations, an African professional working in the United States contributes about $150,000 per year to the U.S. economy.’

Although
Desai’s Biju is not a professional in the way Frears’ Okwe is, Emeagwali’s argument offers a broader comment on a Brain Drain that is essentially about the loss of each individual to the nation, rather than simply of the departure of a Western-style educated and trained person.

South African novelist Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s *Skyline* (1999) also raises this issue, highlighting in the story of Bernard, a young Mozambican refugee living illegally in South Africa, the loss of potential that his hidden existence constitutes. At one level, *Skyline* celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, telling Bernard’s story of overcoming impossible odds. But the figure of a refugee allows Schonstein also to explore the new human geographies emerging in South Africa. Set in Cape Town, South Africa, the figure of the refugee serves in *Skyline* as a focal point through which the novel tells of the profound transformations taking place in an urban landscape that was previously largely the domain of White people.³ Schonstein’s novel resonates with the work of Desai and Frears in their concern with the evolving re-mappings of peoples across and within nation states. The novel’s account of Bernard’s transformation into a legal resident of South Africa positions him as an agent of change, bringing together people who might not have met otherwise. However, although he is embraced by a small group of Cape Town residents who are struggling to cope with the rapidly changing political and social structures in post-apartheid South Africa, this is something of an aberration. In fact, Bernard’s story gives face to a phenomenon that since the end of Apartheid has united black and White South Africans: that being the growing illegal influx of people from other countries in Africa. In the words of a man whose political views suggest he is White: ‘You see! The whole of Africa is running into the country and to here at the top of Long Street…. And do they think they can just come here from where they come over Africa and take the people’s jobs? What is going on with the government to let them in, hey?’ (10, emphasis in original). Although metaphorically the novel foregrounds the positive dimension of South Africa’s return to Africa, it juxtaposes it with the views of those South Africans who feel the new arrivals are taking their jobs. Interestingly, they are mostly White people, such as the 7-Eleven owner or manager whom the young narrator describes as ‘stand[ing] in Rambo mode’ railing against the state of the New South Africa:

> They just got to come down from Africa and take over our country. Fuck up their own place, then come here to steal from us.... This country’s just gone to shit. It belongs to illegals now, not us. They bought it! They paid somebody something under the counter. I’m telling you! South Africa belongs to Africa, not us. (50, emphasis in original)

In this new world, Bernard and others like him serve as a metonym of a Pan-Africanism that now sees South Africa returning to Africa, though in this case in a round-about way. Consequently, his ‘adoption’ by a young school girl who lives in the same block of apartments as he does, ‘Skyline’ and the old woman who owns the whole block, might be read as a pointed comment on South
Africa’s responsibility to reach out to fulfill its role as the engine of Africa’s Renaissance once outlined by Thabo Mbeki (1998). In the portrait of a growing intimacy between Bernard and the two figures linking past and future, the young narrator and the very old Mrs. Rowinsky — herself a European refugee from WW II — *Skyline* underlines the random and spontaneous ways in which identities are formed and nurtured. It highlights most of all a view that each refugee is an individual, alone, afraid and in search of kindness. Bernard finds protection from the bitterness of the wider South African nation-state in the company and friendship of a small group of inner city Cape Town residents, but he is luckier than most. As the narrator reveals, ‘[h]e is here illegally but we are the only ones who know and we would never tell anyone. He bought a passport from someone in Home Affairs and one of the Nigerians on the top floor sold him an ID’. She goes on: ‘[e]ven though the war is over, he has no home to go back to and he does not know whether his wife and children are still alive’ (29).

Indeed, in what is perhaps one of the subtlest comments on the politics of hospitality of the modern nation-state, opening the doors alone rarely will suffice for refugees; the new arrivals from wars and conflicts experienced by growing numbers of people, carry with them the seeds of their own undoing. Despite their unconditional support, Bernard’s friends cannot protect him from regularly re-living the memory of his brutalisation during Mozambique’s protracted civil war. Of one such moment, the narrator says:

> He has a terror again. He lies here on the roof to feel steady. War stalks him day and night, burning him, circling about him with dry flames of nightmare. He has nothing to still the terror with. He cannot shoot it down and it can’t pour water onto it. It is barbed wire around his heart and crying in his mind. It is loss and it is unbearable. (74)

As an ‘illegal’ he is persecuted by the South African authorities who constantly raid ‘Skyline’ but most of all he is haunted by memories of a level of trauma that makes him increasingly withdrawn. When he dies from a racist attack tinged with jealousy — he is murdered by an Italian restaurant owner who suspects him of making eyes at his wife, but the attack is framed by a racialised view of the need to protect the white woman from the black man — it is as if Bernard had been dead all along. Post-apartheid South Africa never made room for him or others like him, despite the belief of the masses — the ‘illegal immigrants and refugees’ (8) who ‘hitched all the way down Africa’ (13) — that ‘Nelson Mandela … the new King of Africa’ (15) has the power to bring peace everywhere in Africa and to resuscitate the many relatives the refugees mourn.

The paradox *Skyline* highlights is that when Africa came calling South Africa was neither ready nor willing to enter into a dialogue, for Bernard is not alone in his discovery that apartheid did not make Black South African people naturally kinder to fellow Africans. In his semi-fictionalised autobiography, *Going Home* (2005), Angolan Simão Kikamba tells a similar story. *Going Home* is the story of a man who moves from being an Angolan refugee in Zaire, to a
Tony Simoes da Silva

Congolese asylum seeker in Angola, and eventually an illegal migrant in South Africa. There he remembers being told that ‘[t]here are no jobs for foreigners anywhere in South Africa. If you want my advice, you should pack and leave. This is our country’ (155). Perhaps not surprisingly, again these words are spoken by a White man; many White South Africans have more to lose from tougher competition for unskilled jobs than their Black compatriots who are long used to scant pickings. Like those Africans in Skyline who travelled down ‘from the rest of Africa’ (8), Kikamba’s character’s nomadic existence through several different levels of marginality, epitomises the subject position of the refugee today as an example of what Wells’s calls the ‘globalisation of the powerless’(15). Living in Johannesburg’s inner suburbs, Hillbrow and Yeoville, a dense mass of high-rise and low-rise apartment blocks where modernity truly liquefies, Kikamba’s thinly veiled alter-ego, Manuel Mpanda, learns that the only thing he can count on is the very instability of being that frames his self as an undocumented self, a sans-papiers. Hillbrow and Yeoville exist for Mpanda essentially as further ‘stations of the cross’, points of reference in a long journey between his condition as a refugee, an illegal migrant and an asylum seeker.

Not unlike Biju and Bernard, though in vastly different ways, Mpanda’s situation illustrates the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ brief about the difficulties of deciding on the most apt definition for variously displaced peoples. Having fled Angola with his parents as a child-refugee at the age of 2 (15) to settle in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mpanda later flees again as a young adult, this time to Angola, as the cruel world devised by Mobutu Sese Seko collapses and the nation-state implodes. Writing as an adult, he refers to both places as ‘home’ (9, 15) but does it almost unaware of the doubleness of being that that implies. As a Zairean/Congolese refugee in Angola (‘Zaire’ having reverted to its pre-Mobutu designation, ‘Congo’), Mpanda finds his way to the slums of Luanda, then a city also in a constantly fluid state as the civil war between Angola’s two main political parties and their respective foreign backers dragged on. In the kind of subtle and unsettling shading of degrees of horror typical of narratives about displacement and loss, Mpanda takes up residence in a slum where his life is as much at risk as it was in the Zairean refugee camp. Moreover, although he recalls his father’s advice as he left for Angola — ‘Do not make the mistake that the crocodile made…. He ran away from rain only to dive into water’ (33) — he ignores it. Eventually he will also leave Angola for Johannesburg and join the masses walking towards that beacon of opportunity and fairness that in Schonstein is described as ‘Mr. Mandela’s country’.

It is a measure of the commonality of experience that unites refugees the world over in their ‘refugeeness’ that as a Black man living illegally in Johannesburg, Mpanda’s refugee position in Johannesburg so closely parallels that of Biju in New York and in fact Bernard in Cape Town. Afraid of being picked up by the police yet desperate to make a living by decent means in suburbs dominated by
drug dealers and pimps, Kikamba’s Mpanda and Desai’s Biju portray the more insidious aspect of the notion of the refugee as a new kind of person, a citizen of the world unencumbered by nationality. She or he is both invisible and too visible. Conscious of how their foreignness marks them out from the rest of the city, refugees live hidden existences, forever fearful of openly showing their humanity. After a while, as Frears’ film shows with such poignancy and perhaps even a touch of melodrama, the refugee skulks around even when there is no need for it. There is something compulsive about Mpanda’s refugee journey that reflects a paradoxical desire for permanence that often intersects with an agonistic impetus that may or may not be forced from without. This is the point Arendt made in her essay on Jewish refugees in post-World War II Europe, and specifically on her own feelings about being a refugee. That, too, is Bernard’s goal as he diligently sets out to acquire his English from any printed text around him.

Frears’ Okwe, caught between two seemingly fulltime jobs, survives by consuming medicinal leaves that allow him to go without sleep for long periods of time. His trance-like existence captures much of the pathos of the experience of refugees the world over: driven by an energy harnessed from the fear of letting down their guard and being caught and sent back to yet another ‘nowhere place’, and the exhilaration of ever-new risks and opportunities. Okwe’s zombie-like wandering across London dramatises both his visibility and his invisibility, the paradox of countless others like him. Survival, after a while, is easier than giving up; Desai’s Biju frequently thinks about going home to his father but now finds himself caught in a cycle that, although initially of his own making, has since gained a life all of its own. In a rather perverse irony, the refugee fears most of all the visibility of invisibility, of an unbeing that is always already over-defined, while craving, almost pathologically, the anonymity of the visible. Seen always already as a refugee, her or his humanity remain concealed under the web of political discourses created to re-signify ‘refugee’ as ‘economic migrant’, as ‘terrorist’, as ‘inhuman’. Yet to an extent, though fearful the refugee is not afraid — of trying new things, experimenting with new ways of being, of doing, for such fearlessness is crucial to the new self. Risk-taking, often with the most horrid consequences, is at the heart of a refugee consciousness as seen in all four texts.

In each case, the motives for crossing national boundaries vary and the claim to refugee status is precariously balanced on an understanding of responsibility as stipulated in international refugee law and moral obligation. Biju is an economic migrant or an illegal migrant; Bernard has concrete reasons for leaving his country, and a reasonably credible claim to refugee status into South Africa; Okwe, the doctor who fled political persecution in Nigeria, could be seen as a legitimate asylum seeker; Mpanda’s situation is closer to that of a ‘displaced person’. In contrast, Biju travels to the USA as a tourist but with the intention of staying as long as required to gain a Green Card. Even Mpanda and Bernard readily admit that the move to South Africa was motivated by a desire for financial
improvement. This is an important point because it is crucial to the dilemma of
the refugee and to a refugee consciousness: to state at the outset that one seeks
financial gain by leaving one’s country is to close the doors of the place one seeks
admission to; to deny that aspect is to place oneself face-to-face with a series of
political, legal and ethical hurdles. Social scientists and human rights activists
have sought to address this quandary by declaring the distinction spurious and
self-interested. According to Hyland, ‘[i]n many countries political terror follows
as if “naturally” from economic misery’ (2), and one might argue that the opposite
is just as apt. In Burma/Myanmar, in Zimbabwe, in West Papua and elsewhere
the refugee is at once ‘political’ and ‘economic’ — the second category, that of
‘economic refugee’, follows almost seamlessly from the collapse of the polity.
Bernard’s existence in Cape Town cuts across these two positions: as with
refugees the world over, he struggles to gain legal residence in the country by
breaking its laws, working illegally outside one of the city’s markets. The need
to earn a living, his very survival, places him in a position where if found out he
will be deemed no longer a refugee or asylum seeker but an economic migrant.
Although the label of ‘economic migrant’ can on occasion allow entry to a foreign
country it is reserved for individuals with the sort of economic resources neither
Bernard nor Biju or any of the other characters has.

The figure of the refugee — stateless, always already beyond the pale — is
depicted in The Inheritance of Loss, in Skyline, in Dirty Pretty Things, and in
Going Home leading an existence characterised by broken connections, deeply
inflected by a more or less conscious fading out from existence. As refugees, as
soon as they leave home Biju, Bernard, Mpanda and Okwe are in many ways
no longer alive to their relatives for they may never be heard from again. In The
Inheritance of Loss, for example, Desai writes of ‘those [Indians] who lived and
died illegally in America’ (99), without contact with their families since leaving
home. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, these are the people who will
die often in the most gruesome manner, as they attempt to cross increasingly
firmly policed national borders on land and sea. Often their deaths go unnoticed,
un-mourned even, since to many of their relatives absence alone is not sufficient
proof that they have died. In Moroccan novelist Mahi Binebine’s Welcome to
Paradise (2004) refugees travelling by sea from Africa across to Europe regularly
disappear without trace; one of the central threads in a narrative filled with the
petits récits of a number of more or less anonymous people, is the story of a
woman seeking desperately to reconnect with a husband long lost to the ‘nowhere
places’ Bauman (2004a) speaks of. Although she presumes him still in France,
she has no means of contacting him, and the boatman taking her and her small
child from Africa across to Europe’s southern coast teases her that the lack of
contact from her husband probably means that he has a new woman. Binebine’s
zoom-like narrative perspective, and the fact that much of the story takes place
in an unidentified ‘nowhere place’ in the middle of the night, combine to create
the feeling that the journey the refugee undertakes leads essentially into a void where death is the only certainty. This is in essence the message that nation-states favoured by large numbers of refugees seek to convey. In “‘Bare Life” and the Geographical Divisions of Labour’, Mathew Hyland cites the former British Home Secretary, Jack Straw’s observation that the suffocation of 58 Chinese people in a cargo container in Dover, in 2001, should serve as a “‘stark warning” to others considering entering Britain illegally’ (2).

But there is a less stark yet infinitely more unpredictable translation into another self that comes when the refugee acquires the identity papers of someone she or he will never know. As previously noted, even the acquisition of a new identity comes at a price: it represents the moment when the self can become whole through the very act of erasure. Speaking of a fellow would-be refugee in Johannesburg, the narrator in Nadine Gordimer’s *The Pickup*, remarks that ‘It was the name that was not his name that he responded to’ (41). A refugee himself, Ibrahim ponders how many others ‘had disappeared under their own names, and were living as he did’ (30). In a significant echo of Desai’s, Schonstein’s, Kikamba’s novels, and Frears’ film, in Gordimer too, the *sans papiers’* metamorphosis into a documented self often means an official existence that bears little or nothing in common with his ‘birth self’ — she or he becomes merely a name on a bit of paper bearing the insignia of a nation-state. In *Dirty Pretty Things*, as the candidates for a kidney removal sign the requisite paperwork, they are offered a choice of nationalities from which to pick — a crude but apt comment on the expedient nature of national labels. Arguing her thesis with reference to what one might see as an earlier incarnation of the present figure of the refugee, the ‘escapee’ from Eastern Europe, Susan Carruthers (2005) notes the ease with which such individuals found refuge in some of the very nations now so intent on closing their borders to all manner of refugees. The escapee, she argues, became in fact central to the West’s war on Eastern Europe’s nations; rather than a figure of fear and hatred, the ‘escapee’ arrived in the West as a symbol of an unquenchable desire for democracy. In stark contrast to the way refugees are viewed in the USA and elsewhere today, the United States Escapee Program ‘*strove* to encourage flight’, hence to create refugees. Ironically, she writes, ‘few scholars scrutinised the ingenuity required to delineate the escapee as a distinct “person” who was *not* simply a refugee by any other name’ (emphasis in original, 913).

Carruthers’ thesis highlights the contrasting reception and treatment accorded today’s refugee, who would probably settle for a bit less scrutiny. To the ‘trained eye’ whose function and purpose it is to detect refugees real and imaginary — the immigration officer, the charity worker, the political activist or the rightwing ‘shock-jock’ — the refugee represents a world that is always a menace to one’s own. That he or she is here now — in Australia, in the United States of America, in Canada, in the United Kingdom — appears to mean only one thing to some: one is over here because one’s place of birth is a mess, a quagmire, a living hell;
it is backward, uncivilised, and in need of development. As a refugee or as a migrant one is always a walking sign of ‘elsewhereness’.

There is an interesting parallel in the way refugees, in the word’s broadest sense, are defined in The Inheritance of Loss, Going Home, Skyline and Dirty Pretty Things and the point made by Bauman, Hyland, Nyers and others, that they serve as an escape valve that deflates the grievances of workers’ such as those in the above quotation about ‘small wages’. Although they are victims of political and historical circumstances, others see them as free agents moving between places forever on the lookout for the best opportunities.

The strength of works such as those I have referred to is that, in the process of making visible the lives of the anonymous multitudes wandering in search of a safe place to live, they bring into relief the dis/connection between the refugee and the societies in which they exist. At one level the texts foreground those people whom Okwe crudely describes as ‘the people you never see. We wash your cars, clean your houses, suck your cocks’. Okwe himself is known among fellow marginalised Londoners for the understated and humane way in which he deals with them. In Skyline they are the anonymous masses who live in Skyline, ‘and most of them carry forged papers or pay bribes to stay in the country’ (8); but “[t]heir music makes each flat [in Skyline] become a village with bellowing oxen coming home at night. Their drumming speaks in the ochre and mud of clay pots and baskets woven tightly to hold beer and sour milk’ (9). In Nicholas Jose’s Original Face, one of the main characters is an illegal immigrant who is known throughout Sydney for her healing hands, either as a masseuse (and the connotative ambiguity is not to be overlooked) or as an acupuncturist. The Bernard whom a small group of Cape Town people embrace has as much to offer them as he has to gain from them. For all the danger and alienation they experience, they live meaningful existences parallel to, even central to, mainstream society. Slowly, painfully perhaps, they seek to move towards a better life in an elsewhere away from their place of birth.

NOTES

1 Patricia Schonstein Pinnock’s name on the cover of her works often appears without ‘Pinnock’; in fact, her name now appears on all her other works as ‘Patricia Schonstein’. Since most of work bears the latter inscription, in this essay I will use ‘Schonstein’ when abbreviating her name.


3 It is a well-known fact that in the urban centres of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town especially, but elsewhere more generally, apartheid’s strict separation of the races never really prevented non-Whites from moving into certain parts of White-designated areas of the city. However, it is equally accepted that too often this view is exaggerated, for it is important to recognise that non-Whites residing there almost always did so under conditions of extreme duress and uncertainty.
WORKS CITED


WALKING OUT IN THE CLARE VALLEY

i
The morning gate is shut
but if you
don’t open it
and walk out
the hour does anyway,
and after it the day.

ii
The distance between
one step and the next
is a length of charred bark
that was snatched
from a passing tree.

iii
Yellow and orange irises
lodged in olive flesh
return my fixed stare:
more wild flowers
in the October bush
than my poor pupils,
may ever number, ever sight.

iv
Don’t speak,
not even to yourself;
so delicious the birds’
tones, their music:
despise commentary.

v
Fields full of grass
like green wool
ready to be sheared
by knitting sheep.
vi
A large log
across your path
invites you to sit
a while and rest
between stanzas.

Like your last footsteps,
your thoughts are melting …

vii
Plovers squabble,
crows are shrill
and garrulous,
but kookaburras
just laugh out their name
over and over.

viii
The cathedrals of Europe
gothic in their beauty,
final in their pronouncements;

yet put one here amid
the blue ranges and ochre ridges,
how confident then
its answers to the oldest
questions this country asks?

ix
Two boys on bitser bikes
ride through my riddles
leaving me to recoup
what truth I can

like their dust
in my watering eyes.

x
The bush cottage
and vine-row oils,
the watercolour hints
of floating hills,

are not the only spring
exhibits: charcoal sketches
from last summer’s ashes
still arrest the eye:
fragments of black bones
scattered in weeds and sky.

xi
Picture in four months’ time
in the dry brown weather
the wind a belting door
on hot screaming hinges,
the perforating rasp of sheep
rattling thick herds of dust,
the creek with nothing, nothing to say.

xii
Despite the savagery of fire,
the land and its animals’
black and smoking carcasses,
the ritual of renewals
is secure as the sun is secure.

Winter rains raise the word
of death to speech of seed and leaf;
the single human has only one
life’s chance of being heard.

xiii
So I think I can’t imagine
the nuclear winter they say
we are threatened by
even here where the fat sun
grazes like a munching cow
in a froth of poppies,
and eucalypts shimmer into song.

But suddenly I shudder
in my tracks, stopped by an idea
that all I breathe,
touch, taste, see, hear,
is only magic waiting to vanish,
as men ordain,
in everlasting death.
xiv
Flames love the fat
of the land, its wheat fur,
when the bush is a lather
of heat and sweats buckets
like broken-in horses.

Then if a wind rises
out of the north’s oven
carrying a single spark,
the Lord promises
black judgement.

xv
There is also slow decaying wood
feathered with fungus and moss
which did not burn;

a peace so prevailing
that makes fire even
seem unaccomplished.

xvi
In the ploughed paddocks:

great gums recently uprooted
by machines like giant ants,
by metal men like robots.

All that remains
of their forest power,
like toppled towers
on the pile of history,
is the fading traction
of a lost message.

xvii
Sun disperses
bush filters
blood-trickling light;

earth on which you walk
is a cushion of cool shade.

Everything near you expands
into the mystery of itself,
except for your own shadow
stretching
disappearing
beyond who you are…

xviii
The wending valley lingers
in its dusk which peels in places
where window panes and
tilting poles brier lights.

Do those who nurture here
see the fruits of gladness,
a beacon name like God,
sculptured in their porches?

Their planter ancestors
of the riesling vineyards
were also pickers
of the Bible’s metaphors.

xix
Vineyards on hillsides
wineries in hollows
orchards in pastures
gardens in orchards
go forth and multiply…
dirt roads and lanes
plank and rock bridges
stone and wooden houses
weatherboard churches
stone and slate churches
go forth and multiply…

xx
Here in this sooner age
I am content
with the wine
from the bottle,
gold from the green
red from the brown;
an occasional smile
for the grace and miracle
of the crushed grape
saved for the palate;

and leave the myths
where they belong
to autumn on the vines:
subsumed, secret,
in their perpetual song.

BRENDA COOPER

Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *By the Sea*

We should never underestimate stories. Like the jinns in *The Thousand and One Nights*, Gurnah tells us that stories ‘are always slipping through our fingers, changing shape, wriggling to get away’ (130). This essay examines some of those shape shifting stories and the material culture that attempts to anchor and strip them of their beguiling power. It does so in the context of their travelling owners in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel, *By the Sea*.

Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Zanzibar in 1948, where his novel is partly set. He emigrated to Britain in 1968 where he both writes and teaches at the University of Kent in the English Department. African Asian writers, like M.G. Vassanji and Gurnah, do not buy into the unified project of nation and continent building. They battle with questions of their African identities and rights to citizenship. These African Asians, who have migrated to cities like Montreal, London or New York, are hybrids, juggling their multiple identities — African, Asian and European — which both liberate and perplex them. This is particularly so in Gurnah’s earlier novel, *Admiring Silence* (1996), and especially in *By the Sea* (2001) discussed here. May Joseph refers to ‘inauthentic citizenship’ in relation to these Asian Africans (2). She herself is a Tanzanian, whose family, eventually and sadly, felt it had to migrate. In response to the corrosive and exclusionary politics of ethnicity and so-called indigenous African nationalism, writers like Vassanji and Gurnah repeatedly construct families and affiliations, which cut across race and nation (Cooper 2004). All of this accounts for the lack of clarity or closure at the end of his possibly best known novel, *Paradise*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994. In that novel, the protagonist, Yusuf, may be escaping to freedom from the indigenous servitude into which his family had been forced to sell him, or, perhaps into another form of subservience within the column of invading German colonisers (247).

*By the Sea* has two main protagonists, a chain of shape shifting and bartered solid objects and a multitude of stories. The first protagonist, Saleh Omar, arrives at Gatwick Airport from Zanzibar, a nomad, a deterritorialized traveller. He
Brenda Cooper

arrives mute, pretending to speak no English, answering no questions and stating no causes for his migration. In his bag he carries, among his paltry bits of clothing, a mahogany casket containing a fragrance of great wonder and magnificence. The fragrance is called ud-al-qamari. This casket and its contents are ‘all the luggage from a life departed, the provisions of my after-life’ (31). The casket is stolen by an immigration officer, Kevin Edelman. The dispossession is immense because the casket is a ‘relic’ which is a fragment, a solid object brought from home, from the past, a treasured thing, a metonymy, a part for the whole of his life in Zanzibar, and the reason why the first part of the book is entitled ‘Relics’ (1).

This little drama at the airport, however, is not unique, but a mosaic of that ancient history of trade, plunder and greed. Gurnah has structured his narrative around travelling, metamorphosing objects. This reflects his understanding of world history that pre-dates colonialism and post-dates post-independent Africa an understanding that is global. Struggles over trade goods and trade routes, lust for exotic stuff from other places, the compelling whiff of spices and the stench of greed have fuelled history for hundreds of years. Edelman’s theft is no different.

The context for Omar’s arrival in England, thus, has to be understood in terms of the history of Zanzibar, from where he came, and where successive waves of plunderers, dreamers and story tellers had, over time, descended on the islands. The Omanis, as Gurnah describes them removed the Portuguese ‘with the British close behind, and close behind them the Germans and the French and whoever else had the wherewithal’ (15). New maps were drawn trade was controlled and restricted and stuff, like ‘ghee and gum, cloths and crudely hammered trinkets, livestock and salted fish, dates, tobacco, perfume, rosewater, incense’, dried up (16). These ordinary and also exotic, travelling things comprised the nature of life in Zanzibar when Omar was growing up. What Gurnah is insisting upon is that we comprehend postcolonial migration, of people and things, in this historical context, rather than as a product of the more recent and publicised trend of globalisation as something new.

Omar’s arrival, his apparent inability to speak, and the theft of his precious casket, appear to reduce him to a silent victim of the Imperial gatekeeper. Or do they? In ‘Signs Taken for Wonders’, Homi Bhabha describes the English book arriving in Delhi where it is received as a marvel, but only at first sight, as the wily, crafty colonial subject, appropriates this book and turns it against the master via the back door; thus Bhabha underscores the entwined complexity of domination and resistance. Now this English Book has been packed and returned whence it came, in a new era of late twentieth-century globalisation. Migrating books transmogrify from deep Symbolic, canonical knowledge, whose tentacles squeeze the minds and tongues of colonial subjects, into melded symbolic metonymies. These are available for ritual use as travelling postcolonials take up their rights to become part of a transforming West.

Omar is a hybrid man, the complex syncretism of many cultures:
Years before, the British authorities had been good enough to pick me out of the ruck of native schoolboys eager for more of their kind of education, though I don’t think we all knew what it was we were eager for. It was learning, something we revered and were instructed to revere by the teaching of the Prophet, but there was glamour in this kind of learning, something to do with being alive to the modern world. (17)

His silence at the airport is a wily strategy:

I had been told not to say anything, to pretend I could not speak any English. I was not sure why, but I knew I would do as I was told because the advice had a crafty ring to it, the kind of resourceful ruse the powerless would know. (5)

This Muslim man from Zanzibar, who has enjoyed a British colonial education, with his decision not to speak and his precious casket of exotic goods, passes through the ritual Gatwick border into that third space of nomads and migrants. The language he silently, internally, evokes, in resistance to Edelman, who stole from him, is metonymic, playful, reducing the power of the patriarchal Law of the immigration officer to the reality of the petty crook that he is.

Edelman, was that a German name? Or a Jewish name? Or a made-up name? Into a dew, jew, juju. Anyway, the name of the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through the generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe’s values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn’t get to enjoy them. Think of me as one of those objects that Europe took away with her. (12)

The perfume implicitly acts as Omar’s passport, and when we encounter him at the beginning of the novel, he is living in a little flat in a small English seaside town. His only friend is Rachel, a kind young Englishwoman who works for the refugee organisation, under whose shelter he survives and whose job it is to assist him in settling down. His real name is Saleh Omar, but he adopts another name and passport. His is an ordinary life — ‘I don’t know a great truth which I ache to impart, nor have I lived an exemplary experience which will illuminate our conditions and our times’ (2). Ordinary it may be, and yet his life will illuminate the postcolonial migrant condition, along with the life of a younger man, the second major character, Latif, who is a scholar, also originally from Zanzibar. Latif’s family and Omar had become enemies, over possessions, when Omar called in a loan that resulted in Latif’s family losing their house and all its contents.

Their lives intersect again, given that Saleh Omar appears to speak no English and to need an interpreter (97). Rachel finds none other than Latif, who hates this man who he regards as having robbed his family, to play this role. The entire novel centres around the lives of these two men of different generations, both in Zanzibar and in Europe, as they come to terms with their past and thereby with each other. Latif wishes he ‘could ignore it all, shrug off the endless stories behind me, but I knew I would not be able to’ (97). Material objects, such as the casket of perfume, are deeply entwined in the history of their familial disputes. The perfume is linked to another precious object from home — an ebony table. The table could not be carried in his luggage, but Omar does bring with him a complex and intriguing relationship to furniture.
TRANSMOGRIFYING FURNITURE: THE EBONY TABLE DE-FETISHISED

... a low table on three delicately bowed legs, made of ebony so highly polished that it glowed tremulously even from a distance. (22)

Once through the border post and into his new life, Omar appears to be fixated by furniture and he spends his days on the streets looking into furniture shops. He does this to anchor himself, because he is an outsider, an aged, eccentric parvenu without roots or family in this strange town by the sea. For Omar, furniture is something that ‘weighs us down and keeps us on the ground, and prevents us from clambering up trees and howling naked as the terror of our useless lives overcomes us’ (3). In the furniture shops, Omar does not experience ‘this agitation’ because ‘furniture shops in the morning are silent, expansive places, and I stroll in them in some equanimity’ (3). And so

I stroll among the beds and the sofas ... I enter a different store every day, and after the first or second time, the assistants on longer make eye-contact. I wander between the sofas and the dining tables, and the beds and the sideboards, lounging on an item for a few seconds, trying out the machinery, checking the price, comparing the fabric of this to that one. Needless to say, some of the furniture is ugly and over-decorated, but some of it is delicate and ingenious. (4)

The mad nomad roams the streets, attempting to find an anchoring point through mundane, material, solid objects. The flummoxed shop assistants stare at this strange, brown, aging man, who fingers the stuff and never buys (4). Yet, in these compelling furniture shops he feels ‘for a while a kind of content and the possibility of mercy and absolution’ (4). Why absolution? What guilt does Omar carry in relation to furniture? To answer this question, we must return to Zanzibar, before Omar migrated to England, and follow the life trajectory of the table.

Omar had been quite a prosperous Zanzibari businessman who ran a shop selling special, desirable objects. Hussein, a trader, ‘a Persian from Bahrain’ (16), lusted after, and bought, a magnificent ebony table from Omar. He paid for it half in cash and half in kind, that being the perfume and its wooden casket. Soon after the exchange, Hussein had approached Omar for a loan. The loan carried as security the house and its contents of one Rajab Shaaban Mahmud, Latif’s father, who was in debt to Hussein for the ‘exact sum of money he wished to borrow from me’ (33). Unbeknown to Rachel, Latif’s family and Omar had become deadly enemies in Zanzibar because Omar had called in the surety on the loan and Latif and his family had lost their house and its furnishings, including the ebony table, which had returned to Omar’s possession. Latif’s mother longed to retrieve at least this table, and had sent Latif to Omar to plead with him to return it. However, Omar had refused and by greedily retaining the ebony possession, he provided a catalyst for his own downfall. Latif’s mother it turned out, had a lover who was a powerful government minister at the time of the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, and all its persecutions, terror and murder. This personal vendetta became a trumped-
up political crime and Omar himself was dispossessed of everything he owned and eventually imprisoned for eleven long, terrible years.

Omar’s shift from the position of persecutor to victim is furthered by his discovery, on his release from prison in 1979, that his wife and daughter have died. The further revenge taken on him by Latif’s family eventually forces Omar to flee the island and seek refuge in England, taking with him only the casket of exquisite perfume that he had received in part payment for the ebony table. In England, the two men from warring families and different generations are forced to confront each other and tell their own stories. From Latif’s perspective, we hear how the loan was called in and the house lost. He bitterly remembers Omar ‘walking among the bits and pieces of our lives, picking out something and then ordering the rest to be auctioned’ (102). The inventory of objects is the chorus of Latif’s litany of bitterness:

Everything was packed into three carts: the furniture, the rugs, including the Bokharra, the old wall clock with a silver face, my mother’s sewing machine, the brass and stained glass goblets my father had inherited from someone, and even the framed tablets of verses from the Koran which hung on the walls. (102)

Latif’s resentment about the dispossession crystallises around the ebony table. That humiliating mission, where Latif had attempted to retrieve the table from Omar on behalf of his mother, is seared in his memory again by way of an envious inventory of the possessions in Omar’s house. He had seen

the comfortable chairs, the rugs, a black almira with brass chasing, the gilt mirrors. All of them were objects which had beauty and purpose, but which stood like refugees in that room, standing still because pride and dignity demanded it but none the less as if they had a fuller life elsewhere. Looking like objects in a gallery or a museum, brightly lit and roped off, to celebrate someone’s cleverness and wealth. Looking like plunder. (102)

These objects are like the stolen goods smuggled by adventurers into museums. In this novel of third spaces, palimpsests and Chinese boxes, objects and their trajectories, stories and their origins and outcomes, are never clear or polarised. Omar is both perpetrator and victim, coloniser and colonised. In tracking the journey undertaken by the ebony table, and surmising about the fuller lives of the objects in Omar’s house upon which their previous owner, Latif, looks with rage and resentment, what comes to mind is Arjun Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things*. Appadurai suggests that objects have ‘life histories’ (41) and that they may ‘accumulate an idiosyncratic biography or enjoy a peculiar career’ (42). He describes how these objects or commodities leave their designated paths and find themselves ‘in unlikely contexts’ (27). These ‘diversions’ are, however, ‘meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray’ (Appadurai, 28). The paths that the objects in this novel take are multiple and global. Routes include journeys to Africa, from India or Europe and back, as traders and migrants carry intriguing baggage, like Omar’s casket of sublime perfume that
had travelled from Cambodia, to Bangkok, to Bahrain to Zanzibar (29), before arriving in London where it disappeared into the hands of the immigration officer. The table is reincarnated in England, stripped of its power and preciousness as Latif and Omar face each other with a ‘low rectangular table of no refinement between [them]’ (144). Seated at the ebony table, they have to strip themselves of the embellishments, stories and differing versions surrounding it before they can be re-made in their new country. Only the testimonies surrounding this table will enable their reconciliation:

‘The little ebony table that belonged to Hassan, my brother. Do you remember it? I came to ask for it back. Do you remember it? I came to ask for it back. Do you remember it?’ he said, still sitting with his chin in his hand…. ‘The one that your friend Hussein gave him before he stole [Hassan] away. Thirty-four years ago. … Why didn’t you just give that table back to her? My mother. Why didn’t you just give it back? You had the house, the bits of furniture, all the rubbish. You had a beautiful house of your own, a wife, a daughter…. Why did you also have to have the table?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘Greed. Meanness. It was a business. I wish I had given it back’ (158)

Omar confesses and apologises. Why did he also have to have the table? His answer is intriguing:

When I got the ebony table back, I put it in my shop not because I thought I would be able to sell it, but because it was beautiful and it brought back to me daily the futility of friendship and ambition. (210)

It is a marvel of a table, but its function as gift, as debt, as commodity, is malevolent and negative, carrying with it all kinds of histories about destruction of friendships and the corrosiveness of driving ambition. The older, wiser Omar has little ambition other than surviving in England and will make new friends as his investment in his future life. One such friend is Rachel and later in the novel Omar describes to her his life of daily early morning visits to the furniture stores where he battles to come to terms with the strangeness of the new culture he finds himself in, expressed by way of wood:

‘Thick pale wood and brutal straight lines,’ I said. ‘I have a fondness for little curls and filigrees, and delicate decorative borders. I can see the quality of the wood in these tables, but I am repelled by their bold utilitarian hubris, their celebration of their ugliness.’ (201)

These fatal curls, filigrees and embellishments that layer things with toxic fetishised meaning, like the beautiful yet fatal ebony table, must be reduced to bold, utilitarian strokes. This wood, for all its ugliness, has de-fetishised the table and returned it to being merely an object with an unambiguous purpose. Yet this is given ambivalently, for these solid objects carry their own hubris; the abandonment of the exquisite, elaborate, emotional aesthetic from Zanzibar is the price paid for integrating, to some extent, into English culture and enables the
feuds and melodrama, pain and violence of Zanzibar to be jettisoned along with the evil ebony.

Migrants like Omar survive by embedding themselves in material realities, establishing new, everyday customs, acquiring the basic accoutrements of life and purging the bitterness of historical injustices. This process of embedding, jettisoning and divesting themselves of the luxuries, the filigrees and the pride and ambition and greed that accompany them, in Omar’s case, began long ago in Zanzibar. Gurnah repeatedly and wisely refuses to polarise here and there, then and now, as he understands history to be global and places to be metamorphosing simultaneously in both space and time. We need to go back again to Zanzibar to re-visit the fancy shop where it all began, where Hussein saw the table and lusted after it and after the body of a young man, and bartered for the table to be a gift, which turned into a curse. Let us see how the shop itself shape shifts until it too, is stripped down, literally, from selling elaborate treasures to providing the basics for human survival.

**Metamorphosing Shops, the Revolution in Zanzibar and ‘Inauthentic Citizenship’**

The historical moment is clear: it is 1960 and Omar is doing well, having inherited a big house and his father’s halwa shop that has been ‘repainted and relit to sell furniture and other beautiful things’ (19). The metamorphosis, however, is only partly successful because ‘despite all efforts, the smell of hot ghee still lingered in the store, and at times of despondency it seemed no different from the dingy dark cave from where my father sold halwa in small saucers’ (19). Aromas, be they fragrant or pungent, do not respect boundaries and history makes itself smelt in the shop. Tentacles of both the past, redolent with Arabian stories of caves glowing in the dark with buried treasure, and the future, of furniture shops in another place and time, wind themselves around this shop: ‘I knew the store looked smart and expensive, and the objects I displayed in there spoke for themselves. I have always had an interest in furniture’ (19).

Omar has turned into the archetypal Asian shopkeeper as middleman, poised hazardously between his own countrymen and the British conquerors, plunderers and trophy seekers from the colonies. As Latif later mischievously informs him, rumour has it that Omar sold his soul to the British for their pounds sterling and people said ‘you licked British arses, that you were a colonial stooge’ (156). Or, as May Joseph generalises, East African Asians worked ‘as middlemen at the interface of colonial subjugation and growing resentment among indigenous peoples’ forging as they did so ‘a precarious balance’ (75). Joseph refers quite specifically to ‘the stereotypical impact of Asians as a commercially successful mercantile community’ (83). This situation came to a head in the 1964 revolution, which engulfed Gurnah’s Omar along with many others. It was a revolution in which ‘the Zanzibari African majority overthrew the sultan’s constitutional monarchy’ (Joseph 80); it was motivated by the complex tensions between different layers of society in Zanzibar, tensions that had been fanned by the divide-and-rule British
‘The uprising was precipitated by long-standing tensions between Swahilis of Arab ancestry (muhajirina) and those of African and Shirazi (Persian) ancestry, motivated in part by colonial constructions of ethnicity’ (Joseph 80).

On Omar’s release from prison, he returns to his shop and he has again to transform it. The concrete details of Omar’s changed circumstances are provided in code by way of the inventory of the new goods in this shop. What these goods exemplify and chart is his painful dispossession, not only of his beautiful objects, but of his African identity in post-revolutionary Zanzibar:

I lived in the store, and in time cleaned one of the back rooms and moved in there so I could start trading again, though in a different way now. I sold what items I had that were of value, and bought fruit and vegetables for sale, and gradually added other small items of a similar kind, matches, soap and some tinned fish. (235)

He later contrasts his ‘little corner shop’ where he ‘sold vegetables and sugar and razor blades’ with ‘the carefully lit emporium where I sold expensive furniture’ of the past (240). These staple things, embody the hardship wrought by the new regime in post revolutionary Zanzibar. This historian, Esmond Bradley Martin, describes the commodity shortages and the depleted shops by 1970 when the economy collapsed (60). Necessities had to be imported and inefficiency resulted in ‘such oddities as Chinese cameras which didn’t work’ and ‘extra-large sized shoes piled up, unwanted by anyone’ as well as ‘massive quantities of faulty torch batteries and fountain pens which had been imported from China’ (Martin 61–62).

The shoes and the razor blades structure the narrative shape of the novel through their interactions with people. Omar’s tins of fish, substitutions for the exotics and marvels, are the indicators of his will to survive and of his new unsettled circumstances that will lead to his own escape from captivity. These transmogrifying shops and their stripped down wares and living quarters serve as a narrative code in that they are the language in which Gurnah depicts the suffering and deprivation of those times, a suffering that Omar finds too painful to describe directly in words:

I have taught myself not to speak of the years which followed, although I have forgotten little of them. The years were written in the language of the body, and it is not a language I can speak with words. Sometimes I see photographs of people in distress, and the image of their misery and pain echoes in my body and makes me ache with them. (230–31)

Those dreadful, depleted years take their toll on the body and are represented by objects as Omar clings to furniture so as not to howl in rage. Those objects have themselves to be stripped of the toxic stories and embellishments that cling to them and to become simple, utilitarian tools. The pain invested in the old filigreed treasures, in the magnificence of the glowing ebony of the table, is the memory of the uncertainties of Omar’s African identity; Gurnah demonstrates how men like Omar, perhaps like himself, play out their painful in-between roles of being neither one thing nor another, neither Asian nor African. Joseph, in her
own Tanzanian context, emphasises that Asian African identities were contested already in Africa prior to migration to Canada or England, and so these people were doubly displaced when they migrated (2). The true reason for Omar’s need for asylum is that his African identity within a Zanzibari context had always been under threat. Gurnah merely hints at this by way of people of Omani descent who are rounded up by the government and sent into detention on the same prison island as Omar until they can be deported (221–22). Omar observes bitterly that

[i]n truth, they were no more Omani than I was, except that they had an ancestor who was born there. … In other respects they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya, and they were sons of indigenes, but after their treatment at the hands of various commanding officers, they were eager to leave, and spoke as despisingly of their persecutors as their persecutors did of them. (225)

The fact that ‘home’ was ambiguous made ‘exile’ even more difficult. Simon Lewis refers to writers like Gurnah as ‘never-quite-indigenous natives’ (226–27).4

From halwa, to expensive furniture and exotic treasures, to food and soap, these solid, yet shape shifting objects and shops provide the narrative contours of the novel as a whole. Omar learns to survive on these staples and ‘I did enough business to feed and clothe myself, and as time passed I was able to live in reasonable safety and comfort’ (236). However, the chain of dispossession is long and winds across the sea. Omar himself is not innocent and has dispossessed Latif’s family. He in turn is robbed and imprisoned, first by indigenous Zanzibari then by Edelman, at the gate of the Western world. The driving force behind history is the lust for things which bring wealth and also war and suffering; but these material objects gain their power from the stories that attach to them with the movement of history and which they transform into myth. Along with the staples he sells in his reduced shop, Omar ‘still had several of the books I had acquired all those decades ago from departing colonial officials, some of them chewed and holed by cockroaches now, and I worked my way slowly through them’ (236–37). There are many stories in By the Sea.

Growing up in colonial Zanzibar, Omar is fed British stories — tablets of the Law — as passport to a distorted, colonised subjectivity: ‘in their books I read unflattering accounts of my history, and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves’ (18). There may have been ‘little or no time for those other stories’, the ones they told themselves, but Gurnah, through Omar, remembers those other stories:

The stories we knew about ourselves before they took charge of us seemed medieval and fanciful, sacred and secret myths that were liturgical metaphors and rites of adherence, a different category of knowledge which, despite our assertive observance, could not contest with theirs. (18)

**Escaping Stories: The Thousand and One Nights and ‘Bartleby the Scrivener’**

When Gurnah was asked ‘what books and authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?’ part of his reply was ‘In “proper” school
our class readers for the first few years were selections from the *Arabian Nights’* (Anon 1994 13). *The Thousand and One Nights*, however, is itself already positioned somewhere in an interstice poised to suit the purpose of a crossed-over Asian writer whose life is now played out in England. Gurnah continues to refuse simplistic polarities in relation to stories which, like smells, permeate and travel where they will. For example, Omar, newly arrived in the little English seaside town, describes his passage to England paradoxically as imagined through those stories that contest English domination:

I imagine it like this: that to get here I had wriggled through a passage that closed in behind me. Too many *A Thousand and One Nights* stories when I was younger perhaps, that image of the passage. (63)

*The Thousand and One Nights* has its own syncreticities, forgeries and violations (Mahdi 1–2). There are many direct and also indirect references to *The Thousand and One Nights* in *By the Sea* but two stories, ‘The Fisherman and the Jinn’ and the tale of King Shahrayar and the killing of the virgins, are re-told in some detail and are ritually connected to rites of passage in the two protagonists’ lives, linking their acquisition of psychic growth to language, subjectivity and historical struggles. What these re-told stories enact is the complex melange of cultural forms that are acquired by ex-colonials in the process of developing as human subjects who are both unique and also structurally determined.

Firstly, in a laden dream-type sequence, Latif, aged nine, remembers searching for the key to a locked room of the family house. He knows that there is nothing valuable or dangerous in the room, but nonetheless it appears to be a matter of life and death to find the key and enter the room. Once inside, he finds ‘two large clay jars’, objects very concrete and ordinary with a mundane reason for being there — ‘probably being stored for a relative or a friend, or a relative of a friend or a friend of a relative’ (84). These material objects, however, are catalysts of the imagination that take the boy into the world of the *Arabian Nights*. This, readers intuit, was the reason he had to find the key and enter the room even if he did not consciously know this:

The jars made me think of stories of jinns rising out of them, of young women abducted in them, of the young prince having himself conveyed in one to his beloved’s chamber. I knew stories like that: a fisherman low on luck and desperate for a good catch snares a jar in his net. (84)

He goes on to tell the well-known story of ‘The Fisherman and the Jinni’. Suffice it to say that the story takes the familiar shape of a mortal struggle between the fisherman and the fierce jinn that is liberated from the jar. The fisherman outwits the jinn and tricks him into returning to the jar, which he rolls back into the sea. Then comes the interesting part. The young Latif, progressing along the informal, somewhat oblique ritual he is engaged in, now climbs into the jar, where language, repeated for its metonymic sound and texture, becomes altered:
When I spoke, which I did experimentally, saying alhamdulillah, my voice reverberated
down a long tunnel and had a flatness which was unrecognisable, as if the space itself
was pressing my head down on my larynx. I tried other words, imagining other worlds,
and in due course I fell asleep. (Of course I didn’t, but Ali Baba did and woke up to
find himself in the cave of the Forty Thieves). (85–6)

Gurnah is alerting us to the unreliability of stories and storytellers, as the
boy fibs himself into the already fabricated and tampered story of Ali Baba,
pointing to the Chinese box of tales within stories. At the same time, however, the
ritual and the discovery unveil something very true. The story links us to Uncle
Hussein, who is indeed the evil jinn unleashed upon the family, who sets in train
events which rob them of all their worldly goods. The new, adolescent broken
voice, heard in the strangeness of the jar, is the initiation into the bitter world of
adults and their feuds and disillusionments. The adult Latif has this to say about
memory, such as that of the clay jars and what they conjured up of his traumatic
past:

Yet when I look back, I find some objects still gleam with a bright malevolence and
every memory draws blood. It is a dour place, the land of memory, a dim gutted
warehouse with rotting planks and rusted ladders where you sometimes spend time
rifling through abandoned goods. (86)

The objects that gleam with malevolence furnish the land of memory. It is a place
stocked with old stuff, abandoned goods, everyday rubbish, which nonetheless
enables Latif to re-construct his childhood in the attempt to banish the demons
and jinns back into their jars and send them packing. Does he, like the fisherman,
succeed and thereby re-make himself in some new rite? And what role does Omar
play in Latif’s ritual drama?

This brings me to the second re-told Thousand and One Nights story, that of
King Shahrayar and the killing of the virgins, which takes place on the island
prison where Omar camouflages his land of memory and pain, populated by
bloodshed and anguish through codes. Omar had been imprisoned for eleven
years. Part of that time he was incarcerated on a prison island and this Nights’ story
is told to him by the old caretaker on the island who is a surviving servant of the
defunct British Empire and has overtones of Edelman, doorkeepers and bawabs
of old, who are everywhere. He maintains the prison building which had fallen
into disuse after the island had been turned into a sanatorium for tuberculosis
victims, and he tends the graves of three British naval officers who died there. The
caretaker is ‘living a secret life of imperial duties and hoarded stores, tending the
monuments of an empire which had retreated to the safety of its own ramparts and
forgotten him’ (224). No clichéd wise old indigenous griot, this relic of empire is
the storyteller of syncretised tales from here and there, Europe and the East. He
tells the story of King Shahrayar who had discovered the treachery of his wife,
and then later on his travels is confirmed in his distrust of women by this beautiful
finger-licking woman.
Once, he said, he saw a column of spray race across the surface of the sea and stop on
the island. When he went nearer to investigate he found a large black figure, a jinn,
sleeping under a tree with a large casket open beside his head. In the large casket was
a woman, stroking her hair and singing to herself, and then licking her jewelled fingers
one by one, as if something sweet still remained on them. … Did I know why she was
licking her jewelled fingers like that? He asked me. Because while the jinn slept, she
seduced any man that was nearby and took a ring as a token of her pleasure. (229–30)

After seeing this, he returns to his kingdom and begins killing all the virgins, until
he encounters the magnificent Shahrazad, who tells him stories so compelling
that in order to hear their end he delays her execution — narrative as literally a
matter of life or death. For Omar, the caretaker’s story is a cacophony of cultures,
histories and narratives:

Then I saw that for the old man the island was crowded with enchanted life, with
British naval officers and British doctors and convalescing patients, and serpents and
imprisoned women singing in the night air, and dark jinns that raced across the sea to
rest from their immortal questing for mischief. (230)

The structure of The Thousand and One Nights organises and contains the story
that Gurnah is telling. By the Sea is a cask, a suitcase, a trunk, that enables layer
upon layer of story to be contained and transported, and within this framework it
echoes and also contains The Thousand and One Nights, with its embedded stories
— ‘that narrative structure’, explains Sandra Naddaff, ‘by which one tale contains
another tale that in turn contains a third’ (41). In other words, Naddaff contrasts
the realistic, concrete linear sequences of The Nights with the twirling arabesques
of their supernatural, imaginary cycles and ‘their ever-shifting fashion’ (121).
And so, ‘the magical palaces and bottled jinn’ (Naddaff 120) alternate with ‘the
objective presentation of the object’ (Naddaff 121), which could be everyday items
such as curtains or ‘the ten pounds of mutton bought by the girl from Baghdad
(Haddawy, xi). All of this echoes the spirit of Gurnah’s own complex narrative
stratigraphy of stories and ordinary material goods in supermarkets.

In other words, By the Sea, with its own repetitions and embeddings, including
the incorporation of The Nights, is itself a ritual gesture to migrant translations
into new persona within the constraints of old, painful and unresolved issues.
These tales of migrating jinns and princes, magic carpets and enchanted fish,
fill the holes in the stories that the British brought in order to tell the colonised
about themselves. This is, I think, what Maya Jaggi fails to understand when she
suggests that ‘the novel meanders into incidental histories’ (3). These ‘incidental
histories’ are, in fact, a veritable palimpsest of stories, histories and cultures. One
of these embedded stories is about another character, who like Omar at Gatwick,
is in his own way refusing to speak. I am referring to Bartleby, the character
in Herman Melville’s tale of Bartleby the Scrivener, a story that plays its own
significant part in Gurnah’s tale of many stories.

Incorporating and transforming a foreign tale in this way, is entirely within
the syncretising, boundlessly capacious spirit of The Thousand and One Nights:
'storytellers handled inherited models and reshaped them into new narratives' (Mahdi 165). Likewise, By the Sea has no difficulty in layering the mid-nineteenth-century American Herman Melville story into its midst. Melville’s story is a code embedded in Gurnah’s novel in order to chart the process whereby Omar frees himself. It charts how Omar ‘journeys from mute invisibility to possessing his own tale’ (Jaggi 3). To trace this journey, we have to follow the life-story of Melville’s book in Gurnah’s novel and see how this tale is expelled from Gurnah’s text.

Initially, Latif finds reading Melville is liberating, opening up an alternative to stuffy British arrogance. In Zanzibar, the library of the English Club was ‘strictly for members only, with wire grilles on the windows and a doorkeeper sitting at a desk by the entrance who granted or withheld admission’ (105). This exclusive pompous British site is contrasted to the library and reading room of the United States Information Service, in the novel’s Zanzibar, where a person could read newspapers and magazines and even borrow books. As Latif enthuses, these included titles by ‘Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, Edgar Allan Poe, names that excited a noble curiosity because they were not contaminated by a discourse of tutelage and hierarchy’ (106). These new world authors appeared to offer Latif an escape from the contamination of British racism, exclusion and cultural imperialism.

In addition, Melville’s character of Bartleby is harnessed by Gurnah in order to provide a role model for wily postcolonial resistance through language. We have to understand the importance of the coincidence that both Latif and Omar identify with the line of passive resistance from Melville’s novel that characterises the whole of Bartleby’s limited capacity for speech: ‘“I would prefer not to,” he said’ (156). We also have to suspend our proverbial disbelief that this novella coincidentally could mean so much to both of these characters:

“Bartleby the Scrivener”,’ he [Latif] said, grinning all over his face, the skin round his eyes creased in lines of surprised pleasure, suddenly happy. ‘You know the story! It’s a beautiful story. Do you like it? You like it too, I can tell. I love the impassive authority of that man’s defeat, the noble futility of his life.’ (156)

In the Melville story, Bartleby begins as a ‘scrivener’. Scriveners are, Melville tells us, ‘law-copyists’ (109). Bartleby may faithfully reproduce the Law to begin with, but he ends as a silent inanimate object as he refuses to copy out or submit to the Law. This must be his attraction for these postcolonials. But what is the manner of the resistance, and what is the outcome of the struggle? In his essay, ‘Bartleby; or, The Formula’, Gilles Deleuze suggests that Bartleby is ‘a pure outsider [exclus] to whom no social position can be attributed’ (73). He becomes the parvenu, the nomad, the postcolonial migrant. Linking the issue of the American writer struggling to be heard against the thundering British traditions and the resistance open to this outsider, Deleuze questions: ‘Is this not the schizophrenic vocation of American literature: to make the English language, by means of driftings, deviations, … (as opposed to the standard syntax), slip in this manner?’ (72). This
Brenda Cooper

is an example, par excellence, of what Deleuze and Felix Guattari called ‘minor literature’, or one, that inserted another language within the dominant one, in order to interrogate its power (16). In this fashion, Deleuze describes Melville as inventing ‘a foreign language that runs beneath English and carries it off: it is the OUTLANDISH or Deterritorialized, the language of the Whale’ (72).

However, this form of resistance is dangerous, unless it leads to an alternative form of speech. For how long and in what manner would the muteness of Omar at the airport have served his purpose? Bartleby himself slowly but surely declines from the human to a silent object, ‘a fixture in my chamber’, a ‘millstone’ as ‘useless as a necklace’ (Melville 136). Eventually, he is imprisoned where he becomes known as ‘the silent man’ (Melville 153) a position Omar echoes in his refugee camp. However, whereas Bartleby dies, Omar recovers language, his own stories and acquires new social identity. In the process, he has to reject the role model of Bartleby; and the catalyst for this recovery of his own voice is Rachel, whose job it is to settle and integrate refugees like Omar. She dislikes the Melville story, which Omar had told her about, and rejects what she calls Omar’s ‘Bartleby act’: ‘too much gloom and resignation in it, she thought’ and ‘perhaps she was afraid that I saw myself as a kind of Bartleby, as someone with a secret and burdensome history who sought to expiate it with silence’ (198). Bartleby makes Rachel ‘think of someone dangerous, someone capable of small, sustained cruelties on himself and others weaker than himself, an abuser’ (198). This brings about an important shift in Omar: ‘I had never thought of Bartleby like that although he was cruel to himself, that was true’ (198). Omar slowly realises that Bartleby’s desire to efface himself is indeed a meagre and soul-less absence. This results in a change in Omar’s language when he speaks to Latif:

‘You must get a telephone,’ [Latif] said, …
‘I have no urge to do so,’ I said, and saw him smile. I thought I knew what he was thinking. He would have preferred me to say, I prefer not to. But I had been thinking of what Rachel said, and thought I would read ‘Bartleby’ again before speaking his words as the utterings of an admired desperado. (244)

In a ritual reversal of Omar’s Bartleby-like mute arrival and the theft of his treasure, we see the beginnings of his initiation into sociability, once again enacted by way of the objects, which are stolen or bartered or bought or sold or given as gifts. It is on the same page of the novel where Rachel rejects Bartleby that Omar describes how Rachel ‘had bought me a pair of trainers as a gift, which I have managed to persuade myself to wear once but I felt gaudy and clownish as I walked on the waterfront with them, and so have not worn them again, yet’ (200). With the tantalising ‘yet’ ringing in our ears, we see how these laden stories, of mutes and jinns and dark caves packed with malevolent, glowing objects, are cleansed by simple gifts of friendship. Gurnah is proposing that the complex gleaming web of stories, like the filigrees and curls that adorn ebony tables, should be translated into simple everyday material objects that sustain social life. This is reminiscent
of Gurnah’s earlier novel, *Admiring Silence*, when the rather sad protagonist, who is mired in an entanglement of stories and lies, understands in a moment of truth that ‘there were stories, in the first place, stories to fill the hours and the mind in the contest with life, to lift the ordinary into metaphor’ (119–120). These stories are in competition with life and this transformation from the metonymies of the everyday to the metaphors, which embellish and beguile, are problematic. And so, says this protagonist ‘that is what stories can do, they can push the feeble disorders we live with out of sight’ (120). These feeble disorders are the stuff of daily realities and become the anchoring point for migrants in search of a new sense of home and family.

**THE RED TRAINERS AND THE PILFERED TOWEL: NEW FRIENDS AND EVERYDAY REALITIES**

Rachel’s gift of the red trainers make Omar self-conscious, as if he is acting in a circus. The assumption of a new persona is strange and difficult, but the little word ‘yet’ — he has not ‘yet’ worn the red trainers again — is a powerful reminder of the transformations that are still possible in the aged Omar. The suggestion, moreover, is subtly made that the ordinary, everyday trainers are trade goods exchanged for the expensive, exotic lost perfume, the ud-al-qamari. This trade is suggested by the fact that in shopping for the trainers in a large department store, Omar tells us ‘I always walk through the perfume sections for the astringent scents in the air’ (200). However, today it is not in the precincts of the perfume section that he will linger. Today he is being whisked along by Rachel to buy bright red trainers, so that he may eventually walk along the windswept waterfront, more anchored and less threatened by the gales of uncertainty.

The gift of the red trainers links to an earlier ordinary, humble gift from a new friend — Alfonso’s towel. To trace the life story of this towel, we must return yet again to Omar’s mute arrival at the Gatwick contact zone. Alfonso, the Angolan, a fellow refugee, had befriended Omar in the worst days of his life in the detention centre where Omar still had refused to speak. There he encountered Alfonso and other uprooted and desperate migrants, nomads and strangers from different parts of the world that had been colonised. When Omar leaves, he takes with him a towel, a gift Alfonso has pilfered for him from the refugee centre. It, like the trainers, appears to be in exchange for the stolen perfume:

I sat in the back seat with the little bag that Kevin Edelman had rummaged in beside me, now missing the casket of ud-al-qamari which he had stolen from me, *but* containing a camp towel that Alfonso had shoved into it at the last moment. (48 emphasis mine)

The ‘but’ confirms the exchange. The Imperial gatekeeper has thieved his casket, but the new life of cunning survival and diasporic allegiance subversively opposes this theft in the form of the cunning Angolan, who steals a replacement object in order to assist the mute new arrival. At the miserable bed-and-breakfast establishment to which Omar is transported Alfonso’s towel becomes a comfort blanket. He sits on the floor of his room ‘with Alfonso’s towel spread under
Brenda Cooper

[him]’ (57) and resolves to ‘wait for Rachel on Alfonso’s magic carpet, safe from disregard’ (57). This meagre little towel becomes a magic carpet but one that is material and grounded, not flying in arabesques and filigrees, but on the floor where Omar sits waiting for rescue. He flees from his racist landlady to his room, where a safe, anchoring place has been conjured up by Alfonso’s towel, whose special properties enable him to metamorphose: ‘I ran away to Alfonso’s towel, and once on it I felt as if I was in an invisible place. I stayed on it all afternoon’ (58–59).

The towel is one of those small gifts that may not be expensive or valuable, but which merge with the human body to become empathetic pillars of support and break into the damaging cycle of greed, stories and embellishments. Elaine Scarry describes these ordinary, magnificent gifts such as ‘the handkerchief, blanket, and bucket of white paint’ as capable of speaking in a special language that says ‘“Don’t cry; be warm; watch now, in a few minutes even these constricting walls will look more spacious”’ (292). This is precisely the role played by Alfonso’s towel in the early days of Omar’s migration, when he is alienated, lonely and friendless: ‘I got into bed without changing my clothes, though I folded Alfonso’s towel and kept it draped over the back of a chair. I did so out of gratitude to Alfonso, and as a gesture of respect for his instinct for self-preservation (62)’.

It all began with a table and ends with a towel. The table has wreaked its way from Omar to Hussein to Hassan, back to Omar. It lingers in Latif’s ‘land of memory’ in that ‘dim gutted warehouse’ of ‘abandoned goods’ (86) wherein Latif and Omar painfully seek release and redemption. It is appropriated by the plundering British in the form of the casket of priceless perfume for which it had been bartered. It is magically transposed into the furniture shops of a little English seaside town and then purged by way of red trainers and a flying carpet — Alfonso’s towel — with which the novel ends. Within these fluid shape-shifting boundaries, nothing is pure. England is both the coloniser and the new family; Zanzibar is both home and prison; The Thousand and One Nights is both Arabian and mongrel, appropriated, stolen, adapted and available for boundless manipulation. Caught between the African new nation, where dictators flourish in the fetid soil of postcolonial grabbing, and the cold English ocean, Gurnah’s protagonists struggle with their stories in order to make flesh, bone and marrow out of crushing allegories.

In the weighty last lines of the novel, Omar wonders whether Latif will remember to get a takeaway for their dinner. This takeaway is an indicator of the migrant making a new home through a small, yet big, detail of everyday life. If it does not materialise, it would not be disastrous because, as Omar comforts himself, ‘I had Alfonso’s towel with me if the worst came to the worst’ (245). This humble object heralds an end to magic carpets and the beguiling nonsense of jinns, whose return to the jar signals the possibilities for migrants to become everyday citizens anchored by material daily realities in their new lives.
NOTES

1 I have retained Gurnah’s usage of ‘jinn’ as singular, and ‘jinns’ as plural.

2 See also, for example, M.G. Vasanji’s *The Gunny Sack* (1989); *No New Land* (1991); *Amrika* (1999); and the tellingly entitled, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003)

3 I am referring to ‘Omanis’ in the way that Gurnah does, probably for his English readership, who would not distinguish them from ‘South East Asians’, albeit that these two groups have a very different historical context in Africa.

4 See Cooper 2004 for an analysis of a similar complex set of identities expressed by the writer, M.G. Vassanj.

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Against Autobiography: Towards a Self-Fictionalisation

I would like to start this essay with a poem whose author I will not reveal until the end of the piece:

**Autobiography**

**Volume I**

Why write it?

**Volume II**

There are a dozen namesakes
Including a few fictional ones
How can I keep my uniqueness?

**Volume III**

I am not a woman
And I am hardly a man

**Volume IV**

Nor am I from an extremely poor background
As my mother said:
You haven’t lived an interesting enough life

**Volume V**

I am not an Asian wo(e)
Man and suffering

**Volume VI**

What if everyone in the world knew me
After I expose myself
On every page?

**Volume VII**

I don’t even know who I am
Can I write an autobiography
For someone else
Like I did before
Writing a love letter
For a friend?
It was in late 2005 in Wuhan when I was preparing a lecture on my own writing that I realised I was someone else or, in other words, someone else was me. It was almost as if my name ‘Ouyang Yu’ had become a pen name or, worse, a fictional name. My internet search returned more than a dozen people that shared my name, word for word, or character for character. This came as a shock. My idea of self as a unique entity disintegrated. Was I this scholar by the name of Ouyang Yu who had lived more than 100 years ago or was I this ‘cold male’ by the name of Ouyang Yu in an e-novel in which he is brandishing a sword against a magical sky? (Anon, Chapter 10) And if someone intends to name his daughter Ouyang Yu (viewjinghua.qianlong.com), does this mean that a name, once given, can no longer be contained in a fixed identity and gender? When the owner of the name becomes plural, there seems little hope of ever retaining the self that makes the core of an autobiography.

As far as I can recall, it was an Australian novelist who introduced the idea of autobiography to me. In the late 1980s in Shanghai, where I studied for an MA in Australian literature, I learnt from him that autobiography was quite a marketable thing in the West. The idea haunted me for some time before I ditched it, for a simple reason. I did not like the smell of market in literature nor did I like the fact that there was probably not much in my life worth writing about. I was also made uncomfortable by the thought that I might be left with nothing else to write about once I exhausted my own life in a book of autobiography. It would be nice if I succeeded in turning my life into a success but if I did not, my life, or my attempt, would be a failure.

I now realise that there was a deeper reason for not pursuing this seemingly easy but potentially fraught option. From when I was a young child more than forty-five years ago, I had a feeling that I was being watched. I remember performing a babyish dance — I was a baby then — in bed feeling as if this was being recorded although there was no such word. I also remember bursting into tears seeing my own reflection in the window pane when I was about three; I could not possibly understand why there was someone else there looking at me
on a night when Mom was away at work. There always seems to be two, at least two, of me wherever I am. This came to a head in Hong Kong in 2002 where I was attending the Writers’ Festival. Something so strange happened that whenever I wrote a poem and keyed in the letter ‘I’ for I, two ‘I’s would appear, a big ‘I’ side by side with a small ‘i’, like this: ‘Ii’. This lasted the entire Festival before it disappeared although the impression remains to this day, becoming stronger after I went past the age of fifty, so strong that sometimes I think that I am this small ‘i’, keeping company with this big ‘I’, a total stranger whom it is my duty for the remainder of my life to follow and write about.

But who is this ‘I’, this big ‘I’? Is he necessarily me? Who is he? Can he be someone that contains me? Or I? How many people are there in this ‘I’ person? Is he single or plural? Or single and plural?

To answer these questions or avoid answering them, let me refresh my memory with some incidents in my past life. At one stage, I fell passionately in love with Herman Hesse’s writings in Chinese translation. I searched in vain for the particular ones I had read in my university days. The last impression left was this: that it was I, not Hesse, who had written them. The close I-dentification, also I-dent-I-fiction, with Hesse was achieved when I thought his thoughts were mine and his emotions were mine or he was I who had expressed them, in another age, another place, and another time. Likewise, a friend of mine had read Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Chinese translation and expressed a similar sentiment. He told me that Rousseau had said everything that he had ever wanted to say. Perhaps, as J.S. Mill once put it (from memory), only by focusing on the one ‘I’ could one individual hope to reach other ‘I’s, multiple ‘I’s.

Now, I seem to defeat my own purpose by preaching the virtues of autobiography. Not so. While I admire Rousseau for his intellectual honesty and originality in introducing the genre of autobiography I do not wish to turn night into day by turning my life inside out. ‘ren yinggai you ziji de mimi’ [one should have one’s own secrets]. These words were said more than thirty years ago by a middle-school classmate of mine in my home. After he left, my dad commented that it was well said. I resented that because I did not like the boy much. As I am writing this I have come to see the worth of his words. One’s life is not a show, least of all a freak show, for the rest of the world. There are things in one’s life that one can never begin to tell anyone, let alone oneself, because one has to work hard to find out their meaning, instead of exhibiting them in book form. While a lived life is easier to write, it is limiting in that there is little room left for imagination; there is little possibility for other lives to be lived.

Take Songs of the Last Chinese Poet, my second book of poetry written in English. When I wrote that book, I literally heard voices. I became multiple, multiplied, turning into a multitude of voices. After China, it seems, the original integrity of my soul could no longer hold together but must break into pieces of self at fissures of intense cross-cultural conflicts, speaking in a voice ringing
with a chorus of other voices. Later, when some of these cantos were collected in my *New and Selected* (2004), a reviewer refused to review the collection, citing ‘dislike’ and believing that I as the poet had a hatred for Australian humanity (King 83). He had committed the sad mistake of taking the book literally as one of autobiography. He did not know, could not possibly have known, that as I wrote the book the I in me had somehow vacated, reaching the state where, as Chinese woman poet Wang Xiaoni says, *zhīyǒu wǒ bù zài wǒ zhōng* (only I is not in I) (qtd in Huang & Jiang 114), a multiple orgasmic state in which the I became a tool employed in the act of writing. If it was entirely an Ouyang Yu thing, why would an Australian woman, a total stranger, write from South Australia and tell me that she was moved to tears while reading it in bed at night?

Talking about books of autobiography, I find these examples of exhibitionism dressed in fanciful autobiographical colours hold less and less appeal for me, things like *Wild Swans* and *Mao’s Last Cancer*, sorry, I mean *Mao’s Last Dancer*.¹ It may be personal but when the person does not even like his own image there is no help whatsoever. I once showed a video-recorded TV interview with me on ABC to a group of friends at home but had to hide myself in another room because I could not bear to watch myself moving in another form. I once tried to listen to my own reading on Radio National, only to find myself switching the radio off in disgust because I simply could not stand my own voice. I wish I could be as beautiful as Narcissus and love myself as no-one would, till I die and turn into a flower of the same name. Curiously, though, it is there that fiction is born, the fictional flower born of the death of self.

There is a need, then, to fictionalise oneself, to bring out the woman in one, to depict the other embedded in the self, to live the death, if you like, to make history through self-realisation and to turn into a rose by any other name.

At one stage in my life, lured by all its trappings, I came dangerously close to writing an autobiography. In that 700-odd-page novel (*Loose: A Wild History*), I begin with the story of a fictional character by the name of Ouyang Yu, who lives a parallel life to that of my own, only to find that it becomes increasingly untenable and unsustainable until the character becomes reduced to a simple letter, O, who is every bit unlike me, reaching a fictional height above what is a merely autobiographical existence, fictionalising the self to the degree of non-recognition. By Book III, for example, a fictional character has taken over from Ouyang Yu to write a biography of Ouyang as he states here:

> Today I have officially taken over the job of writing the Ouyang Yu biography after the trial period in the second volume of this book. I know Ouyang has got someone writing about him but he has since said no to that someone although I have never got a chance to take a look at the manuscript to see how he or she approaches him. My idea is offer a comparison between that person’s biography or part biography and mine to give the reader a chance. We’ll see how we go but I think I shall follow the pattern set out before.
As a writer’s life resembles that of a chrysalis, s/he takes other lives and lives with them inside his or her cocoon. By the time s/he turns into a butterfly or a moth, his or her fiction is complete, the cocoon that is his or her autobiography abandoned like a shed skin. S/he becomes a new poem, as I did when I wrote the following poem:

The Great Chinese Loneliness

Early morning, the empty door, the echoes somewhere upstairs
The walls with blind ears, the bare buildings in the rain
Noseless ones, the silenced trees, the lake slowly gathering
Trickles of effluence of an affluent city, the cold seeping
Into the pores of one quietly living his loneliness
To the hilt, the dark windows during the day, reminiscent
Of a packed Hong Kong with its millions of nonentities
Of a Taipei reeking with hot airs of sewage
Of a psychiatrically, classically Melbourne
Of a Wuhan with a single cabdriver waiting all night
Outside a bath station for a client to finish
His business, the riverlets running down the panes, the voices of buying
And selling, the one who left for America the Beautiful Country
In 1847, almost all alone, the one who opened
Fire on himself after an intense period of no
Communications and full force, the sense of solitariness
Descending on the Song Dynasty in Su’s poetry, the shroud of fire
Crackers bombarding the ears of the city, the woman’s demented
Fragments in Castro’s novel, the one who seeks white
Comfort, no fruition, in the 40s New York
Chinatown, the one gone silent after ascending to the top
Salary range, the one reading the Bible in the 21st century, loneliness
Become her, the one with a balding head and words that I’d go
Mental if continuing to live this way, the place full
Of people talking to each other at once, without understanding
Anyone else, the one spending his nights reading writing rereading
Listening to the wind in the empty door, the hollowness
Of the century, the full fury of the incessant working
Beings, the constipated weather with unrainable
Clouds, four fathoms deep, the heart divorced
The bodies fragmented, far away, a lone voice saying
Coming, I’m coming, 5000 years and now
Basic living, from hand to mouth, from mouth to bums
From heart to non-heart, from mind to unminded
The door again, slamming itself against
The untouchable wind, celebrating the idea
Of one being no one
Else

While the word ‘alter-ego’ means a second self, the Chinese expression, zhiji [知己], is not exactly the same, as it means, word for word, ‘know self’. That is what is meant when they say ‘it takes one to know one’ although the Chinese ‘know-
self’ is an infinitely positive one because it is not a second self but a different self that knows this self. The self does not know itself but needs another self to know it; it needs no more than one other self to know it. Sometimes there is not even one other self to know it or that knows it. Hence the birth of need for poetry for me, as shown here below, in my self-translation from Chinese:

I don’t have friends
I don’t have friends
All my friends are far away

Even when they are far away
My friends are not many

Among these few friends
Not one is a know-heart

Even if I count myself in
I dare not say I know my heart

Closest to me
On the edge of the quilt beneath which I nestle against the cold winter

Are my only two friends:
A cup of hot tea and this poem that will soon be finished (Zong 2007)

In this poem, you will notice a slight change from ‘know-self’ to ‘know-heart’; these two are basically the same thing according to Chinese lexicographical definitions. In my own understanding, though, the know-heart (zhixin) [知心] is more intimate than the know-self (zhiji) [知己]. An unfathomable thing as the Chinese expression goes, ‘ren xin nan ce’ [人心难测], the heart defies any attempts to know it. I would be content if there were only one person in the whole world who could claim to know my heart if and when I let him or her know it. I would never hope to reach millions by exposing that heart to its full contents unless I wanted to become a transparent celebrity.

In an age addicted to zilian (self-love) [自恋], autophilia or narcissism, it would sound anachronistic to say the above but, given a self that resists penetration by private eyes, a self that is satisfied with no more than one know-self or know-heart, and a self that is bent on knowing more about itself and others, it is fair to dissociate the self from any autobiographical attempts, merely to meet the market demands, and to fictionalise the self in myriad forms, in a perpetual effort to search for the ultimate truth, truths, personal and otherwise. As Mario Vargas Llosa once said, and I identify strongly with him, ‘Since childhood, I have always been beset by the temptation to turn into fiction everything that happens to me, to such a degree that, at times, I feel that everything I do and that is done to me — all of my life — is nothing more than a pretext for inventing stories’ (Llosa 12).

In my recent attempts to fictionalise the self, I have aimed at the community at large by telling stories, reducing myself to the role of a cold observer and
combining my story with other stories in a fictional manner that do not limit them to an autobiographical level but elevate them above the market constraints in search of that lone know-self or know-heart that I am sure will lend his or her ears in a corner of this world. This has created an effect akin to Czesław Milosz’s poetic description here: ‘as if my life had not been/as if not my heart, not my blood,/not my duration/had created words and songs/but an unknown, impersonal voice’ (Milosz 13). I shall end the piece with one of the poems from my collection *Listening To* by giving you a chance to listen to that ‘unknown, impersonal voice’:

**Listening to the poet talk about himself**

Sitting in his kitchen-washroom in Vauxhall, London  
Under a sky of low clouds  
I was amazed by the number of windows on the opposite building  
Across a yard with a bicycle hanging, upside down, on an iron rack  
When he said:

And the number of eyes behind those windows, mostly closed  
But I won’t see them for I draw my curtains  
Against a world of sane madness  
I didn’t know who I was, English or Chinese  
But I go beyond that now, I rise above  
Nationalities, I am bound by no boundaries  
My father was murdered when I was six  
Having just woken up in a train station, in northern China  
I have since adopted my mother’s surname  
Hell is London, not exactly the way you say Australia is  
For you at least have sunshine which I’m sure will cure me of my disease  
Here my face is a sky that smiles no smiles  
My face, if anything, is a history turned inside out  
With wrongly written characters  
Newly put down in English letters  
I speak not  
To the old world where my love can’t root  
I speak to  
Poets only  
Spender, Porter, Brodsky  
Have another glass of this  
Marc Xero  
A lovely white  
Wine from Italy  
In a little while  
I’ll walk you to Victoria  
Where you can take the Victoria Line  
To Blackfriars  
And see Tate Modern  
Right on the other side of the Thames  
Hopefully, one day when you come back again  
We could meet for the pekin duck again
In Vauxhall, of all the places, and I’m sure I’ll remain poor
And love poetry as a most beautiful thing
Despite what you say
About its fascinating ugliness

By the way, you have probably guessed it, and your guess is as good as mine, that the poem I quoted at the beginning of this essay was written by no other person than the fictional one by the penname of Ouyang Yu.

NOTES
1 It was in reading a friend’s email that I thought I saw an intriguing title of a book, Mao’s Last Cancer. On second looking, I realised it was Mao’s Last Dancer. Nevertheless, I recorded the incident as an example of ‘creative mistakes’ in my coinage.

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Syd Harrex

LA FONTAINE DE VAUCLUSE

Trees in the wind-churned orchards now are curdled in saffron blossom from L’Isle-sur-Sorgue by cottage wall and road to Fontaine-de-Vaucluse where we came on a pilgrimage, though not of the orthodox kind:

came not to the twelfth-century chapel in homage to the Saint (Holy Bishop of Cavaillon), but to patriarchal Petrarch who in the same church first looked on Laura and fell in love in rhyme.

Their love is a local legend still, though not of promiscuous passion but of grand privations, as they signalled one another between vertigo rock and pine across the Vaucluse fountain’s gorge.

Yet as I stare into the stream of ovulating jades which drowned their sweet sighs, I wonder how much false myth and fickle chastity now conceals their intangible hearts: who’s the dreamer, whose the dream?

And I can’t help feeling Petrarch and Laura were not so famished by virtue as the tablets say, especially as all around us trout are spawning in canals and bees are honeying in blossom.

(1970)

Well I never know I would make it back much less get in without Matron seeing me and cutting my tail for being outside without permission. Bread and water for a week. Plus, if she ever find out about the commotion I just cause! But I was lucky for as soon as I reach up to the house I could tell from all the noise Matron wasn’t there, for the girls only carry on like that when she turn her back leave poor Aunt in charge. So I change into my house dress and I get inside without a soul see me. But my heart was still in my mouth from the running and the fright so that if anybody did say one word to me that evening, I would just start to bawl. Then I would let my mouth run away with me and tell them everything. Then dog would nyam my supper for Matron bound to hear.

But Saturday evening is the only time they leave you alone to read or play games or watch television and nobody to bother you except you’re on kitchen duty. So by the time I reach the TV room I’m feeling OK, not like how I was feeling when I throw up all over the stush lady carpet.

I still wish I could tell somebody. Even Aunt, though I don’t know how Aunt would take it. Aunt sort of nervous all the time — Ronda Levine say is because Miss Richards — that is Aunt real name — Miss Richards don’t have man and she need a good — well, you know. But I can’t bring myself to say it though I’m practising to say all these things like Ronda Levine and not turn red and Matron wash out Ronda Levine mouth with soap umpteen times and I never have my mouth wash with brown soap yet.

Aunt is the one that start the whole thing, about how this man is my father though now I have to wonder. But a big person like Aunt would make up something like that? In my heart of hearts I hope it don’t go so, for I never want to be family to any of those people.

Aunt is not my real aunt. I call her by her rightful name Miss Richards when anybody else is around for is not everything you must let people know about you. But when is me and her alone, I call her Aunt because I know her long time and I don’t have nobody else. That don’t mean she go easy on me, she beat and punish me same as everybody for Aunt don’t joke.

Aunt is Matron assistant, the one that live at the Home with her when the rest of the staff gone home. And is because she know my mother that I get into Demercado Home for even though it is suppose to be for orphans and homeless girls, they don’t take in just any and everybody there, I can tell you. So by rights I should be in Maxfield Park or Eventide or Nathans House like all the other poor people pikni. I hear they give you rat to eat at Nathans Home and wee-wee
to drink at Eventide. Dress you in flour bag. And sleep you four to a bed. Plus the chink. So I glad I end up at Demercado and have my own bed without chink because I would hate to sleep with anybody else, especially that Eppy Grant who moan and groan and toss and turn every night as if cotton-tree duppy riding her.

So I grateful to Aunt and the house not bad; a big mansion, three storey, that old man Demercado die and leave. Though how one family could live in a house so big that thirty of us and Matron and Aunt living there now quite comfortable thank you is beyond me. But is so rich people stay. Rich people always dying and leaving money for Demercado Home though I wish they could come back sometime and see what Matron doing with it, they would cry the living eye water to see what she feeding us. And I wish one of them would leave us some money to get a new television set because this old one is giving me eye strain.

Is my mother ask Aunt to ask Matron to take me and since Aunt working here from the year one, Matron agree. So Aunt tell me, for she and my mother like sister from the time the two of them born and grow in the same district in Clarendon and come to Kingston on the same bus. Aunt get the job at Demercado Home the minute she arrive and she still here for she’s the steady sort. That’s what she always saying. ‘Beauty is as beauty does, Reema. But it’s the steady sort that makes the world go round.’

Aunt always say ‘Beauty is as beauty does’ when she talk about my mother and I never know what she mean except I can tell she never like how my mother pretty and glamorous because Aunt not any of those things. She never like the kind of life my mother was leading no good could come of it Aunt says. Though I was too small to remember what kind of life. Well, one time my mother had a job in one of Mister Canaan store and I don’t know what happen, but Mister Canaan is well and truly my father. So Aunt tell me one day and my mouth drop open for though I name Canaan, is off a shopping bag I think my mother did get it. For you can’t go anywhere like into a supermarket or the ten biggest store in town, or go to buy hardware or do a hundred other things in life, and don’t come out without a bag with Canaan name on it.

By the time I born my mother living with Uncle Nelson so I think Uncle Nelson was my father. But no, Aunt say is because of Uncle Nelson why my mother gone and leave me, for Uncle Nelson get green card for America and when he go there he send for her, but say she have to come without the baby for he never want to mind another man pikni. Especially not one with brown skin. So Aunt tell me.

Well, at least I have Aunt and I know my mother, not like some of those other girls like Eppy Grant who they find wrap up in paper bag at Coronation Market. Can’t even say they come from this place or that. Can’t say they related to a soul. Still, my mother didn’t have to treat me that way, because the day she leave me at Demercado Home she say she coming right back. That I should stay with Aunt and be a good girl and she come back soon and bring sweetie for me. I definitely
remember that. So I really think she was coming back. Is only when I grow big
that Aunt tell me my mother never plan to come back, my mother never even write
to hear how I growing, never even send her an address from the day she leave.
Is only then I realise my mother trick me in truth. To this day I don’t understand
how she could lie to me like that. Sometime I think no matter what Aunt say, my
mother is going to come back. For Aunt keep telling me to practice speaking nice
and not sound butto like the other girls because my mother always speak nice and
dress nice and carry herself nice and that is how she would like to find me when
she come back. I try to do all these things Aunt say though I only have two dresses
outside my school uniform and sometime I would rather have a dirty mouth like
that Ronda Levine so I could curse off Matron whenever she bother me. Maybe
even curse my mother off if she ever come back though the Bible say to Honour
Thy Father and Mother that thy days may be long. Oh yes, Aunt show me right
where it say so, in black and white. But I don’t care for my days here long enough
as it is, sometimes I just praying for the day to end so I can lie in my bed, by my
own self, with nobody bossing me around. And maybe since my mother leave me
here and gone bout her business, cussing is what she deserve.

Ermalinda curse her own mother sometime, but only when she really vex
and in punishment and crying for her mother gone and dead and that is why she
cursing her. Ronda Levine say that Matron letting Ermalinda stay because every
weekend Ermalinda father come and carry Matron to market in his taxi and she
don’t have to pay him because he getting payment some other way. When I ask
Ronda Levine what other way, she do something screwing her finger around in
the middle of her other hand and she laugh but she won’t tell me what it mean.
Ronda Levine is worse than Ermalinda. Her own mother carry her to the judge
and beg him to lock her up, she so unmanageable. Since she come here, she don’t
mess with Matron though, for Matron not afraid to cut her tail. For Aunt sake, I
trying hard not to follow Ronda Levine too much and to keep myself nice in case
my mother decide to come back for me.

The father thing is different because is not like I ever feel I have a father
except for that Uncle Nelson and I sorry now I ever have good feelings for him.
After Aunt tell me this big important man Mister Canaan is my father, I never
tell a soul for here I am like poor-ting-pikni sitting in Demercado Home and I
don’t want people have me as poppyshow. Everybody know about my father. But
nobody know about me. That he is my father, I mean. I don’t know if even he
know. Well, I should hope not for it would be a real disgrace that he never pay me
the slightest bit of mind. But I used to look at him on TV and his picture in the
newspaper and everything. And I could really see a resemblance. Well, I could see
it after Aunt point it out. Aunt keep this big picture of him she cut out of magazine
in her bureau drawer and every time I visit her she take it out and make me stand
with my face set like how this big man have his (though it don’t look natural to
me) and she start pointing out certain things.
‘See there Reema, look at your nose. The living stamp of his. Those big brown eyes? Look!’

I would look but in truth I think Mister Canaan two eye looking like stale fish. But I don’t contradict Aunt, I politely agree for she is big woman that know my mother before I born. But I didn’t feel no way about this man. He don’t mean a thing to me. If he wasn’t so rich and important, I would maybe feel different. But I see him the way I would see a movie star or somebody like that, or a rich old person like Mister Demercado who die and leave this house after he and his family finish rattle round in it. Rich people different. They strange can’t done.

Well about a year or two after Aunt tell me this big man is my father, he go and die. Not that I cry or anything when I hear it on radio. Is like the Queen die or something. I never feel no way about it, so to this day I could never explain to anybody, why, just like that, I decide to go to the funeral. Is like something come over me between the time I’m there wringing out my school blouse over the basin and I move to hang it on the line. It just pop into my head that I should go to the funeral and next thing I rushing round trying to find Matron Gleaner so I can see which church the funeral keeping. It’s four o’clock on Saturday so I know I can get away easy without anybody see me. I hide my white dress and white socks and patent leather T-strap shoes in a bag behind the big mango tree near the fence and I stand behind the tree and change my clothes and dodge under the fence through the hole Matron don’t know about and I reach the road and catch the No.6 bus that drop me off right in front of the church.

There was a big crowd of people everywhere and plenty car but I just squeeze myself through and I see a nice looking lady going into the church by herself so I walk in like I come with her and take a seat beside her as if I have every right to be there. The lady smile at me so I smile right back. And since I never been to a funeral before, I settle down to enjoy myself. The whole thing come to an end and what happen next is the lady fault for as we leaving the church (I’m still trying to stick close to her for I never seen such a crowd of people in my life), she turn to me and she say, ‘Would you like a lift?’

Well, am I going to turn down a chance to drive in a car? So she tell me her name is Mrs. Henderson and I tell her my name is Marva for that is what pop into my head and she start to talk even before we get into the car and I don’t think she stop talk yet. Is like she don’t have nobody to talk to at home though it hard to understand her sometimes for she talking in this funny way, like when she ask me, ‘And what is your relationship to the deceased?’ I have to think before I figure out is Mister Canaan she talking about so I tell her my mother used to work for him but she is living in the States and couldn’t get to come to the funeral so she say I should go. Well it wasn’t a big lie and it satisfy Mrs. Henderson for she don’t ask me nothing else, she just keep talking. I paying no attention to what she is saying for I passing through a part of the world I never see before. Is not often we get out of Demercado Home apart from church and school and is the first
time I ever drive in the front seat of a car though is something Ermalinda get to do every week when her father pick her up in his taxi and she never let us forget it. So I am thinking what a pity none of the girls from Demercado Home can see me primping off in the front seat of the lady nice new car, looking boasie as if is something I do every day.

I go and see them bury Mister Canaan and then I think Mrs. Henderson going drive me back to the church or some place that I could get a bus. But she say she is a friend of the family and she going to the Canaan house for a minute to pay her respects and I can come with her and not to worry for afterwards she will drop me at my aunt in Beverly Hills (which is where I tell her I living). Well, I was going to pass up a chance like that, to see inside his house? Plus I get the feeling Mrs. Henderson kinda lonely and liking my company for everybody else at the funeral come with other people, she’s the only lady there alone. All the same I know that once I got there I have to get away from her, so I can get a bus back to Demercado Home. By now, I know dog nyam my supper long time, for it almost night, but I feeling so excited by everything that I don’t start to worry about Matron yet and the palampam when I get back.

Well this house is just like Mister Demercado big three-storey house but it clean and pretty can’t done, like how rich people house suppose to be. And the garden full of lovely trees and flowers and grass, not like ours which is dirt and bush. Plenty people here too, standing out on the lawn, but I just march in behind the lady and behave as if I am with her, proud that I listen to Aunt and keep myself well and know how to speak properly, not like that Michelle and those other ones who drop their aiches all the time. Some people even hold out their hand and I shake it but nobody paying me any mind everybody so busy chatting and drinking you’d think it was a party. Some fellows passing around with trays full of food, not a good hearty meal — little dainty kind of things, but every time one come by I grab as much as I can and stuff myself, for suppertime at Demercado Home gone long time now and Matron going to be so vex, she might starve me for a week.

So I am wandering around the garden and eating and drinking and taking it all in and looking at the rich people in their spiffy clothes and thinking how I going to get away so Mrs. Henderson don’t see me. And then I find myself standing by the veranda and I look around and not a soul watching so I climb up the steps a little and then a little more till I reach right on the veranda. I go further till I can peep inside this room for the doors are wide open and this is the most beautiful room I ever seen in my life with carpet on the floor and nice soft furniture you could just fall into and statues and pictures on the wall and all that kind of thing.

The doors wide open, nobody could say is me open them, so I take a proper look inside and the room is full of all these women in hats, real rich women sitting around and when I look good I realise a lady with her back to me is Mister Canaan wife for I seen her in the church. That make me jump a bit, but nobody notice me, they so busy chatting and eating and drinking, so I walk in and sit on the carpet
just inside the door. I really can’t tell anybody why I do that, is like a spirit was moving me because the room so pretty; because of the perfume and the ladies in their silk dresses and their hats and their diamonds and gold, well I never in my life seen nothing like that, so is like I drinking it all in till I sort of forget myself.

I just wanted was to catch a little bit of that life so I sitting there for a while feeling so peaceful. And everything was going fine for nobody notice me except like a spite I have to see something in the room I cannot believe so I find myself getting up and walking across the room to stare at it but sort of behind all the chairs and sofas so I’m not in their way. What I get up to look at is this picture in a fancy gold frame. Is a picture of a woman, and she’s blue, everything about her blue, even her hair. But the real funny thing is that this woman all chop up. Well, she looking like she get chop up then put back together again but not quite right and her two eye real funny for one big to everlasting and take up half her face and the other one slipping down the other side and so small you wonder what she could be seeing out of the two of them.

I’m thinking this is a real funny thing for these rich people to have on their wall for right away I know is Delores Stephenson mother that die in the train crash. That’s why Delores come to Demercado Home and been acting special ever since for the train crash was the biggest thing that happen and their picture and name in the newspaper and everything, all of those people like Delores mother who get so chop up in the crash they couldn’t even fit their body back together. Up to now, they not sure they bury all of Delores mother. Or so everybody at the Home been saying from Delores arrive which is why ever since we looking at her like she strange to have a mother like that.

So I looking at this picture and thinking why anybody would want a picture of this poor dead woman who get cut up all in pieces by the train on their wall and she dead for sure for her skin and everything is so blue when they could have a picture of a nice bunch of flowers like what Matron have in her office. But then again I thinking it can’t be Delores mother, what these kind of people would want with her? So the whole thing have me totally confuse.

Matron always telling me my mouth going to get me into trouble one day but sometimes I can’t help myself, things just pop out. So I never even know I was saying it loud: ‘What this picture of Delores dead mother doing on the wall?’

Well, the minute it slip out I wish I could drop through the floor for every woman in that room turn and staring at me with their mouth open and nobody saying a word. I can hear what I say in my loud coarse voice going round and round the room and I know the minute I make the mistake and open my mouth they know right away I not one of them. No matter how nice I keep myself or how nice I look or how nice I try to speak for Aunt’s sake. These people just know. For I can’t get my tongue around the words soft and round like them so they know I have no right there and every one of them staring. It’s like we’re all in a picture, nobody moving. Then as if to break the spell, this lady, Mister Canaan wife,
suddenly jump up and start pointing her finger at me, a fat finger with blood red nails and full of flashing rings.

She get up out of her chair and she shouting: ‘What is the meaning of this? Where have you come from? Whose child are you?’

I so frighten same time my head swell up big like the time I see the duppy and is like I want to run but something is holding me to the spot. And suddenly, I couldn’t help it, I feeling so sick all the food I been eating just rising to my throat and before I can take a step everything coming up on the lady carpet. That give me a little time to get hold of myself for everybody so shock, they just sitting there and I know Mrs. Caanan stop dead in her tracks. But though I feeling so bad, I not so frighten that I don’t see Mrs. Caanan with her long nails coming awake and stepping across the room. And like everything else I been doing I don’t know how it happen I just feel my two feet lifting me up and I take off like lightning, out the door and down the veranda steps into the garden and through the crowd of people. I knock a few and even slam into a waiter with a tray but I not stopping for nothing, for I can still hear Mrs. Caanan screaming in my ears, ‘Who’s that child? Catch her, the little devil. Don’t let her get away’.

But the crowd so noisy I streak off before anybody can take it in and by the time I hear people calling out after me, I gone clear cross the lawn through the gates and right across the street. I hear running and shouting behind me but I don’t look for I pelting down the road to the crossroads where I take a right then a left and I running so fast is like I flying and taking the corners as I come to them without paying no attention to where I going. Well I run and I run looking every which way to hide, till I see a place like a park and I cross the road and crawl under a fence and I’m running on grass now, nothing in sight but grass, and I’m flying like a bird, till I come to a wall and I have to stop. Braps!

I cringe up against the wall and try to catch my breath and I look around but I don’t see a soul, though that don’t mean they not still looking for me and I don’t know how much time they give you in prison for throwing up on rich people carpet and nobody to plead for me. I listening out for any sound and then after my heart stop beat so hard I hear this roaring coming from behind the wall and when I listen good, I realise is traffic I hearing. So I look around some more and I know where I am, I’m on the big golf course next to the main road where I get the bus that day. All I can say is Thank God Thank God for is like a miracle I know where I am and is not far from Demercado Home. I take a good look round again and I don’t see a soul and that frighten me too for is me one and God out there. but I can’t stop to worry now, I look and look till I find a little hole in the fence for every fence must have hole is Ronda Levine motto for she always running away though she don’t escape from Matron yet and I squeeze through and I come out on the main road. By now my nerves really jumpy for I swear I hear people calling out ‘See her there!’ But I don’t wait to find out, I start running again as if the devil behind me and I run up the street until I come to the traffic light and it’s green so I
don’t even slow down I just run through and cross over to the other side and I see the big cotton tree at Demercado Home gate but of course the gate lock to keep everybody in. And my blood is pumping so much I don’t even have time to worry about the duppy that living there I just run past the gate and crawl through the hole in the fence and run straight up to the house.

Mark you I don’t show myself right away. I stop and I listen to see if anybody behind me. My heart going boom! boom! so hard that for a long time is only that I hearing. But then it slow down and I know nobody follow me home and I can hear from the noise and confusion coming from inside that Aunt in charge and I’m safe for she so busy trying to keep order she won’t notice nothing. I sit down on the ground for a good long time to collect myself, then I go down to the tree for my house dress and I put it on. Then I realise I better do something about my white dress that I can see have all kind of grass and stain on it. And though it late and I can barely see I know I have to go to the wash room and wash it or I will be in even worse trouble though everybody know the wash room haunted but I try not to think of that. I go and wash my dress and I hang it on the line with other people clothes that not dry enough to take in and I know I must remember to come down before day break and check to see if I leave anything for Matron to see.

Well, for a long while after that, I still fretting that those people will find out I come from Demercado Home. I jumpy all the time and I listening out for every car coming up the driveway. but nobody come for me. At first, I couldn’t bear to think of what would happen and how I would end up in Eventide or Maxwell Park or even one of those place where they put bad girls for sure. But once I start to relax, and I run the whole thing over in my mind it start to look very funny to me. I have to stop myself from laughing every time I think about it and everybody saying I mad laughing to myself like that. but I can’t tell a soul for no matter how much somebody is your best friend today, they will throw everything you tell them back into your face the minute you quarrel. And I decide I not telling Aunt for Aunt is behaving real strange.

A little after the funeral, she call me to her room and hug me (which frighten me for she never do that before) and she say, ‘Reema I am sorry your father is dead but he was a wicked man and a good thing you never know him. But I am sure he do right by you in his Will. So Reema, I hope when you are rich you won’t forget your poor Aunt who bring you up’. And she start to cry. To God!

I never believe a big woman could so foolish, honest. Is like I am the big people and Aunt the little girl the way she behaving. I almost open my mouth and tell her everything but something tell me no. The way Aunt carrying on, I start to wonder if she make up the whole thing. I wanted was to tell her that if she did see those people at the funeral, she would never think I could be family to them. When I was little maybe I believe something, but now I thinking the whole thing is foolishness. As soon as I leave her that day, I rush to the bathroom to look in the mirror and I’m sure I never see a single thing about myself that look like
Mister Caanan. After Aunt carry on like that, I stop worrying about the whole thing because you know what? I’m still feeling so good about how I run away from everybody that night so fast that nobody could catch me.

And that is how it come to me I could beat Ermalinda on sports day. That make me feel so good that when I sit in the TV room the next Saturday night, I forget myself and I give her a cut-eye right to her face because is her big mouth that cause the whole thing, going on all the time about her father. Just because he come to visit her and take her driving in his taxi, Ermalinda always going on bout how she not no orphan like the rest of us though it couldn’t be me she calling orphan and how she only there because her mother die and her father soon take her away and who don’t have father is cockroach. All this time she there playing with the wristwatch her father give her. All of us vex but nobody answer her for is true plenty girls at Demercado House don’t have father or mother but they don’t like to talk about it and nobody else have wristwatch. Anyway, Ermalinda is such a big-shot at Demercado Home and so own-way I don’t think she believe what she see, that I would have the nerve to give her cut-eye right to her face. I could see her blinking her cow-eye and looking at me but before she say a word I get up and rush outside I laughing so hard. When I come back, I could see Ermalinda looking at me the whole time as if she confuse, but she never say a word to me. Ee-hee, Miss Ermalinda, I saying to myself now, you just wait till sports day. And that is making me so bold the next chance I get, I find I giving a cut-eye to Ronda Levine of all people, who is bigger than me and the best fighter at Demercado Home and have everybody fraid of her. She beat me up all the time because she jealous I always get my sums right and Matron say that is the only good thing about me, and my handwriting. Ronda don’t like how I speak nice neither but that is only because Aunt beg me. Nobody could say I look for trouble, so normally I would only cut my eye at Ronda behind her back but this time I do it right to her face. Which really surprise me for I never plan it. But she even more surprise than Ermalinda and can’t believe I could so bold, for she don’t say a word neither, she just keep looking at me all evening. This just make me feel badder than ever so the next chance I get, I not even thinking, I just walk straight up to her and give her a shove and she shove me back, hard. I pitch right in and butt her in her stomach so she fall and she come back up and hit me so I see stars but I was ready to hit her back if somebody never part us. From the way she looking I could tell that I frighten Ronda for nobody ever fight her back before. So I just give this big smile showing all my teeth right at the moment Matron come to see who making noise and she tell me I lack contrition or whatever and punish me worse than she punish Ronda which not fair for Ronda don’t even have to do anything to deserve punishment.

But you know, I never mind because from I run like that, and come home by myself past the cotton tree duppy, and go by myself to the wash house to wash out my dress and go out the back in the dark to the clothesline to hang it out, I feel I can take on the whole world.
Every time Ronda look at me, I screw up my face and I saying some bad things but not out loud. I can tell I’m looking tough, for now Eppy Grant looking at me the way she used to be looking at Ronda, real scared, so I decide I will take on Ronda next time she start to pick on Eppy Grant or the other girls.

The next thing I consider is that since I can run so fast, maybe my real father is somebody who can run fast fast too like those guys you see on TV running in the Olympics. Because you have to get these things from somebody, you know what I mean? Else, how I could suddenly run so fast? I don’t think it come from my mother for Aunt say she always dress up in high heels. And that Mister Canaan was fat with plenty cars so he never have to walk, much less run.

But I’m also wondering if my father is somebody who can sing, for I can’t carry a tune and Christmas coming and Matron won’t have me in the choir which is wicked for if you’re in the choir you get to dress up and go to all kind of places to sing for rich people and sometime they give you cake and ice cream and I never get to go nowhere. So I’m thinking that just as it come to me by accident that I’m a runner, I might find out suddenly that I’m a singer. Boy, what a thing! I’d be the most famous girl in Demercado Home. The fastest runner on sports day and on top of that I would get to go out to sing Christmas Carols with the choir. Yea, I bet I have a father like that. He can sing, he can run. Though I don’t know. Sometimes I consider how if I had a real father like that he would be bound to come and find me by now.

Then again, I think I better keep myself quiet and just stick to the running. For next thing you know, at Christmas I going to be standing there in the choir singing away — in a church, or the plaza or even the veranda of some rich people house. And you know what? This rich Mrs. Canaan going to be there. Maybe — worse than that — we might end up having to go and sing in her very own garden. And just as everything is going good like in the middle of Silent Night Holy Night All is Calm All is Bright she going to recognise me and point her fat finger with the rings right in my face and scream: ‘That’s the girl! That’s her, the little devil! Whose child is this? Who are you?’ And boy, I not lying, if that should ever happen, I swear, this time I would too frighten to run.

No sir, I going to sit and keep myself quiet and concentrate on beating Ermalinda on sports day for nobody big and important ever come to that. Even if my father should turn out to be the greatest singer in the world, and my voice suddenly come so pure and true that Matron herself get down on her knees and is begging me please, please Reema, nobody is going to catch me going out there to sing with any choir.
The blonde bombshell saunters past two paunchy and balding men in business attire; a filmy low-cut dress hugs her ample figure, shoulder straps falling down to reveal even more tempting flesh. One can almost hear the click of her stiletto heels across the office floor, as her pursed lips and lowered lids send a sultry look that acknowledges the powerfully developed skills for which she was hired. One man happily comments to the other, ‘Es lo que necesitábamos aquí: un nuevo rostro’ [It’s just what we needed around here: a new face] (Bohemia 51.1 144). Feminist proponents of the Cuban Revolution will be pleased and unsurprised that this comic from the country’s most-read variety magazine — Bohemia — never made it to the living rooms across the Caribbean island, as it is one of the eight panels from the Humorismo [Humour] page of the January issue 51.1, compiled prior to the changeover and never circulated. After all, one of the tenets of the new political and social agenda was gender equality, based on a respect for the valuable contributions made by women to the insurrection and the building of a new society. Unfortunately, if this image was kept back from mass media distribution, it was replaced by others that offer similarly disrespectful representations of women. Still a principle organ of the state-run media today, Bohemia’s depiction of gender roles and sexuality has changed only very slowly; contrary to what the optimistic cubanófila [Cubanophile] might expect, comics from the first year of the Revolution, 1959, show a still-ubiquitous misogynist and patriarchal representation of gender and relations between the sexes. The objective of this essay is to describe and analyse how men and women are depicted in the cartoons of the time, and to discuss how this reflects some of the existing tensions and incongruities of the early revolutionary period.
As an aside, the almost entirely ‘white’ representation of Cubans within the comics of this year makes it difficult to deal very specifically with the issue of race, other than to point out its virtual invisibility. In line with societal representations of the day, non-Caucasian images appear only twice in the 52 volumes under study here (these comics will be discussed more specifically in a later section). A speculation that all of the graphic artists drawing for Bohemia in 1959 are men who identify as ‘white’ is probably not mistaken. Even in the unlikely event that there should be a man of colour contributing to the magazine in this era (no women cartoonists were published in major periodicals in Cuba until quite recently), the official stance that revolutionary Cuba was already non-racist contradictorily meant that Afro-Cubans were inhibited from directly addressing their racial identity for the first decades after the political takeover (González Mandri 65; Howe 159–64). Cuban poet and cultural critic Nancy Morejón makes the point that the issues of racial stereotyping and discrimination still plague Cuba, and that they are cultural elements that affect the entire nation (167). While contemporary scholars such as Morejón, Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, and Flora González Mandri are successful in confronting the legacy of silence and recuperating erased black voices, Bohemia comics from the year of 1959 merely provide fodder for their critical fire. The fact that both racial and gender equality seem to be absent from the cultural imaginary is surprising, given the seemingly heartfelt political stance of the day.

After all, the overthrow of the conservative and U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, accomplished January 1, 1959, saw an abrupt transition to a liberal, progressive, and eventually Marxist form of government. The architects of this insurrection, Argentine medical practitioner turned armed insurgent Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara and the young Cuban attorney Fidel Castro de Ruiz, increasingly incorporated women and women’s rights into the revolutionary movement. From the earliest stages of Fidel’s challenge of Batista’s administration, women from the middle and upper classes utilised their skills in organising, writing, and networking to support his efforts. When working class women joined in the struggle, as documented by Margaret Randall, the combined effort made the difference in Fidel Castro’s revolutionary drive. Randall asserts that thousands were ‘selling war bonds and producing rebel uniforms, taking part in propaganda work, participating in action and sabotage units in the cities, transporting arms, and fighting in the mountains’ (22). The Women’s Martí Civic Front, headed by feminist activist Carmen Castro Porta, and The Revolutionary Women’s Union (UFR), organised in 1959 by communist activists Elena Gil, Clementina Serra, and Rosario Fernández, began an extensive campaign of door-to-door recruitment and fundraising (Smith & Padula 34).

Moreover, according to Che Guevara, women would constitute a necessary part of the revolutionary corp. In a much reproduced essay on women’s roles in the revolution, he writes that women are capable of doing virtually every task
that a man can do, including bearing arms and firing upon the enemy if need be, and that moreover, due to perceptions of female fragility, women could serve especially well in espionage and transmission of messages, supplies, and even arms (1972 131–32). And participate they did, in surprisingly high numbers, forming a formidable presence among the guerrilla fighters garrisoned in the open air in the Sierra Maestra.

The persuasive powers of a few key women [such as Celia Sánchez and Melba Hernández] convinced Fidel and Che that the fairer sex could serve the Revolution by bearing arms in addition to attending to the more domestic tasks of war. […] During and since the Revolution, fighting women like Celia Sánchez and Haydée Santamaría have been all but canonized, and Cuba’s leading actresses have positively portrayed guerrilla fighters in films like Manuela. (Cooper 135)

In Fidel’s triumphant victory speech the day he entered Havana, he lauds women’s participation in the Revolution and exhorts Cuba to change policy and practices that discriminate against women:

Porque está demostrado que no solo pelean los hombres, sino pelean las mujeres también en Cuba, y la mejor prueba es el pelotón ‘Mariana Grajales’, que tanto se distinguió en numerosos combates. Y las mujeres son tan excelentes soldados como nuestros mejores soldados hombres.

[…] Yo quería demostrar que las mujeres podían ser tan buenos soldados, y que existían muchos prejuicios … con relación a la mujer, y que la mujer es un sector de nuestro país que necesita también ser redimido, porque es víctima de la discriminación en el trabajo y en otros muchos aspectos de la vida. (n.p.)

[Because it is proven that not only our men fight, but also our women fight in Cuba; the best proof is the ‘Mariana Grajales’ platoon, that distinguished itself so well in numerous battles. And women are as excellent soldiers as the best of our male soldiers.

…

I wanted to demonstrate that women could be just as good at being soldiers, and that many prejudices existed … relative to women, and that women comprise a sector of our country that needs to be redeemed, because they are the victim of discrimination in the workplace and in many other aspects of life.]

The official preoccupation with women’s rights did not end with the institution of the new government. In 1960, all existing women’s political groups were conflated into the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), founded and directed for many years by Vilma Espín Guillois de Castro. This organisation was created to develop pro-women laws and programs as well as educate women on their continuing role in the Revolution, which continued to flourish (Smith & Padula 36). The radical refashioning of society brought about by the Cuban Revolution would give women freedoms and responsibilities that they had never experienced, and Vilma Espín, as the sister-in-law of the Commander in Chief, would utilise her privileged position in order to keep Fidel’s original promises fresh in his mind.
With such a background, one expects to encounter a markedly new approach to the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the revolutionary press, something that would contrast with the sexist, racist, and classist images of the former society. Even in the ‘low-brow’ cultural milieu of cartoons and caricatures, one might see a filtering through of the revolution’s high ideals. Nonetheless, what the attentive critic finds in these early images of the Revolution are tentative and faltering steps toward social changes that are slow in coming. If race seems to be a non-issue, even issues of socio-economic class are addressed inconsistently, and the topics of gender and sexuality receive a decidedly traditional treatment, as shall be seen over the next pages of this study. Before turning to an in-depth look at the cartoons of Bohemia, however, it makes sense first to sketch out the medium in which these images will appear.

**(Parts and Purpose of a Revolutionary Popular Magazine**

*Bohemia* is a popular Cuban weekly magazine that has been running continuously with a national circulation since 1908. Magazine content suggests the wide range of intended audience, from young people to housewives to intellectuals. Regular features of the magazine after the January 1959 change of government include television and radio schedules; political editorials; a society page; international, national and regional news; a feature page on Cuban workers; horoscopes; historical vignettes; a recipe section that in November of 1960 takes a focus on healthy cooking; crucigrams; movie synopses; sports; fashion; short fiction from Cuban and foreign writers (for example, Dora Alonso and Tennessee Williams); news of scientific and technological advances; a self-education section, started in December of 1960; a public opinion page; miscellaneous puzzles, trivia, and jokes; and two cartoon pages containing comic strips and single panels — *Humorismo* and *Humorismo y Revolución* [Humour, Humour and Revolution].

The utilisation of *Bohemia* for the purposes of education of the masses and dissemination of party ideology can be seen in almost every section of the magazine, from the proud announcements of Cuban advances in the sciences and technology to the full page advertisements (starting in 1960) promoting issues as diverse as agrarian reform and recruitment of volunteer workers. The *Aquí el Pueblo* [Here the People] (historical vignettes) and *Cantaclaro* [Sing it Loud] (public opinion) sections demonstrate the new positive focus on regional areas and rural communities on the island, a distinct switch from the previous assumption that La Habana was the only important or interesting city in Cuba. The short fiction presented either directly or indirectly pertains to revolutionary ideals, and the new *Los Obreros* [Workers] page, which celebrates individuals and groups of workers from all industries, certainly strays from pre-revolutionary content.

Especially pertinent to this study, the regular *Humorismo* [Humour] section that has long been included in the magazine is supplemented by a second page of comics, entitled first *El humorismo de la Revolución* [Humour of the Revolution] and changing names slightly over the course of the year.¹ For the purposes
of this essay, I will differentiate between the general comics’ pages and the newer ‘revolutionary’ section, without marking a difference among the various titles used in the latter. For simplicity’s sake, I will use the title *Humorismo y Revolución* [*Humour and Revolution*] or the designation ‘revolutionary comics’ interchangeably. Even these comic strips — in addition to the political cartoons that appear in news or editorial sections — can be seen to change in both overt and subtle ways, so that they become connected to the political and social agenda of the newly instituted government and refashioned editorial committee of the magazine. Some sorts of humour disappear from the comic section, while new topics and formats are introduced. Nonetheless, not everything changes, as underlying truths about national identity and society are much slower to respond to political action than are the legal shifts that reflect official policy.

What is most crucial to understand about *Bohemia* during this era is that this is a popular mainstream periodical that is designed to appeal to a general audience, inclusive of both genders and most social positions. The magazine purports to inform the readers of important events past and present, enrich their social and cultural lives, provide entertainment, and educate them in a range of matters of import — from practical household tips to explanations of revolutionary theories and objectives. This is perhaps the most effective vehicle to influence public awareness and changing values, especially before televisions are found in the majority of Cuban homes. Therefore, I contend that the various images of gender and sex that appear in its pages would have much more impact than changing legislation or public policy.

**It’s a Mad, Mad (Man’s) World**

Studying *Bohemia* comics from 1959, one of the salient points that arises is that the goal of gender equity has not yet become reality in popular cultural production. Women are still depicted as sex objects or housewives, and a cynical take on marriage pervades the comic’s pages. The Revolution is shown to be mostly a man’s world, despite the official claims that women’s roles are equally crucial, and despite Fidel’s own admission that ‘lo cierto es que quedan vestigios de discriminación para la mujer’ [what’s true is that vestiges of discrimination against women still exist] and ‘hay mucho que hacer por la mujer’ [there is much to be done for women] (1960 n.p.).

The great majority of the *Humorismo y Revolución* comics feature men only, while the regular *Humorismo* page features both men and women. In the revolutionary comics as in the regular comics, men are depicted as soldiers and revolutionaries, musicians, agricultural workers, country bumpkins, family men, businessmen, barbers (especially in early comics, juxtaposed against the revolutionary ‘barbudos’ [bearded ones]), bums, politicians, coal miners, children in the classroom, and even as the personification of the Cuban Revolution. In sum, men are depicted in a wide range of permutations that illustrate their complexity and myriad cultural roles. As a general rule, the regular cartoons tend to show
men relating to or in the company of women, as will be discussed in the following section. The revolutionary comics, on the other hand, often focus entirely on the masculine sex, and in many ways their rendering offers graphic suggestions as to what a man should be and do to be a legitimate participant in the Revolution.

In contrast with the Humorismo page from the uncirculated January 1959 issue, which depicts men as unhappy husbands, gangsters, bar drinkers, vacationers, and the office workers mentioned in this paper’s opening paragraph, the predominant image in the revolutionary comics from January and February is the barbudo, that is the bearded and long-haired rebel whose long siege in the Sierra Maestra left him with no recourse to amenities such as shaving and haircuts. In the first issue of the ‘Edición de la Libertad’ [The Liberty Edition], the curly facial hair of Fidel Castro leads a child to herald the arrival of Santa Claus, a visual comparison that of course suggests that Fidel and his company are bringing all good things to those who have been good (51.2). Barbers daydream of getting their hands on the hirsute rebels, a dream that ultimately will be frustrated, as the unkempt look of the revolutionaries comes to provide a counterpoint to the perceived effete decadence of the bourgeois. Although the campesino [peasant, country folk] holds a special place in the hierarchy of the revolution, allowing him to keep a beard or not, the city dweller with no facial hair comes to be somewhat suspicious. The first revolutionary issue shows a clean-shaven man with a ‘complejo’ [complex] (an inferiority complex, one assumes), and several men with a 5 o’clock shadow are either worried (51.4) or bloodthirsty criminals like the Dominican dictator Trujillo (51.4). Meanwhile, the revered bearded men like Fidel, Camilo Cienfuegos, Faure Chaumont, and Che Guevara are lauded as the ‘Beards of Today’ [Barbas de la actualidad] (51.4). In the same issue a baby boy is brought out of the maternity ward already sporting a full beard (51.4), and another panel has three barbudos (one wearing a straw hat, another a soldier’s cap, and the third a beret) marching under the stars as if they were the three wise men (51.4). The informal fatigues worn by the revolutionaries contrasts with the evening wear of the upended elites and the foreigners who hope to reclaim financial and political control of the island (51.4, 51.5, 51.7). The clear message in these and many other cartoons of this year is that the new Cuban man is committed to the protection of his nation’s new-won status and to the fulfilment of the ideals of the Revolution much more than to any previously sacred social standards of appearance.
At the same time, young boys and ‘regular Joes’ are shown supporting the revolutionary efforts and belief systems in many of the *Bohemia* comics. The artist, Pecruz, draws several versions of the revolutionary boy, always shown in the school-boy uniform, a straw hat, and brandishing a Cuban flag. He toasts the New Year (51.4), encourages all to have faith (51.15), praises agrarian reform (51.12), and even threatens the enemy (51.27). Rural workers exclaim revolutionary slogans, compare the revolutionary regime with the capitalist and imperialist powers, discuss economic reform, brandish their machetes, and note with satisfaction the dwindling strength and authority of the formerly powerful large land-owners. In a July panel entitled ‘Reforma agraria’ [Agrarian reform] the cartoonist, P. Fuentes, draws a despondent *latifundista* [big landowner] being watched by two men in *guayaberas* [typical short-sleeved light cotton shirt of the peasant class], one of whom exclaims, ‘Compadre, ¡Mira que ese señor ha bajado de peso!’ [Hey buddy, look at how that guy has lost weight!] (51.27). Still, dozens of comics also point to the town dweller who appreciates and supports the revolutionary efforts. The New Man depicted in the comics scorns Batista (‘el que a hierro mata, a hierro muere’ [he who kills by the sword dies by the sword] 51.13), plans to wear a soldier’s cap to the beach (51.19), suggests that dandies be sent to work in the fields (51.20) and welcomes the agricultural worker into his home (51.32).

In seemingly direct opposition to cultural norms as presented in the regular *Humorismo* pages, which present men as singularly fixated on finding access to women’s bodies, the revolutionary comics expect men to transcend the biological imperative in their zeal to comply with an ethical imperative. In a funny comic that appears during the first period of agrarian reform, the cigar-smoking husband stares wide-eyed at his new farm equipment under a crescent moon. His wife combines a curvaceous form with an innocent, ‘country’ aspect, representing all that is assumed to be positive about the Cuban rural woman, yet her charms are not enough to compete with the shiny mechanistic modernism that lures the man from his bed. Her query appears below the comic: ‘Sueño Realizado: — Viejo, ¿Vas a pasar toita la noche mirándolo?’ [A Dream Come True: ‘My dear, are you going to spend the whole night looking at it?] (51.5). Considering the stereotypical self-
representation of Cuban men as very interested in sex, the situation is humourous in itself, as it suggests the lengths to which the Cuban man must go to perform ideal masculinity. The expectations of the Cuban ‘New Man’ will be explained in 1965 by Che Guevara, as summarised here by Fidel Canclón:

Una Revolución sólo es auténtica cuando es capaz de crear un ‘Hombre Nuevo’ y este, para Guevara vendrá a ser el hombre en el siglo XXI, un completo revolucionario que debe trabajar todas las horas de su vida; debe sentir la revolución por la cual esas horas de trabajo no serán ningún sacrificio, ya que está implementando todo su tiempo en una lucha por el bienestar social; si esta actividad es lo que verdaderamente complace al individuo, entonces, inmediatamente deja de tener el calificativo de ‘sacrificio’. (8)

[A Revolution is authentic only when it is able to create a ‘New Man’, who for Guevara will come to mean a twenty-first century man, a complete revolutionary who ought to work his entire life long. He should have a sense of the revolution, for which those hours of labour will be no sacrifice at all, since he is spending all of his time in a fight for the common good. If such activity is truly what pleases the individual, then immediately it stops being a ‘sacrifice.’]

In sum, his loyalties lie entirely with Cuba, the Cuba of a new era that eschews contact with right-wing regimes of neighbouring islands of the Caribbean just as vehemently as it seeks to create a national identity that empowers men of all regions and all stations in life. Ironically, the comics also reflect the incipient erasure of the racial and cultural hybridity that in truth characterise a majority of the Cuban population. Of the two men of colour seen in *Bohemia* cartoons in this year, one is a barefoot black man dressed all in white, who is greeted by a white man in a business suit. The latter says, ‘Pero usted no es el babalao de Guanabacoa? … ¿Qué hace vendiendo tamales?’ [But aren’t you the shaman of the Guanabacoa region? … What are you doing selling tamales?] The shaman responds, ‘Figúrese … Después que el gobierno inició la operación ‘limpieza’, nadie va por mi consulta….’ [Go figure … After the government started operation ‘clean up’, nobody shows up for consultations with me any more….] (51.19). From this one gathers that if the new Cuban Man is so unfortunate as to be of African descent, he should have the decency to let go of his religion and cultural heritage in favour of the emerging socialist (and white) order.

**ENTER THE FAIRER SEX…**

In *Bohemia* comics of this era women, unlike the men, are more often portrayed in roles more directly linked to their gender — in both the *Humorismo* and *Humor y Revolución* sections. While this in itself seems culturally logical, one would expect to see at least some acknowledgement of women’s changing roles, of the respect and recognition embodied in Fidel’s speech to the women of the newly created Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). He praises the women and reminds them that: ‘se han unido para trabajar, para trabajar y para luchar; se han unido para todas las tareas que la Revolución nos trae; … se han unido para ayudar a la patria en cualquier circunstancia’ [you have joined together to work, to work
and to fight; you have joined together for all of the chores that the Revolution brings us; ... you have joined together in order to help your country under any and all circumstances] (1960 n.p.). Despite the diversification of women’s roles, and the increasing burden they bear of supporting the revolutionary effort, the great majority of Bohemia cartoons present them as extremely sexy ‘objects’ of the male gaze, be they controllable sex kittens or controlling femme fatales, or as sexless house-frau types exhibiting behaviours typically associated with the female gender; in either role the joke is usually at the woman’s expense.

Dianna C. Niebylski’s historical review of women’s place in humour within humour theory and Latin American literature offers an interesting elucidation of this phenomenon. She notes that ‘most classical philosophical treatises assume all expressions of humour to be a form of ridicule, and hence to stem from a sense of malice’; Niebylski counters that while humour may or may not always be linked to harm, it is intrinsically connected to control (15). Like Doña Eufrosina, mother of Quixotita in the eponymous novel by Fernández de Lizardi, ‘aggressive, and outspoken’ women present ‘a serious threat to public and private morality’, so are turned into the ‘laughable female grotesque’ (Niebylski 23). This category of woman includes both those who use their womanly wiles to entrap or manipulate men and those who after marriage refuse the submissive role that society dictates for the female sex. Making fun of such women is a form of psychological violence that in essence hopes to shame them into more socially appropriate behaviour. On the other hand, even the females who behave as they should are not exempt from gentle mockery. ‘Buxom babes’ who accept male sexual attention, and docile wives and mothers who follow the rules must be kept in line; they must be reminded that they are in some subtle way the inferior sex and had best continue to conform. The common denominator in the Bohemia comics of this era is that women are on the receiving end of masculine wit and humour.

The voluptuous Cuban woman is a regular feature of the regular Humorismo section, providing myriad provocations for laughter. The typical sexy secretary, like the one described at the beginning of this essay, is funny because she is both desirable and presumably available. Shown in the professional environment, she is implied to be nothing more than a sex object, fulfilling her obligations simply by exhibiting her beauty, which is a fringe benefit for her male counterparts. Exemplifying these assumptions is a panel in which a businessman behind his desk stares at the exposed shapely legs of a woman who evidently has come to ask for more work wearing a strapless split-leg cocktail dress that shows her garters. Her confidence in her physical resumé — indicated by her heavy-lidded calm and Mona Lisa smile — is vindicated, as the man eagerly responds, ‘Enseguida le asignaré algún trabajito extra’ [I’ll find you a little extra work right away] (51.8). Women are reminded not to make things too difficult for their superiors in another panel that shows a man racing around a desk, chasing after a woman in heels whose shoulder straps are falling down and skirt is flaring up from her effort.
The man exhorts her to ‘No corra tanto, jovencita; el médico me recomienda que no me sofoque’ [Don’t run so much, young lady; my doctor told me to not overexert myself] (52.3).

Women also are represented as gold-diggers who, despite the emerging socio-political scorn of capitalist mercantilism, are fully committed to trading their wares on the free market. For instance, consider the femme fatale figure shown asking a man, ‘Así que según el contrato no puedo casarme. ¿Ni siquiera por dinero?’ [So according to the contract I’m not allowed to get married. Not even for money?] (51.6). Whatever contract she is contemplating, she is anxious to retain her rights to the sale of her body in the most traditional sense. The idea that sex and her body are the only commodities that a woman has on her side is lampooned in a panel depicting a young man, his parents, and his fiancée in the family living room. The smiling mother is whispering to her concerned-looking son, ‘Creo que tu novia quiere impresionar favorablemente a tu papa’ [I think your girlfriend wants to make a good impression on your dad], referring to the sexy strip-tease the young woman is performing (51.6 176). The sexy woman is desired and appreciated as eye candy, but at the same time suspicious and not to be trusted. Even in the revolutionary pages one finds examples of flirtation and sex within the domestic sphere. A Silvio comic entitled ‘Las cosas claras’ [Everything above board] refers directly to a recent political edict while taking advantage of a sexual double entendre to drive home his point. The drawing consists of one man raising the tablecloth and peering underneath to see the other man’s hand resting on the knee of the woman sitting next to him. The voyeur points out, ‘¡Está bien que jueguen, pero … por debajo de la mesa nada, nada! ¿O es que no oyeron a Fidel Castro?’ [It’s fine if you play around, but … nothing under the table, nothing! Or didn’t you hear Fidel Castro?] (51.5
One guesses that the young woman might be his daughter, which adds to the humorous suggestion that due to the Revolution a father would be more permissive with his daughter’s conduct, as long as it fell within Revolutionary parameters. In this case the joke is not at the expense of the woman, which is a refreshing difference.

Rarer (but still present) are the comics on the revolutionary humour pages that focus on the overtly objectified female body. The last January issue in 1959 has one example of the more blatantly sexist comic that usually is reserved for the regular comic pages. A woman with impossibly large jiggling curves and a wasp waist is startled to hear a man exclaim a revolutionary-themed *piropo*, the common form of compliment issued on the street. Wide-eyed, he asks, ‘Oye mi’jita: ¿ese movimiento también es del 26 de julio?’ [Hey, baby, is that movement from the 26th of July too?] (51.4). Although the compliment is intended clearly to voice approval of her scintillating stroll down the street, and moreover equates her movement with a positive and important historical event, in the end (pun intended) the woman comes out a loser in the comparison. As the July 26th movement refers to the daring attack led by Fidel Castro on the Moncada barracks in 1953, a purposeful beginning to a national insurrection that will change the political climate of the Americas, this cannot help but overshadow the relative import of a woman’s sex appeal. Worse, the implicit comparison is that men will take the military and political actions on behalf of the nation, while women’s contribution is more limited and aesthetic in nature. Disappointingly, even the revolutionary comics point to the stereotypically sexy Cuban woman as an object, both of desire and of pride, that can help ‘sell’ the revolutionary ideals. A comic by Pecruz has a balding man pointing over his shoulder to a curvaceous young woman in a strapless gown and saying, ‘¡¡Los productos cubanos son mejores, y son nuestros!!’ [Cuban products are the best, and they’re ours!] (51.12). Here he underlines the need to buy domestic products rather than imports, while subtly suggesting that women, like commercial products in the stores, are there for the consumption of the New Cuban Man.

Returning to the general *Humorismo* page, the other prevalent image of women in the family context is the housewife and mother, who may be attractive
or frumpy, but who is not overtly eroticised and as usual tends to be the butt of the joke. In the first uncirculated issue of 1959 a husband remarks to his wife, who sits disconsolate in front of a vanity table covered with ointments and crèmes, ‘Ya no eres tan bonita como eras; no eres siquiera tan bonita como eres’ [You’re not as pretty as you once were anymore; you’re not even as pretty as you are] (51.1). This insulting and disheartening image of married life and aging is particularly ironic in a magazine that in 1959 still runs advertisements for beauty treatments, depilatories, and perfumes. In another panel on this same page, a husband is carrying a bathing shed to his wife, who is stuck in the water, evidently having lost her bathing suit. The message seems to be that her shape would be so horrid that a mere towel would not be sufficient to cover it (51.1). A third panel in this issue shows a pair of newlyweds ready to get into their car, and the wife is saying ‘¡De ahora en adelante, manejo yo!’ [From now on, I’m doing the driving!] Slightly different from the others, but still treating women in a derogatory fashion, this comic portrays the ‘ball-breaking’ wife who acts passively only until ‘hooking’ her man, then allows her controlling nature to emerge. In two comics from a July issue, I found one just-married bride eating a large piece of cake because ‘ahora no hay necesidad de vigilar la línea’ [now there’s no need to watch my figure], and one henpecked husband who somehow has been forced to dress up as a mouse. He says indignantly, ‘Es mi último experimento. Veremos si me impongo de una vez a mi mujer’ [This is the last time. Let’s see if I can speak up to my wife for once and for all] (51.25). Overall, general Humorismo comics showing married couples reveal a social hierarchy in which men are superior, and women are depicted as overstepping their natural limitations: they are mocked and derided. Such depictions of the married woman — her figure and her personality — make the ubiquitous comics of cheating husbands quite understandable, at least from the masculine point of view!

Married women appear less frequently in the revolutionary comics, and their depiction is most often limited to the domestic sphere, but in contrast with the general comics, here women are not always shown to be departing from socially acceptable behaviour. Rather, the house-bound women in these panels often
remind me of the double standard evident in Che Guevara’s famous words on women’s contributions to the Revolution. Although Guevara lauds the ability of women to bear arms, pass messages, and transport weaponry in combat zones, he places great emphasis on their more feminine gifts to the cause, which should be primary except in cases of dire necessity. He especially mentions cooking, teaching children, sewing, and nursing, for which women’s naturally superior tenderness makes them ideal (‘El papel de la mujer’ [Women’s Roles] 133). Fidel’s words to the women of the FMC also overemphasise their womanly role as mother, which in his estimation is the great unifying force between them, as well as the greatest role they can play. He points to Mariana Grajales as a symbol of women’s greatness, praising her sacrifice of her sons to the cause of independence, and proclaims: ‘Y las une la alegría de hoy, la tranquilidad de hoy, el orgullo de hoy y el honor de hoy. Y basta ser madre para albergar esos sentimentos, y toda madre quiere para sus hijos en el mañana lo mejor’ [You are brought together by today’s joy, today’s tranquillity, today’s pride and today’s honour. And it suffices to be a mother to be filled with these sentiments, and every mother wants for her children a better tomorrow] (1960 n.p.).

These comics, then, exemplify what women should be aspiring toward in order to be of greatest service to the national good. In issue 51.41 for example, three out of five comics feature women as the main focus; in two, the woman plays a gender-stereotypical role of the conforming housewife and mother. In one comic, by Ñico, an older woman in a frumpy housedress explains her savings plan to a man, assumed to be her husband. In the other panel, authored by Silvio, a young boy talks to his mother as she stands in front of the stove, clothed in a dress and apron. He tells her he no longer wants the little brother he asked her to order from Paris, since now Cubans need to reduce imports and save dollars. In a later Silvio comic, a wife and mother looks on with wide-eyed delight as her husband helps their son take his first steps. Her exaggerated bust and buttocks, together with her rather simple expression, make her an attractive and non-threatening female witness to the primarily male triumph; the man exclaims to her, ‘¡Mira, Cuca, ya el niño también es fidelista, ‘dio un paso alante’!’ [Look, Cuca, the boy already is a Fidel follower, he ‘took a step forward’!] (51.21). These comics focus on issues related to the Revolution, presented in
such a way that they either reflect expected feminine characteristics or appeal to the experience of female readers. On the one hand, women are portrayed as being participatory in the Revolutionary process, such as the saving of household funds (thanks to the nationalisation of housing) or raising appropriately educated and socialised children. In the first comic, however, the housewife’s unattractive physical appearance (she is round, dowdy, and has a large and discoloured nose and hair up in a bun) is compounded by her apparent intellectual simplicity, inferred by her wholly redundant plan for household budgeting. In the other two panels, the wife and mother is relegated to the position of passive onlooker, rather than active agent, and again she seems to be less intelligent than her husband — or even her young son. The mother who has been promising her child a sibling imported ‘from Paris’ is subtly linked to bourgeois values, while the little boy shows an understanding of the economic necessities of a newly socialist Cuba. The ironic grain of truth is that in the early years of the new regime, school children were thoroughly inculcated in the ideals and theories of the political system, a knowledge base that their parents (of either gender) did not always share. The importance of the female presence in the Revolutionary humour page cannot be overrated; however, the placement of women in the domestic sphere, and their portrayal as somewhat simple, is troubling.

Marriage in general is seen with a cynical eye, as with four panels from the general Humorismo page of February 22nd, 1959 where the noviazgo [courtship leading to marriage] is portrayed more as a business deal, and married couples engage in mutual violence, either physical or verbal. The typical difficulties experienced with in-laws is the subject of the central panel, where a woman turns the corner in her home to see a saw poking through the wall, emerging exactly at the mouth of a frowning portrait of her mother. The man sardonically laughs, ‘¡Ja! ¡Ja! Fíjate lo que el vecino le está haciendo a tu madre’ [Ha ha! Just look what the neighbour is doing to your mother] (51.8). The older woman is now triply silenced, victim of social strictures that approve only of young and tractable women, her vindictive son-in-law’s malice, and the neighbour’s co-incidental remodelling project. The innocently shocked wife who peeks around the corner, turned out nicely in a pretty dress, heels, and modest hairdo, certainly is supposed to learn from the tableau, as is the female reader of
In both the general and revolutionary comics, men frequently insult or complain about their wives because they are nosy and engage in gossip; in one representative example, a rotund man with a furrowed brow complains, ‘Fíjate si se mete en todo lo que hacen los vecinos, que le dicen Senado Americano’ [Just think, she sticks her nose into everything, and now they call her the American Senate] (51.31). The sly political cast to the joke gives a hint of how women are disrespected through humour; since the behaviour of the United States senate is very much under fire at this time, comparing the woman’s behaviour to the number one enemy of the state is a profound statement. Very similar is a panel titled ‘Mala fama’ [Bad reputation] that appears only three weeks later, where a husband chides his modestly dressed and now chastened wife, ‘¡Como sigas inventando chismes con el vecino, te van a llamar la ‘united press’’ [If you keep on making things up gossiping with the neighbours, they’re going to start calling you the United Press] (51.34). Examples of what Niebylski’s concept of the ‘laughable female grotesque’, the humour of these comics arises from ridiculing women who speak out, attempt to exercise their own wit, and in any way exceed their societal and gender limitations (23).

Within the scope of expected behaviour for women is a continued understanding of their husbands’ sexual transgression. If she does not accept his peccadillos, then she bears the brunt of societal disapproval and runs the risk of being mocked. A comic from the *Humorismo y Revolución* page from April 1959 shows the still prevalent societal complicity with the man who goes out carousing, and perhaps even strays from his wife. The drawing is of a woman angrily shaking her finger at her husband who, only slightly chagrined rejoins, ‘Nada, mujer, es que hay que cooperar con la revolución, por eso traigo la fachada pintada’ [Come on, darlin’, it’s just that we’ve got to cooperate with the revolution, that’s why I’ve come home with red lipstick on my face]. The title of the panel is ‘Ciudadano Obediente’ [Obedient Citizen], both making fun of the individuals who will tout new justifications for old behaviours and yet also underlining the official mandate that all Cubans do need to find ways to be (or appear to be) dutiful revolutionaries (51.16). Francisco Blanco Ávila emphasises that comic artists are aware of their potential influence ‘in creating the new man and in building the new society goals in which Cubans put such great expectations and commitment’ (qtd in Mogno 221). However, cartoonists evidently did not equally espouse all areas of revolutionary ideology; in studying their work one does fear that social change will occur only slowly and painfully in the arenas of gender role expectations and permissible sexuality.

An uncommon representation of women’s sexual agency appears later in the year in a comic that turns the joke around, as a man comes home from work to find his curvaceous wife’s figure is marked with black handprints in strategic places. She blithely remarks, ‘El campesino que quedamos en alojar, ya vino... es un carbonero de la Ciénaga de Zapata’ [The peasant that we agreed to host...
is here already … He’s a coal miner from Ciénaga de Zapata] (51.31). Titled ‘Cooperando’ [Co-operating], the comic reflects generalised fears experienced by Cuban men at allowing other males in the home through the campaigns of literacy and agricultural exchange. Although these tasks specifically are mentioned in Che’s treatise on women’s role in the Revolution, they clash with traditional separation of the private and public spheres. This obsession with keeping women safely under wraps is most famously rendered in the tripartite film Lucía, but in contrast to the honest and revolutionary wife in the film, this comic shows the wife to be wily and promiscuous, like most representations of the Cuban woman from this period of Bohemia comics. Although women might find some sense of empowerment from the image, it still provides justification for the argument that women are not truly cooperating with the revolutionary agenda.

A less common vision of marriage, in itself positive and romantic, is presented in a June 1959 comic by Pe Cruz, which offers fairly direct praise of Revolutionary efforts in its depiction of a country scene in which a man tells his girlfriend that they can wed right away, thanks to the agrarian reform act (51.24). Given the preponderance of cynicism on this topic, one is more tempted to laugh at the future surprises in store for the country maiden who will soon enter the coveted state of matrimony.

In general, comic art spans a range of intellectual content from the puerile to the subtle and insightful. In terms of the representation of gender and sexuality, the Bohemia comics of this time period tend toward a rather childish and reductionist view. To the extent that this is true, Cuban comic art functions as part of the widespread cultural discourse commented upon by Judith Butler. Rather than merely reflecting reality, or even one perception of that reality, the comic is part of ‘a restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field [and] performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalises the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption’ (43 [emphasis in original]). Thus the revolutionary comic depicting a family that sits around the radio and hears an announcement that public employees will receive a raise in pay not only applauds the economic
impact of the political changeover on the normative family, but also suggests how the members of that family will respond. The joke is visual in nature, in that each figure is shown to have a stereotypical desire for spending the money, as shown in the thought balloons above their heads: the dog imagines a bone; the baby an ice cream cone; the woman a pair of shoes and matching purse; and the man a sexy brunette (51.1). It is difficult to say which wish is the most frivolous, but quite easy to determine how the wishes conform to a simple division of gender role expectations.

Although men are not always dealt with lightly, the comic representations of women in the entire set of 1959 issues of *Bohemia* more directly and consistently objectifies, mocks, or at least underestimates the fairer sex. During this year, graphic artists prompt the reader to laugh with them at the wiles of the vamp and the mental limitations of the housewife. In this time period the Cuban woman is shown in a positive light almost exclusively when she is performing her traditionally imposed tasks related to motherhood. In this role, she is appreciated as being important to the Revolution in that she contributes to the physical well-being and indoctrination of the next generation of male children, who sometimes are shown to be more verbally astute than their mothers. The relations between the sexes, however, are painted in an extremely cynical light and the institution of marriage is the subject of relentless parody.

**By Way of Conclusion**

I cannot help but think that the inescapably misogynist depictions of women, on their own and in relationships with men, are a function of the same rigid gender role categories that reserve the authorial voice (and drawing) to the masculine segment of the population. Even as the century turns again, women still remain almost exclusively the object, rather than the author of humour in Cuban cartooning industry.³ Within a socio-political movement that seeks to establish parity among the sexes, how can this continue to be true? Again Niebylski proffers a realistic, if daunting explanation. Starting with the ancient Greeks and continuing to this day, moralists in countless religions and cultures have suppressed and condemned women’s expressions of humour, out of terror that feminine wit would pollute the female body (18). In more modern times, scientists and philosophers like Darwin, Spencer, and Freud argued that women simply are not as developed or capable of real humour as are men. Indeed, there are those who still argue that women just are not funny. Regardless of the convoluted explanations appearing over the centuries for keeping women from participating fully as agents, as subjects, as authors and artists creating comedic expression, the real reason may well be that humour is at heart aggressive, transgressive, and disruptive of the status quo. Niebylski’s description of work by Latin American women writers like Ana Lydia Vega and Alicia Borinsky surely describes the feared result of allowing feminine humour to seep out of the closet: ‘Often aimed at dissolving fixed limits and borders or poking holes in the pretentious or reductive solemnity of social institutions and cultural
grammars, the practices of gendering humour and embodying excess studied in this volume encourage ex-centricity and uncivil disobedience’ (4). In a nation where rebellion is purportedly the rule of the land, as it is in the Revolutionary society of contemporary Cuba, in reality the administration requires a surprisingly fixed ‘solemnity of social institutions and cultural grammars’.

Even now, and certainly in the first months of the Revolution, a rigid control kept women from straying too far from their standard roles, just as it kept men and women clearly within the established (and evolving) limits of ideology and cultural identity. Despite Fidel’s exhortation that ‘Debe dárselas oportunidad en todos los órdenes, y deben estar preparadas para todas las tareas’ [they should be given opportunities in every sphere, and they should be prepared for all kinds of jobs] (1960 n.p.), women were not to be let loose on society without limitations. Humorismo had its assigned role, which was a carefully prescribed shaping and shifting of Cuban behaviour and beliefs within the newly emerging society. With such sweeping changes, some cultural norms simply had to stay the same, in order for daily life to avoid disintegration into complete chaos. Cuban comics played an integral part in counterbalancing the news stories idealising women revolutionaries such as Haydée Santamaría and Celia Sánchez, so that Cuban women willingly would return to (or maintain) their household duties, even as they were encouraged to work outside the home as well. Through laughter men and women were educated in how they ought to think and perform to remain within the Revolution, where in 1959 all was still theoretically possible. Only a few years later Che Guevara would recognise that both social traditions and dogmatic adherence to newly learned Marxist principles were holding back the nation’s progress, admitting that, ‘la culpabilidad de muchos de nuestros intelectuales y artistas reside en su pecado original; no son auténticamente revolucionarios’ [the fault of many of our intellectuals resides in their original sin; they are not true revolutionaries] (‘El hombre nuevo’ [‘The New Man’]). When revolution finally can be permeated with the true rebel spirit of upending the static and stagnant — not to mention false — dichotomies of the masculine and the feminine, then we can all laugh together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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NOTES
1 When the regular Humorismo page is supplemented by a second page of cartoons with a revolutionary bent, it is first titled El humorismo de la Revolución (edition 51.2). then El humorismo y la Revolución [Humour and the Revolution] (51.4, 51.13,
51.14, 51.15, 51.17, and other issues intermittently), El humorismo en la Revolución [Humor in the Revolution] (51.11, 51.16, 51.22, 51.23, 51.26 and others). The simpler title Humorismo y Revolución [Humor and Revolution] is first used in the 51.47 issue, then in 51.50 and 51.51, becoming the main title for the year of 1960. The question of conjunctions, prepositions, and definite articles is an interesting one, calling to mind the intricate connection between the structure of language and culture. The idea that the Revolution itself is funny, implied by the use of ‘de’ in the first title, quickly shifts to the images of humour happening alongside or within the Revolution, suggested by the conjunction ‘y’ and the preposition ‘en.’ The title that will stay in place for a longer period of time, Humorismo y Revolución, hints that graphic humour is a tool, or vital element, of the insurgent soul, rather than being specific to this historical event.

An exceedingly complex text to translate into English, this comic employs a multivalent word play and also could refer to several cultural phenomena. ‘Fachada’ is literally ‘façade’, and can refer to the front of a house, a person’s face, the overall appearance of a person or place, or a façade or cover-up of true feelings. ‘Pintada’ can mean either ‘painted’ or specifically ‘red’, In Cuba, often people would paint the front of their houses even if they couldn’t afford to paint the other sides, to pretend a level of affluence they did not have. Red is also the colour that represents communism. Therefore, ‘La fachada pintada’ could refer to the man’s face being red from having over-indulged in alcohol, or it could have red lipstick marks, and his excuse could be that he is not really drunk or seeing another woman, but rather is coming home ‘red’ to show solidarity with the communist revolution.

John A. Lent writes in 2005 that only three women cartoonists are working in Cuba, including Miriam Margarita de la Caridad Alonso Cabrera (Miriam), Alicia de la Campa, and ‘Ely’ (207). While more women were present at the women’s cartoon and caricature competition awards dinner in December of 2007, none but Miriam Alonso are well known, still.

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Syd Harrex

LEAVES

*for Judy King*

I would emulate
the productive laziness of leaves
green growing
falling with dignity
in their beauty,
returning to skeletal tissue,
mulching under winter darknesses:
Thus am I when I sense
my mortality like an encroaching frost,
feeling the deciduous glancing off of leaves,
the emptying of my branches.

But on an Australian Indian summer
day like this late April one,
the blue bowl sky
paling to windless white,
immortal longings bestow
willing suspension of disbelief,
and the leaves I would now emulate
are the canoe-shaped eucalyptus,
their shining oil of health
immune to the seasons
of flood, drought, ice, heat,
and regenerative even after holocaust.

Days such as this, like a Shakespearean
conceit, seem to prosper forever.

(from *Dedications*, 1999, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, p. 44)
‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’: The West Indians and the Church in *An Unsuitable Attachment* by Barbara Pym

Passing along the ‘brightly — almost garishly — painted houses’ of the West Indians, Mark Ainger, the male protagonist of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, an Anglican priest, remembers that it was in this street that his wife Sophia once saw ‘a cluster of what she took to be exotic tropical fruits in one of the windows, only to realise that they were tomatoes put there to ripen. “Love apples”, she had said to Mark, and the words “love apple” had somehow given a name to the district, strange and different as it was from the rest of the parish which lay over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line’ (16).

This anecdote captures the ambiguous representation of West Indian immigrants in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the novel that the English novelist Barbara Pym (1913–1980) wrote between 1960 and 1963 but was unable to publish in her lifetime. Between 1949 and 1963 Pym wrote six of her twelve novels. It was the most productive period of her literary career. These novels realistically document a decade in which Britain moved from post-war austerity to relative affluence, and underwent a series of dramatic social, cultural and demographic changes. Most of Pym’s novels centre on the ‘church, and the life that [goes] on around it’ (1984 31) and her portrayal of the Church of England is often cited by church scholars as reliable historical and social testimony. In their conversations, her characters routinely refer to topical issues that occupy contemporaneous public discourse, and offer subtle commentary on cultural issues, church matters and social trends.

In her interest in social issues Pym continues the strong English tradition of novelists, poets and literary critics (Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, William Thackeray, and F. R. Leavis, among others) who were engaged in ‘implicit sociology’ (Kumar 44, 55).

Mistaking the tomatoes for ‘exotic tropical fruits’ and subsequently renaming the ‘strange and different’ district to ‘Love Apple’ hints, on one level, at the less than ordinary tradition associated with tomatoes (imported from South America to Europe as *pome dei Moro* and later called by the French *pommes d’amour* either as a corrupt translation or because of its alleged aphrodisiac properties) and endows the scene with an air of cosmopolitan excitement. Yet, the transformation of the tomatoes gives an additional level of meaning to this scene: Sophia’s confusion may be seen as a genuine error. It also suggests however, her fear of the unknown and her anxiety regarding the overt sensuality of the strangers.
The sociologist Georg Simmel defines ‘stranger’ as a person who comes today and stays tomorrow; whose position in a group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning; and that he imports qualities into it which do not and cannot stem from the group itself (402). In the England of the 1950s and the early 1960s the ‘exotic’ West Indian immigrants were strangers whose labour ‘was welcome’ but ‘their presence in large numbers in “one’s own” residential area was often not’ (Hastings 510).

This essay offers a close reading of the passages in *An Unsuitable Attachment* that depict the West Indians in the North London parish of St. Basil. In order to achieve a better understanding of the cultural climate and discourse of the time, I use, whenever possible, sources written during the 1950s and early 1960s — at the risk of citing views that may now be perceived as outdated or politically incorrect. Placing that immigration, as depicted in the novel, in its historical context, I shall demonstrate that Pym’s representation of the West Indians in general and their relationship with the Church in particular is never as transparent as it seems at first reading. Moreover, while reflecting on the ambivalence of the English toward the newcomers, Pym subtly criticises the way they were received in that society in the early 1960s. *An Unsuitable Attachment* is set in a north-west London parish. Rather than focusing on a main protagonist, Pym presents an array of characters who are connected to the parish church — the priest, his wife, her sister and two new members of the congregation. In terms of plot, like most of Pym’s stories nothing dramatic ever happens, but the book explores the theme of attachment suitable and less-suitable among the married and unmarried characters. The novel provides an accurate picture of life in London in the early 1960s and reflects the social and cultural changes that have taken place in Britain since the end of the war.

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Although cultural and racial diversity had existed to a certain degree in Britain before the Second World War, it was in the post-war society that the ‘presence of non-white people’ and the ‘wide measure of cultural diversity which they have brought with them’ became more visible (Royle 15). The 1948 British Nationality Act, which passed to standardise Commonwealth citizenship laws, confirmed the right of all citizens of the British Commonwealth and Colonies to settle in England (Inwood 854). After the war, the West Indians were the first group of coloured immigrants to come to the UK in significant number. (The sailing of the Empire Windrush from Kingston Jamaica in June 1948 marked the beginning this new era.) As a result of the ‘open door’ principle enshrined in the 1948 British Nationality Act, the number of immigrants from ‘underdeveloped countries’ — mainly from the West Indies and India and Pakistan — reached approximately 21,000 in 1959; 58,000 in 1960; and 136,000 in 1961 (Butler 205).
As early as 1950, the British Council of Churches urged the churches and their congregations to take every opportunity to promote the welfare of non-European students and workers. After the Notting Hill riots of 1958, the Executive Committee of the Council of Churches issued a strong statement condemning race prejudice and hostility (Patterson 1969: 325; Glass 148), and expressing its opposition to any restriction on immigration. Yet at the same time, Ruth Glass notes the silence of the ‘Lords Spiritual’ on that matter (147–48).

From 1955 until 1962, 260,000 Caribbean immigrants entered the country — nearly 75,000 in 1961 alone. Immigration control was imposed in 1962 with the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which limited entrance to Britain.

The West Indians were keenly conscious of their status as Christians and British citizens. They spoke English, and their education was focused on Britain — their ‘mother country’ — and on its history. The church, often the Anglican Church, had played a significant role in their lives in their home country, and their social values had been modelled after those of British society. West Indians who relocated to Britain referred to themselves as ‘migrants’ rather than ‘immigrants’, pointing out that since they were British citizens their ‘migration [was] essentially the same as internal migration within the British Isles’. As Glass suggests, they arrived in Britain fully expecting to be integrated into the new society, believing that their life in the West Indies had taught them what to expect in England (Glass 95).

The population in England, as reflected in Pym’s first post-war novel Excellent Women (1949–51) is still ethnically homogeneous. In this novel foreigners appear only once — the heroine Mildred Lathbury and a co-worker Mrs. Bonner encounter two Indian students in a cafeteria. Mildred describes them as ‘harmless enough’ and they keep calling each other ‘old boy’ in the traditional English fashion (75), yet, they attract the attention of Mrs. Bonner who is somewhat apprehensive about sitting at the same table with them.

Immigrants and foreigners start appearing in Pym’s work more frequently in the mid-1950s. In No Fond Return of Love (1957–60) foreigners are mentioned as suffering from racial discrimination; the heroine, Dulcie Mainwaring, worries about ‘lonely African students [who are] having doors shut in their faces’ (12). Jerry White argues that for white Londoners of the time, West Africans and West Indians were all ‘black strangers’ (160).

By the early 1960s, the period when An Unsuitable Attachment takes place, West Indian immigrants constituted a significant percentage of the population of St. Basil’s, the fictional North London parish. At the time, West Indians often experienced great difficulties in their search for lodgings in Britain. Clifford Hill, a minister who worked closely with the immigrants, testifies that in house-after-house they were met with ‘we don’t take niggers’, or were politely informed that
the room was already taken. They were often driven into the mercenary hands of landlords who saw their plight as an opportunity to make money. As many more West Indians arrived, property owners seized the prospect of buying up large old houses (usually from the late nineteenth century that were a problem on the property market), sub-divided and ‘furnished’ them and then let out the rooms (Hill 41). The choice of location for West Indians was then very narrow; they needed to be fairly near to the central London labour market and generally found rooms in ‘tall houses covered with grime and peeling plaster…. The streets have
been by-passed because of their location — near a railway, a noisy market’ (Glass 48). These observations are echoed in *An Unsuitable Attachment* in which the immigrants live at ‘the fringe of [the] parish, that part that would never become residentially “desirable” because it was too near the railway and many of the big gaunt houses had been taken over by families of West Indians’ (16).

Other social processes taking place in London are also reflected in Pym’s description of St. Basil’s parish. At the same time that one part of the district was deteriorating, another part of the parish was being rejuvenated. Two of the main characters, Ianthe Broome and Rupert Stonebird, moved there and live ‘over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line’ (16) in the newly renovated part of the parish. Ianthe and Rupert represent upper middle-class English people who returned to town from the suburbs and sought small terrace houses that had been ‘bought up by speculative builders, gutted, modernised, and sold at high prices to people who wanted small houses that were almost in town but could not afford the more fashionable districts’ (16). Here Pym refers to the growing trend of middle and upper classes to return from suburbia to town. The combination of immigration and ‘gentrification’ in London made the mixing of races easier in some cases (White 160).

Yet, in this novel, in spite of geographical proximity, contact between the different residents of the parish is never established. Pym’s description reflects the findings of a nation-wide Gallup poll carried out on September 1958 when the riots in London were still going on. This survey revealed that 61% of the people asked said they would definitely move or might possibly move ‘if coloured people came to live in great numbers’ in their district. There was a clear distinction between those who knew coloured people personally and were definitely more tolerant and those who did not (Glass 125).

Moreover, although the West Indians have been in the parish longer than the owners of the renovated houses, they are still referred to as ‘strangers’, ‘newcomers’ and ‘exotic’ (22). A description of a busy commercial street in the parish provides an opportunity to test the reaction of an outside visitor — Lady Selvedge, who arrives from the country:

‘So many black people,’ said Lady Selvedge in her penetrating voice. ‘And do I see yams on that stall? I don’t think the vicarage can be here’ …

‘I thought I saw Yams on one of the vegetable stalls as we were coming along,’ said Lady Selvedge. ‘It reminded me of our time in Nigeria. Humphrey was there, you know’. (62–63)

This scene illustrates the conclusions of a report published by the Fabian Colonial Bureau. In a section titled ‘Origin of Hostility’, this study found that the status of colonial migrants was determined by three factors: first, as the West Indian or African migrant is a coloured person, he [sic] is likely to face race-associated prejudice; second, since he [sic] is considered a foreigner, he [sic] is subject to the attitudes directed toward foreigners regardless of race; third, because some
Britons associate coloured people with ‘extremely low social status’, he [sic] may suffer class discrimination (9). The attitude of the British toward the strangers was illustrated in the statement by one respondent: ‘I dislike discrimination but I am obliged to practice it’ (qtd in Glass 110). This ambivalence stems from the attitude to the colonies which was not only one of impersonal authority, but it had some ingredients of a family relationship. This was demonstrated when people from the empire came to Britain and found they were viewed both with suspicion (dark strange exotic) and also with pride as a symbol of the far-reaching power of the empire. Overall the attitude to the strangers was that of superiority, the foreigner was inferior and was not really regarded as British (Glass 109).

In the early 60s this contradiction was beginning to be reversed just as the flow of migration was reversed and fewer white Englishmen were making their careers as administrators of dependent territories. The old ideology of colonialism with its connotations of prejudice was on its way out in the new Commonwealth, and was becoming more noticeable in the ‘mother country’. Multi-racial harmony was more a theme for export than for import (Glass 110).

Indeed, Lady Selvedge’s attitude features all three factors: her initial reaction to seeing ‘so many black people’ is shock; this feeling then gives way to fond memories of yams which she associates with Sir Humphrey, her late former husband, and the time that they spent in Nigeria. This recollection eases her anxiety as she places the strangers in a more comfortable and familiar context of her experience in the colonies; finally her bigoted class consciousness is demonstrated by her ‘penetrating’ voice and her talking about the immigrants while ignoring their presence.

The juxtaposition of Lady Selvedge’s encounter with the black people in the scene that follows, in which she opens the charity bazaar and in her speech encourages the people present to give contribution to the parish church, is ironic. This bazaar may well have been for the benefit of the parish poor, some of whom she has snubbed in the street on her way to the church. Lady Selvedge is presented as an unsympathetic character, a relic of the old social order, but it is up to the reader to make the connection and conclude that it is easier to make charity speeches than to show real tolerance.

Pym suggests that tolerance is a difficult virtue to attain and even more challenging to demonstrate as illustrated in the following passage:

Whenever [Daisy] entered a café she always felt obliged to choose a table where a coloured man or woman was already sitting, so that they should not feel slighted in any way. Looking around now she saw a table for four with an African already at it. Then she noticed that a clergyman, also bearing a tray, was making for the same table, but she managed to get there before him and put her bag down on the chair next to her to prevent him from sitting down. One never knew—he might be a Roman Catholic or Oxford Group; it did not occur to her that he too might be trying to show the black man that there was no colour bar here.

He gave her a somewhat hostile stare as she crashed her tray down on the table.
‘Anyone sitting here?’ she asked brightly.

He made a slight movement of his head and went on reading his book which had an abstruse legal title. (235–36)

This slightly absurd anecdote provides an example of how members of the community seem to bend over backwards to seem friendly to newcomers. However, feeling obliged to sit next to a ‘coloured man or woman’ suggests that this is not done entirely out of free will. Daisy’s eagerness also reveals that she regards coloured people as strangers or guests who ought to be made to feel welcome. She is so busy with her mission that she is unaware of the man’s ‘hostile stare’. Daisy’s efforts are undermined by her lack of sensitivity (and suspicion of the clergyman), and this scene suggests that forced kindness may be the other side of biased stereotyping.

In contrast to Daisy, Mark Ainger and his wife adopt a less proactive approach to draw in the newcomers:

Mark had been visiting, trying to establish some kind of contact with his exotic parishioners and hoping to discover likely boys and men to sing in the choir and serve at the altar. He had received several enthusiastic offers, though he wondered how many of them would really turn up in church. (16)

Mark’s attitude is an example of what the sociologist; Sheila Patterson, terms ‘benevolent laissez-faire’ (1963 258), which was typical behaviour of many clergymen at that time in Britain. His only contact with the new residents occurs when he visits their homes for the purpose of recruiting ‘boys and men to sing in the choir and serve at the altar’. Since Mark doubts the sincerity of their ‘enthusiastic offers’, it appears that he senses that his visits have not been a success. It is worth noting that in this passage, only the men and the boys are invited. Albert Hyndman suggests that in 1960s England the living conditions of the majority of the migrants prevented them from regular church participation. Women found it especially difficult to organise their domestic responsibilities well enough to get sufficient time for worship (78).

Rupert Stonebird, an anthropologist and a new member of the congregation, alludes to Mark’s failure to address the needs of the newcomers by comparing these visits to the unwanted prying of anthropologists. He believes that the priest brings them ‘[s]omething they don’t always want’ (210). Judging by Daisy’s earlier disappointment upon hearing that anthropologists do not actually do anything ‘for the welfare of these poor people’ (41) whom they investigate, it seems that for some ministers the West Indian population is little more than an opportunity for a field trip.

Mark’s ambivalent attitude towards the strangers is further revealed during a conversation with his wife and Ianthe. To the latter’s inquiry as to whether tropical fruits are proper for the Harvest Thanksgiving, he responds: ‘Certainly — they’re really most appropriate here’. The open-mindedness of this statement is undermined when Sophia quotes from Reginald Heber’s missionary hymn,
‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’. She only quotes two innocuous lines, ‘What though the spicy breezes / Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle’ (32). However, for readers familiar with the rest of the hymn,

1. From Greenland’s icy mountains
   From India’s coral strand;
   Where Afric’s sunny fountains
   Roll down their golden sand:
   From many an ancient river,
   From many a palmy plain,
   They call us to deliver
   Their land from error’s chain.

2. What though the spicy breezes
   Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle;
   Though every prospect pleases,
   And only man is vile?
   In vain with lavish kindness
   The gifts of God are strown;
   The heathen in his blindness
   Bows down to wood and stone.

quoting this hymn suggests that, like Heber, the Aingers view themselves as missionaries working among the heathens. According to Patterson, this attitude was especially problematic as the West Indians were very sensitive about anything that smacked of missionary approach. One of their ministers told the sociologist: ‘After all, we’ve been Christians for hundreds of years. We even send missionaries to Africa ourselves’ (254).

Sophia’s yearning for the glorious days of the empire (‘how one longs for the days of Bishop Heber sometimes!’ 32), further attests to her dissatisfaction with her lot in the parish. Heber’s hymn in this context emphasises the discrepancy between the vocation of the romantic colonial priest and that of the modern-day priest, while also pointing out the inadequacy of missionary ideals.

This approach is demonstrated again in a humorous conversation between the Reverend Randolph Burdon, his wife Bertha, and their niece Ianthe:

‘I suppose St. Basil’s is a poor parish?’ Randolph asked in an almost hopeful tone.
‘Yes,’ said Ianthe ‘The congregation tends to be a poor one and there are quite a number of coloured people living in the district’.
Randolph sighed. ‘If only I had that opportunity — such a rewarding experience working among people of that type.’
‘But they are much more naturally religious than we are,’ said Ianthe. ‘It is the white people who are the heathen.’
‘No dear, you must be mistaken,’ said Bertha in a pained tone. (92)

This scene suggests that Randolph Burdon and his wife, ministering in a wealthy part of town, know very little about the immigrants and their religious beliefs. Yet they do not give up their romantic ideas about working in poor immigrant parishes; Burdon appears to be genuinely longing for this calling.

This conversation echoes contemporaneous cultural debate. While the mainstream public often doubted the sincerity of the West Indians’ Christian beliefs, according to Pastor Clifford Hill, many of the immigrants were disappointed with Church worship in England. He further laments that the ‘English, who originally carried the Gospel to the West Indies, do not believe, or practice what they have preached’ and the ‘widespread paganism that exists in England under the thin
 veneer of Christianity’ (103). Pym’s portrayal of empty Anglican Churches struggling to attract believers supports this claim, and Ianthe’s bold assertion that it is the white people who are heathen suggests a growing scepticism regarding the genuineness of common beliefs.

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Churches have traditionally played a crucial role in facilitating the early stages of adjustment of immigrants to the new environment by lending them spiritual, social and material assistance (Patterson 1963 252). Yet, the church in An Unsuitable Attachment does not offer such aid. Although Mark has rejected a living in the wealthier parish of St. Ermine’s, preferring to work with the poor, his inadequate ideas about the newcomers and his lack of resolve in drawing them into the church render him ineffectual. Consequently, the relationship between the church and the newcomers remains static: they do not begin to attend church or to join the activities of the parish.

The inability to reach out and to ‘see’ the other is not limited to Mark’s relationship with the West Indians. When Sophia discovers that, contrary to her expectations, the spinster Ianthe intends to marry the ‘unsuitable’ John Callow, she realises that she only thought she knew Ianthe. Because of her biases, Sophia was unable to see that Ianthe had other needs and wishes; she must have, in her own words, left out ‘the human element’ (226). Indeed, from the private to the public sphere, An Unsuitable Attachment demonstrates disregard for the need of the other and neglect of that human element.9

In the fictional world, even mistakes and misunderstandings resulting from partial blindness can ultimately be worked out, especially if true love, however unsuitable, is present. But in the case of the West Indians Pym manifests a genuine social concern and, while subtly exploring the confusion, anxiety and ignorance on the issue within English society, she offers no happy ending. In a parish where so many of the residents are West Indians, they remain at the geographical margins — as well as in a world apart.

A broadcast describing the West Indians’ experience of public and private life in England by BBC Caribbean Service (1958–59) illustrates the irreconcilable differences between the two worlds. Under the topic of ‘Making Friends at Church’ appears the following suggestion, which could have been taken directly from An Unsuitable Attachment:

Some people will go out of their way to try and make you comfortable. Many may believe you have never gone to a real church before and they are trying to make you like what they think is your first experience. Do not insult them for this ignorance. They will learn better in time… Sometimes they decide to give you credit for being truly converted … simply because they may have it in their heads that colored people are heathens who break the hearts of saintly missionaries who try to convert them.

(qtd in Glass 100)
An Unsuitable Attachment does not present the point of view of the West Indians themselves. Throughout the novel they remain a silent entity never to be personalised, and this absence emphasises the problem even further. Pym wrote the novel two years after the Notting Hill racial riots of 1958, which she expressly mentions: ‘Race relations seemed almost cosy discussed at this distance from Notting Hill or Brixton, Penelope thought scornfully. But that had been last month. Tonight it might be the Common Market or the future of space travel (86).

Having already witnessed some of the consequences of that rift, An Unsuitable Attachment reveals an overall pessimistic assessment of the Church’s commitment toward improving race relations. Moreover, Pym suggests that in spite of the riots, this topic had not gathered enough momentum to become a priority on the social and political agenda. But rather, in the course of some short three years race relations have been relegated to being yet another topic discussed from afar among well meaning but ineffectual intellectuals.

NOTES
2 The American sociologist, Joel S. Kahn, recorded his impressions when he first arrived in London in the 1960s from America: ‘I can still remember how shocked I was to find overtly primitivist representations of Blacks in British popular culture, representations that were unthinkable in polite American society of that time. Advertisements for tropical fruit drinks shown in cinemas, for example, depicted happy African natives with prominent lips cavorting through the jungle; the appearance of blacks on the football pitch was inevitably accompanied by chants about jungles and bananas by baying crowds of spectators making ape-like sounds — either of which would have led to riots in contemporary American cities’ (139).
3 See Raz 2007, p. 5.
4 According to Clarence Senior and Douglas Manley, until the mid-1950s ‘movement to the United Kingdom was unimportant’. Small numbers went as munitions and factory workers, and approximately 8000 joined the armed forces (4).
5 The Europeans who conquered and colonised the Caribbean brought their religious beliefs with them. The slaves have been converted by missionaries (Moravians, Methodists and Baptists) from the mid-eighteenth century. At first the Anglican planters viewed them with hostility as they feared unrest among the slaves but near the end of the eighteenth century the British government adopted a more positive policy towards the conversion of slaves (see Manely 45).
6 Pym’s description of St Basil’s location corresponds in Glass’ map of West Indian Settlement in London to an area in which 4% to 8% of the immigrant population lived.
7 Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was an English bishop; in November 1804 he was elected a fellow of All Souls’; after completing his university career, he went on a long tour of Europe. Having taken holy orders in 1807, he took up the family living of Hodnet in Shropshire. In 1823 he became the Bishop of Calcutta. The hymn was published in 1819.
8 It seems that Pym’s attitude towards missionary work evolves throughout the decade: in Excellent Women, missionary work overseas is regarded as an important cause. Mildred, the protagonist, even imagines herself as a local Christian missionary who
awaits opportunities for ‘saying a word’ and propagating the gospel, as her vicar always urges his parishioners to do (9). In contrast to the general congenial attitude, only one eccentric character in the novel, Mrs. Bone (who is characterised as ‘not a Christian’—meaning she is not a churchgoer), is a single voice in her dissent against the work of the missionaries in Africa. She protests against their condescension towards the natives, claiming that ‘Missionaries have done a lot of harm’ as the ‘natives have their own religions which are very ancient, much more ancient than ours. We,’ she says, ‘have no business to try to make them change’ (140). Although Mrs. Bone is presented as an eccentric, and her peculiar opinions concerning other topics undermine her credibility and create ‘considerable confusion’ in the mind of Mildred (140), this early manifestation of a postcolonial position, expressed by an unconventional character, questions the moral foundation of missionary work in Africa.

Although none of the other characters in Pym’s novels of that period express views similar to those of Mrs. Bone’s, the next novel, Jane and Prudence, displays a general fatigue with the cause of colonial Africa. When the vicar Nicholas Cleveland and his wife Jane return from their vacation, they discover that the locum priest’s sermons were ‘not much well liked’. Miss Doggett, a prominent member of the congregation and a member of the Parochial Church Council (131), explains the reason for this: ‘We got very tired of Africa and I didn’t feel that what he told us rang quite true. He said that one African chief had had a thousand wives. I found that a little difficult to believe’ (Jane and Prudence 213).

Towards the middle of the decade missionary work overseas ceases to be a recurring motif in Pym’s novels. Africa is becoming instead a field of anthropological studies, whereas the centre of missionary work is actually London.

Similar examples are the notion of both Rupert and Mervyn that they could be suitable husbands for Ianthe, without considering her feelings in the matter, and the officious social worker who presumes to know what is best for her charge Mrs. Grime.

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Interrogating Malaysian Literature in English: Its Glories, Sorrows and Thematic Trends

Malaysian literature in English has just attained its sixtieth anniversary since its modest inception in the late 1940s, initiated by a small group of college and university students in Singapore. Singapore was the academic hub of British Malaya and the only university of the colony was located there, therefore it was natural that a movement in English writing should have started from there. Nonetheless, given the current cultural and political rivalries between Singapore and Malaysia, it is rather ironic that a Malaysian tradition of writing started in a territory that now sees Malaysia as the ‘other’. There is a second irony with regard to this tradition, however; that is, it started not during the heyday of colonial rule as in the case of India, but just before the retreat of the Raj to its native shores. If we consider, say 1947 or 1948 as the starting point of Malaysian Anglophone tradition, or 1950, the year that saw the publication of Wang Gungwu’s *Pulse*, it is hard to miss the inherent irony in the timing of its inception because India and Pakistan were already independent in 1947 and Malaysia was to become independent in a few years, in 1957. Of course, there are practical and political reasons for this late commencement of the tradition, and yet the fact that English writing should begin in the years immediately before the departure of the British cannot be ignored either.

Given the time that has lapsed and the new milestone that the tradition is about to reach, it seems appropriate to interrogate the glories and sorrows, possibilities and perils, of this tradition and investigate some thematic trends. The questions to be addressed are: Why has Malaysian literature in English failed to keep pace with the growth of literary activity in other postcolonial centres, like Singapore and India? What are the future possibilities of this tradition? What are some of the dominant interests or abiding postulations/moorings in the body of its works and why or how have they found their anchorage in the sensibility of these writers? To what extent have the writers of the tradition contributed to Malaysian nation-formation and to the cultivation of a dialogic sensibility that Malaysia so requires for coming to grips with its plural cultural environment? Is it possible to see writings in English as part of the Malaysian national enterprise, integrally related to the history and culture of the country, in spite of its alien medium? This essay seeks to deliberate on these issues, with particular reference to some prominent writers and with a view to rendering an account of Malaysian Literature in English.
GLORIES AND SORROWS OF THE TRADITION

It is true that English writings have made phenomenal advances in many of the postcolonial societies in the last fifty-odd years, so much so that Salman Rushdie made the controversial claim that English writing has been more prolific in India in the post-independence period than literature in its sixteen ‘official languages’ and that “‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books’ (viii). Rushdie’s claim might sound a bit audacious, but certainly countries like India, South Africa and even neighbouring Singapore can profess to be literary centres so far as English writing is concerned because of the sheer volume and quality of literature they have produced in the language. Can Malaysia be included in this league? Does it have a body of writing substantial and challenging enough to make it into a literary hub in English? The answer is not so clear because Malaysia has produced an oeuvre of writings in the language and yet the growth of literary activity in the medium has not been steady, substantial and continuous as compared to other countries. This is not to blame the individual writers because Malaysia has produced some very good writers in English, who are comparable to the best writers in Singapore, for example, but the socio-political-cultural circumstances of the country have dogged the English literary scene, including the careers of its most established writers, from the beginning.

I’ll come to the sorrows of the tradition or challenges faced by writers in the English language later, but let me first point out its glories, or what the tradition has accomplished in the last forty-odd years. In an essay published in 2003 in Kunapipi (written in late 2001), I discussed the achievements of Malaysian English writers and pointed out that Malaysia has produced a body of writers who deserve serious critical attention. These include Ee Tiang Hong, Wong Phui Nam, Muhammad Haji Salleh, Salleh Ben Joned and Shirley Geok-lin Lim in poetry; Lloyd Fernando, Lee Kok Liang, K.S. Maniam and Shirley Geok-lin Lim in fiction; and K.S. Maniam and Kee Thuan Chye in drama. These are writers who have written substantially as well as meaningfully, with sufficient craftsmanship and depth in their work to make it worthy of critical attention. Some of these writers have earned considerable recognition including in some instances, literary prizes from home and abroad. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, for example, was the first Asian and first woman writer to receive the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1980, for her collection of poetry Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems; Kee Thuan Chye won the Australian Cultural Award in 1994, and K.S. Maniam was honoured with the Raja Rao Award for Fiction by the Indian Sahityaa Academy in 2000. Shirley Geok-lin Lim also won the Asiaweek Short Story Competition Second Prize in 1982 and American Book Award for her acclaimed memoir Among the White Moon Faces: Asian American Memoir of Homelands in 1997, and K.S. Maniam won first prizes in The Straits Times-McDonald and The Straits Times-Shell Short Story Competitions in 1987 and
1990 respectively. However, what is noteworthy is that two of the writers in the list have already passed away and those living are in their sixties and seventies, with Kee Thuan Chye, the youngest of all, in his fifties.

I also listed a second group of writers in that essay. These include Adibah Amin, Nirmala Raghavan, Che Husna Azhari, Chuah Guat Eng, Rehman Rashid, Karim Raslan, Amir Muhammad and Dina Zaman. However, their achievements are often limited to one book, as in the case of Chuah Guat Eng and Rehman Rashid; or they show more interest in journalistic writings than serious literary works such as fiction, poetry and drama, as with Karim Raslan, Amir Muhammad and Dina Zaman. Some of the writers, such are Adibah Amin and Nirmala Raghavan, are also bilingual which affects the volume of their output in the English language. However, this list too, like the previous one, includes few younger writers, which is where, I think, the problem lies with Malaysian English literature: there has been a lack of continuity in the tradition and it has failed to flourish at a steady pace as with Indian and Singaporean literatures. The strong tradition started by the first and second generation writers has become sporadic, sluggish and aimless for lack of comparable writers in the new generation.

I do not think the literary scene in the country has changed in any significant way since the publication of my essay. 2002 and 2003 saw the publication of three novels, one collection of plays, two volumes of occasional-journalistic writings, and an anthology. The novels include Lee Kok Liang’s *London Does Not Belong to Me* — the story of a young law student in England, probably written in the 1950s but published eleven years after the author’s death; K.S. Maniam’s *Between Lives*; and Rani Manicka’s *The Rice Mother* — the story of four generations of women in a Malaysian family spanning most of the twentieth century, for which she was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book, in the regional category, in 2003. Karim Raslan’s *Journeys Through Southeast Asia: Ceritalah 2* and Farish Noor’s *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia’s Subaltern History* were both published in late 2002; Huzir Sulaiman’s *Eight Plays* in 2003, and *Petals of Hibiscus: A Representative Anthology of Malaysian Literature in English*, which I co-edited, in 2003. 2005 saw the publication of Rani Manicka’s second novel, *Touching Earth* and Tash Aw’s debut novel *The Harmony Silk Factory* (which won the Whitbread Book Award as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel for 2005), while Wong Phui Nam’s first play, *Anike*, Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s second novel, *Sister Swing* and Kee Thuan Chye’s fourth play, *The Swordfish, Then the Concubine*, were published in 2006. There has also been a steady stream of edited anthologies by Silverfishbooks, but these volumes include stories by writers from Singapore and Australia as well. These are obviously exceedingly heartening and sure signs of progress, but still the majority of the publications are by the early writers of the tradition and some by writers who have crossed the national borders and taken on the identity of Malaysian diasporic writers. Moreover, the overall progress of
the tradition does not seem to compare with the other postcolonial literary centres mentioned above, either in terms of volume or pace.

As mentioned earlier, there are obvious socio-cultural-political reasons for this relatively slow and interrupted growth of English writing in Malaysia. The most formidable of these are the country’s language policy and the uncompromising notion of what constitutes its ‘national literature’. I believe the policy of having a national language itself is socially-culturally beneficial as Malaysia needs a common language to create a semblance of unity and harmony among its culturally and racially diverse population. One might argue that English, as a neutral language without the undesirable connotations associated with the local languages or the markers of ethnic and religious prejudices, would have been a better choice for a national language in a complex sociolinguistic setting like Malaysia. Every choice has its pros and cons: the neutrality of English would probably have helped to create a better ethnic and administrative cohesiveness in the country, and placed Malaysia at a more advantageous position in the community of nations for having a language of global communication as its national language, but then there are many cultural, social and political implications that accompany the use of an external language. For one thing, the use of English as the national language would have seriously compromised the identity of Malaysia as a nation; it would have subverted the local cultures, interfered with people’s ways of thinking and articulating their ideas, and continued the process of colonial subjugation through the power discourse associated with English as a language. Besides, it would require the whole nation to sacrifice its past and present and look away from its collective soul for the sake of pragmatism.

Bahasa Malaysia was therefore not a wrong choice as the national language for this newly emergent nation. It was the pre-colonial language of the land and the language of the majority of its population in the post-colonial period. The choice of Malay as Malaysia’s national language makes more sense than India’s choice of Hindi, which was just another regional language with no better historical claim than Bengali or Tamil, for example; or the attempt by the founders of Pakistan to elevate Urdu to the country’s national language, when it had several indigenous languages of its own and Bengali was spoken by the majority of its citizens. One might accept, albeit somewhat grudgingly if one belonged to a Malaysian minority community, Mahathir Mohammad’s argument in The Malay Dilemma that as immigrants to the US or Australia are required to learn English and accept it as the national language in order to get citizenship, a similar principle of national unity could also be adopted in this newly independent, multi-racial, Southeast Asian nation (‘The Bases of National Unity’).

However, although the policy itself was not divisive and exclusionary, its rigid definition and binary method of implementation has thwarted the growth of English writing in the country. In Malaysia even to question the status of Malay as the national language is considered seditious, which is obviously excessive
compared to the policies in the US or India, where greater flexibility is allowed in people’s attitudes to the national language. Moreover, in Malaysia, as a continuation of the language policy, only literature in Bahasa Malaysia is accorded the status of national literature. In fact, since the introduction of the Language Act in 1967, Malaysian literature has been divided into two categories: ‘national literature’, or literature written in the national language; and ‘sectional literature’, or literature written in English and the country’s other ethnic languages. This exclusionary approach, which translates into the withholding of support from the government institutions if a writer chooses not to write in the national language, has caused severe repercussions for non-Malay writings, including English, in the country. It has led to the pampering and protection of mediocrity and rejection of fair competition among writers, which is again different from the practices in India and Singapore where writers in all major languages are treated equally and considered for national support and national prizes. Comparing the literary scenes in Singapore and Malaysia, Kee Thuan Chye laments:

Singapore respects literature in any language written by its citizens. By and large, Singapore upholds a meritocratic system. It nominates writers from across the language spectrum for its Cultural Medallion and for the SEA Write Award whereas here in Malaysia, you’d have to be writing in Malay to qualify to become a National Laureate or even be considered for the SEA Write Award, which is actually bestowed by an external body. In fact, year after year, the winning of the SEA Write Award by Malaysians has become a mockery. It’s a case of the writers in Malay waiting their turn to be called. (Quayum 2005 137)

This monolithic view of national language and the consequent reductive definition of national literature has been the main stumbling block for the growth of literary activity in English. First and foremost, it has pushed writings in English (together with writings in other ethnic languages) to the margins of national culture, forcing some writers to forsake English as a literary medium and frustrating others who could not but continue writing in the language. For the first- and second-generation writers who were educated in English schools in the colonial era, English as a medium of literary expression was not a matter of choice but one that was determined by their environment. The options left for them in the face of this essentialist political development were either to continue writing in spite of the consequences, migrate to a new land where they would be more at home with their tongue, or just stop writing. Lee Kok Liang and Lloyd Fernando chose the first option and stayed with their medium and in the country; Ee Tiang Hong and Shirley Lim chose the second option and emigrated to Australia and the US respectively; and Wong Phui Nam chose the third option, albeit temporarily, before deciding to write again after a considerable period of silence. Only native speakers of the language like Adibah Amin, Muhammad Haji Salleh and Salleh Ben Joned managed to branch out into Malay and straddle two languages.

It is possible that some of the writers who were born in the Malayan territory that now constitutes Malaysia chose to stay back in Singapore after the political
separation between the two countries, or later moved to Singapore and other countries, because of the stiff policies on language and literature. Would Catherine Lim or Suchen Christine Lim have made Singapore their home if the hierarchic policies and privileging norms in matters of language and literature had not been adopted? I believe there is no clear answer to such a question, although there is room for conjecture that the outcome might have been otherwise if Malaysia had adopted a more inclusivist and accommodating spirit in its definition of national literature. I recently took the opportunity of asking both Catherine Lim and Suchen Christine Lim as to why we should not consider them as Malaysian writers in the same way as we continue to view Shirley Geok-lin Lim as a Malaysian writer in spite of her emigration to and subsequent citizenship in the US, or as critics see Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian writer despite her domicile in the US. Suchen Christine Lim responded with considerable ambiguity, suggesting that she belonged to both (Malaysia and Singapore) and was grateful to both, because ‘one gave [her] life, the other gave [her] an upbringing’ (Quayum 2005 152). Catherine Lim’s response, however, was a more resounding ‘no’. As she was born and educated in Malaysia, and since she wrote about her childhood memories in Malaysia, I asked her whether it would be appropriate to consider her a Malaysian writer? Her reply was:

I find it difficult to consider myself a ‘Malaysian writer’ rather than a ‘Singaporean writer’, simply because I suppose my sense of being a Singaporean is so strong, Singapore being the country I have adopted, grown to love very much and will always be committed to. (Quayum 2005 23)

One is left to wonder if the status of English and English writing in the country has anything to do with Catherine Lim’s such strong attachments for Singapore and a concomitant apathy towards the country that gave her life and provided shelter and protection for the first twenty eight years.

The rigidity in the language policy and the exclusionary view of national literature has also contributed to the relative lack of dedicated new-generation writers in the language. Earlier I pointed out how the English literary scene in Malaysia is still very much dominated by the first- or second-generation writers who were born before the inception of Malaysia. This is because those who were born in the emancipated, post-colonial Malaysia were influenced by the Language Act of 1967 in one way or another. As a result, they were either not adequately exposed to the language or they saw the futility of pursuing it as a literary medium. The language enactment, and its amendment in 1971 to further bolster the position of Bahasa Malaysia, resulted in minimal support for the teaching of English and for English activities; English literature especially suffered both at the secondary school and tertiary levels. Before the language enactment, English was widely used in schools and offices, but after the enactment, English as a medium of education was slowly phased out from the National schools and Government administration was run absolutely in the Malay language. Although
English remained as an academic subject in schools, passing it was not a strict requirement to enter university, and whatever English was taught was also on a functional basis, without any inclusion of literary texts in the curriculum or emphasis on the creative and imaginative potential of the language. Literature was also de-emphasised at the university level as most of the English Departments specialised in the teaching of language only, with little or no attention to literature and literary texts.

All these factors amounted to an indifferent environment for the emergence of new writers in the language. Absence of literature or literary texts in the school curriculum would have limited the exposure of students to English-language writers and the potential to exercise their own creative faculties in the language. In fact, Malaysia still does not have English medium schools where local students could enrol freely without permission from the Ministry of Education, and in spite of some changes in the English curriculum in schools (literature was reintroduced as a component of the English syllabus in 1999), the situation is still not conducive to producing writers in the language in any significant way. The handful of younger generation writers that we see practising the craft developed their love for writing in English either because of the individual family environment they grew up in — in which English was possibly still a favoured language and somehow used for daily interaction and expression — or more probably because they have benefited from the changed policy of sending students to English speaking countries for their education during the Mahathir era (1981–2003). This is certainly true for most of the younger or third generation writers of the English language mentioned in this article, such as Karim Raslan, Farish Noor, Dina Zaman, Rani Manicka and Tash Aw (the last two currently residing in the UK).

The language act also had an adverse effect on the English publication industry and it severely restricted the possibility of publishing works in English, especially by new writers. Publication in a money-driven society is invariably linked to readership; fewer readers means little or no interest from publishers. Publication still remains a major barrier for writers, although the interest in English and English activities has picked up considerably in the last fifteen or so years. There is also the problem of confidence for young writers, who could hardly see the value of their writing even in a positive environment. The problem is greatly compounded when the threat of rejection is palpable to them, and when they cannot even properly decide whether it would be worthwhile to write and publish in English in a country where literary activities in the language are deliberately marginalised and treated with the reduced status of ‘sectional literature’. Dina Zaman sums up the problem of English writing in Malaysia, especially for younger writers:

I suppose my writing in English initially unsettled a few scholars and academics. When I began writing in the 90s academics kept asking me why I wrote in English and not Malay. I’m Malay and I should write in Malay…. In general, writing in Malaysia tends to be the domain of Malay writers. I have to admit when I think of writers, I think of
Pak Samad etc first then K.S. Maniam. This has nothing to do with the quality of their writing, but because of what we were told/informed. (Quayum 2007 297, 299)

The pressure to write in Malay is not on Malay writers alone but on all Malaysian writers, although the Malay writers feel it more acutely owing to the risk of being singled out as traitors to the culture. After all, the logic goes: Malay is the national language and there are so many personal benefits for the writer, from economic to cultural, for writing in it, so why should a Malay writer choose not to write in the language? The extent to which writing in English involves marginalisation and invisibility is obvious from Dina’s statement; a writer in English herself, she cannot help but think that a writer in Malaysia means a writer in the national language first. That is how the political and cultural machinery works against the writers in English in the country and the net result is, as I have suggested earlier, the ‘othering’ and exclusion of writings in English and an interrupted and slow growth of the tradition.

There are many other challenges faced by writers in Malaysia, such as the censorship laws which prohibit writers from venturing into so-called politically and culturally ‘sensitive subjects’; the recurrent threat of the Internal Security Act (ISA) that allows arrest and confinement of an individual by the authorities without any specific allegations, fostering an environment of fear and self-censorship among writers; social and religious taboos on topics of literary interest such as love, desire, and sex; and a general apathy towards literature in an environment that glorifies material and technological developments. These are problems encountered by writers in general and across the spectrum and do not necessarily contribute to the subordination of English writing within the national culture. I have discussed some of these issues in a separate essay published in the CRNLE Journal in 2001.4

**Thematic Trends in the Tradition**

Malaysian literature in English is rich and diverse in its thematic scope; it encompasses sundry social, political and cultural issues intrinsic to the local society. Malaysia is a unique country with a unique set of problems and possibilities. For one thing, it is a newly independent nation. It had never experienced nationhood before the departure of the British in 1957. Besides, Malaysia is a polyglot and pluralistic society, with many races, cultures and languages coexisting within its borders. It is both an old and new society; some of its population has inhabited the place for centuries, while others were brought over during the colonial period. It is also a grappling ground for tradition and modernisation; much of its life-style is bound by tradition but there are also the new values introduced from the West by its rapid modernisation. All these issues and complexities are represented and reflected in the works of writers in English. However, the primary interest of these writers seems to be nationalism and nation formation. They often criticise Malaysian culture with a view to establishing a fair and equitable society and a
nation that is inclusive and accommodative in spirit. They are keen to dismantle hierarchies in caste, class, sex and race so that an harmonious, balanced and humane society might be established in Malaysia. Their overwhelming sympathies are for the subalterns and the socially disadvantaged, and they seek to dissipate all forms of prejudice, exclusivism and bigotry in their imagination of the nation. One could argue this thesis in all the genres of this tradition, but let me examine a select body of its fiction for the purposes of this essay.

Poetry came first in the Malaysian Anglophone tradition, followed by short stories in the sixties and novels in the 1970s and 1980s. There are quite a few anthologies and individual collections of short stories that have come out since the publication of Lloyd Fernando’s *Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories* (1968) and *Malaysian Short Stories* (1981). Some of the early short stories were also published in local journals and magazines, such as *LIDRA* and *Tengarra*. Many of these stories focus on poverty and destitution in Malaysian society in order to expose its class and caste hierarchy. They also argue that indigence is not a race problem but a class problem; the oppressed and the humiliated are found in all the various ethnic groups in the country. Poverty was acute in Malaysian society in the aftermath of independence because of the Japanese Occupation and the Communist insurgency in the 1940s and the 1950s respectively, which had thrown the country’s export economy into disarray, causing, as Andaya and Andaya suggest, widespread ‘unemployment, food shortages, poverty, poor health and general uncertainty’ (258). Poverty still remains a problem in some sectors of the society, in spite of the country’s phenomenal economic growth in the last twenty years, because of lack of equitable distribution of wealth among its citizens.

The themes of poverty and class distinction are highlighted in Siew Yue Killingley’s ‘A Question of Dowry’, Pretam Kaur’s ‘Pasang’ and ‘Through the Wall’, Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s ‘Hunger’, and Dina Zaman’s ‘Philippa’ and ‘Night and Day’. All these stories show how impoverishment affects the life of the social and economic ‘other’. Killingley’s ‘A Question of Dowry’ is the story of an Indian couple which fails to marry off their daughter because they cannot raise the money required for her dowry. The story criticises the age-old tradition of the dowry system in Indian society, which the Malaysian-Indians, unfortunately, have failed to relinquish despite their departure from their homeland; but it also shows how lack of money can adversely affect the life of an individual and a family, since Sivasothie, the young girl whose marriage falls through because of lack of dowry, faces the prospect of remaining a spinster all her life and being a social stigma for her parents (as unmarried women are seen very unkindly in the traditional Indian cultural perspective).

Pretam Kaur’s ‘Pasang’ is the story of a young Punjabi boy, Chranpal, who is so poor that he cannot even afford a *pasang* (a top) which he desperately requires to mingle with the rest of the children. It is most touching when the little boy goes
to his mother for money to buy a top and all the mother can do is to helplessly squall at him, ‘Well, you can sell me and buy a top for yourself.... Top, top, ten cents, ten cents, forever, you have eaten my ears with your endless noise. Go away. I don’t have any money’ (38). The story can be read as an allegory, as the boy’s failure to mingle with the rest of the children for lack of a top can be seen as the failure of the Malaysian poor to enter the mainstream community and stake their claim in the new country due to their lack of resources and means. ‘Through the Wall’ depicts the lives of two poverty-stricken families, one Punjabi and the other Chinese, who have large families but share a house, partitioned by a plank wall. The Punjabi man keeps cows, while the Chinese is a trishaw peddler. One day the latter’s wife gives birth to a beautiful girl but the family is so impoverished that they are forced to sell her to two Malay women for $90. This shatters the mother emotionally and forces her into isolation and insanity. Both the stories highlight the problems of privation in the minority communities in Malaysia and show how children were deprived of their normal childhood or mothers of their maternal love owing to their overwhelming penury.

Poverty is also the dominant theme in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s ‘Hunger’, in which the eight-year-old protagonist, Chai, experiences acute deprivation and hunger despite her being a bright student and intellectually gifted: ‘She had this secret machine inside her that could eat up books, swallow them whole, then give them back in bits and pieces, as good almost as before she ate them’ (7). At recess in school, when all the other children rushed to the stalls for food or ate their ‘fried noodles or sardine sandwiches or rice cakes’, Chai ‘waited in the classroom till she thought they had finished eating, then she went out to play with them’ (10). Chai’s problem is compounded by the fact that her mother has deserted the family and left her with an unbearable emotional hunger as well. Deprived physically and emotionally, Chai eventually sacrifices her innocence and yields to the temptation of a guava from a neighbouring old man, who in exchange ‘put his hand under her dress and stroked her front’ (12). The next day, the girl collects a ten-cent coin from the paedophiliac old man and allows him to stroke ‘her arms and chest, his eyes shut mysteriously’ (12). On the third day, however, the girl resists the temptation realising that the old man has nothing more to offer than money, while she needs both love and money. The story shows how poverty can bring destructive and grievous ill in society, although the story also criticises parental irresponsibility in the mother who has selfishly abandoned the family, as well as the practices of sexual abuse and exploitation of children by the materially empowered but morally hollow haves of society.

Dina Zaman’s two stories, ‘Philippa’ and ‘Night and Day’, also deal with poverty and the lives of the marginalised and the often forgotten in contemporary Malaysia. ‘Philippa’ is the story of an immigrant Eurasian-Indonesian woman who has come to this country as a domestic help, and Midah, a transvestite, who lives a shady life in the seedy streets of Kuala Lumpur. They are the lowest of
the low and live in extreme destitution and near sub-human conditions, and their agonies of being the insulted and the humiliated are underscored in the narrative. ‘Night and Day’ is the story of an economically underprivileged male prostitute and his psychologically confused, alienated but economically empowered female client. There is also a transvestite in this story, who is seen as marginalised even within the layer of the marginalised, as the male prostitute, who is himself poor and seen with considerable prejudice on account of his lowly occupation, treats the transvestite as worth less than him. This shows that class hierarchy in Malaysian society is far more complex than one might think; there is the binary of the rich and poor, but within the dichotomy there are layers of distinctions and classifications which will need to be deconstructed and reconstructed if a horizontal and equitable society is to be accomplished — a task that is monumental if not overly idealistic and utopian, but well worth the aspiration for a new and growing nation.

Gender hierarchy and the ruthless victimisation of women (including young girls) and their fortitude and endurance are addressed in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s ‘Journey’, ‘Life’s Mysteries’, ‘Mr Tang’s Girls’ and ‘Sisters’; Hilary Tham’s, ‘The Discovery’ and ‘Unborn Tomorrow’; Cynthia Anthony’s ‘Nannan’, K.S. Maniam’s ‘Mala’, Che Husna Azhari’s ‘Mariah’ and Dina Zaman’s ‘The Fat Woman’. These are stories written and published over a period of about thirty years and by writers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but they all share the common theme of gender binary and oppression of women in a tradition-bound, androcentric society. ‘Journey’, Lim’s first published story, written when she was an undergraduate student at the University of Malaya, is about a young girl who witnesses her mother’s distress in an abortion and comes to realise that in spite of her personal courage and resourcefulness, the mother is a victim of her biology (she has seven children and is pregnant again) and an indifferent, unfeeling, egocentric male world; her journey of life is viciously manipulated and controlled by the good-for-nothing father who is totally obsessed with gambling and sees his wife as nothing more than a sexual object, without the subjectivity and agency of a human person. ‘Life’s Mysteries’ reveals the anxieties of a ten year old Swee Liang about being a girl instead of a boy, which she thinks has been mysteriously causing her parents to drift apart; in her innocence, the girl considers a sex change operation so that she can get her father’s love again and help reunite the parents.

‘Mr Tang’s Girls’ is the story of four girls in the second family of Ah Kong, an affluent but insensitive and traditional father, who fails to cope with the growing sexuality of the eldest girl. He tries to marry her off to one of his assistants as his second wife. His anxieties are eventually transformed into a nightmare in which he is first seduced and then murdered by the eldest daughter. ‘Sisters’, an excerpt from Lim’s second novel, Sister Swing, is a rewriting of ‘Mr Tang’s Girls’, with a more comical ending. Here also the polygamous father, who likes to dominate and have full control over his family, fails to cope with the growing
sexuality of his daughters and dies of a heart attack one night when he suddenly and most shockingly discovers his daughters looking at their private organs in a mirror in their room. These two stories are somewhat different in that they depict the subordination and othering of women but also provide resistance to male authority through caricatures of the father.

Tham’s ‘The Discovery’ embodies a powerful criticism of men’s obsession with women as sexual objects. It begins with a young man’s discovery that the father he idolised is a philanderer and ends with the young man himself following in the father’s footsteps after his marriage. Kim San, who has seen his mother’s sufferings from his father’s betrayal, fails to learn from the experience, which shows the author’s scepticism about men’s sexual integrity and honesty and their inaptitude for maintaining honest matrimonial relationships. ‘Unborn Tomorrow’ tells the tragic tale of a girl’s drowning in the sea in the resort town of Port Dickson because the family chose the boy over her for swimming lessons. The message of the story is loud and clear — such gender discriminations and derelictions are not only disabling for the individual but they can also eventuate in the untimely death of a person.

In ‘Nannan’, Cynthia Anthony pays tribute to a Burmese-Portuguese grandmother who survived the cruelties of a stepmother and a vicious husband, who not only had extramarital affairs but also abused her physically. The traumatised woman gave birth to fifteen children and endured six abortions but never gave up on her family; only when her youngest child finished his education did she file for divorce and find her freedom. The story encapsulates the sufferings of countless Malaysian/Asian women who endured all hardships and hostility for the sake of their families and found emancipation in love and devotion for their children and/or grandchildren.

K.S. Maniam’s ‘Mala’ recounts the life of a young Indian girl abused by her parents and exploited by her husband. Mala marries Sankar to escape her sufferings at home with her parents, triggered by her bad performance in school, but the husband exploits her sexually to meet his own appetite as well as to gain mileage with his business clients. At the end of the story, Mala is compared to a mannequin and there are hints that she might end up as a prostitute like Lucy, who has been sharing the flat with Sankar even before Mala moved in as his wife.

If the stories of Lim and Tham deal with lives of women in the Chinese community, and Anthony’s and Maniam’s in the Eurasian and Indian communities respectively, Azhari’s ‘Mariah’ and Zaman’s ‘The Fat Woman’ demonstrate how women experience the same marginalisation, subjugation and injustice in the Malay community. ‘Mariah’ is a fine story about the practice of polygamy, in which an Islamic priest (Imam) marries a beautiful widow as his second wife because the woman reminds him of his adolescent love, and the Imam feels no compunction over the emotional and psychological torment it brings upon his first wife. It is an example of wanton abuse of religion for the fulfilment of personal
sexual appetites. ‘The Fat Woman’ is also about lust and appetite as it narrates the tragic life of an unnamed fat prostitute who is abused and hated (because she is so fat) by everyone in the neighbourhood. Unable to cope with the exploitation and animosity of her neighbours, she finally chooses to switch off emotionally and live an unfeeling and stoic life: ‘She did not allow herself to care any longer. She knew she had to stop feeling. She had to be that way because there was no way to deal with life if one felt’ (93). Again, this is the story of many Malaysia/Asian women who continue to suffer the biases and brutalities of a male centred culture, passively and in silence.

Some of the stories discussed under poverty and class discrimination also address the issue of the gender binary. Sivasothie’s problem in Killingley’s ‘A Question of Dowry’ arises precisely because she is a woman; it is the same with the trishaw peddler’s wife in Kaur’s ‘Through the Wall’ and Chai in Lim’s ‘Hunger’. Probably the fate of each of these characters would have been different if they were not circumscribed by their sexual identity. Some of the stories, however, also bring up the issue of racial divide in the country and the necessity of reconciling the differences in order to build a tolerant, vibrant and harmonious nation. ‘Through the Wall’ shows friendly relations between an Indian and a Chinese family, but in Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s ‘On Christmas Day in the Morning’, it’s the opposite. A fracas breaks out in the story between a Chinese and a Eurasian family, living next to one another, because the boy from the Chinese family becomes friendly with the girl from the Eurasian family. The story is told through the eyes of a young girl who is left completely puzzled as the families start cursing and hollering at one another on a Christmas morning over a trivial incident involving adolescents. The narrative depicts the distrust and disunity between the races in the early stages of the country’s nationhood, which unfortunately has not healed because of the race-oriented political structure and certain privileging policies of the Government, although the establishment has been trying proactively to portray a more positive picture of the situation.

However, Lim’s ‘Another Country’ is an optimistic story which delineates the friendly relationship among three characters, a Malay woman and two Chinese individuals, in a hospital in Kuala Lumpur, where they have been admitted with illness. The Malay character’s friendly attitude towards the two Chinese figures, in spite of her own mortal illness, is an expression of the writer’s hope that cross-cultural equanimity and harmony is possible in the country if the present hierarchical binary were effectively dismantled and people were allowed to live in mutual trust and in a human bond of ‘spontaneous fellowship’, without having their racial or religious sentiments stoked for the selfish gains of certain groups with vested interests. In this sense, the story reads like a political allegory, similar to Lim’s Joss and Gold (2001) or Fernando’s Scorpion Orchid (1976) and Green is the Colour (1993).

The novels, as I mentioned earlier, also delineate the themes of poverty, gender discrimination and race relationships in the country, with a view to constructing a
dialogic, composite and synergic nation. I see the prevalence of these themes, in various degrees, in the novels of Fernando and Lim cited above as well as in K.S. Maniam’s *The Return* (1981) — four of the better known novels in the tradition.

*Scorpion Orchid* is the first English novel published in Malaysia. It is set in the Singapore of the 1950s and against the backdrop of the riots that engulfed the island during the period. The novel hinges on a group of four multiracial friends — Sabran, a Malay; Santinathan, an Indian; Guan Kheng, a Chinese; and Peter, an Eurasian — and shows how their relationship is affected by the volatile situation. Within this framework, the writer addresses all three themes, although the main focus of the novel lies with race relations and the ways of overcoming the present divides to create a holistic nation. Poverty and class discrimination are addressed in the impoverished *kampong* life of Sabran before he lands a scholarship to study in Singapore, as well as in the meagre life-style of Santinathan and his sister Neela, as against Guan Kheng and Peter who come from an affluent, urban background. The gender binary is addressed in Sally-Salmah’s abuse at the hands of her elderly, impotent husband and in her bodily violation by a rowdy crowd at the height of the riots. It is the riot itself and its consequences for the future of the island that preoccupies the writer throughout most of the novel. The narrative looks rather cynical at the outer level as lawlessness and violence keep spreading like a virus, but underneath the writer indicates how Singapore could forge a better future for itself by fostering tolerance and mutual respect between its races, and by adopting policies that would help to unify the nation, when the British forsake their ‘white man’s burden’ and Singapore becomes independent and self-reliant.

Fernando’s second novel, *Green is the Colour*, also addresses the issues of race relations and nation formation, but this time the focus changes to post-independent and post-colonial Malaysia. Set against the backdrop of the interracial riots of 13th May 1969, the novel examines what went wrong and how the mistakes could be amended to create a more inclusivist and dynamic nation. This novel does not address the issue of class hierarchy explicitly as it dramatises the relationships of a group of middle-class characters from different ethnic backgrounds during the volatile period: Siti Sara, a university lecturer and her Harvard educated husband, Omar; Gita, also a lecturer and her husband, English-educated lawyer Dahlan; Yung Ming and Panglima, both civil servants; and Sara’s father, a religious teacher. The gender binary and the plights of women are highlighted in the sexual abuse of Sara, by both Omar and Panglima, as well as in Gita’s ‘othering’ by her father who prevents her from marrying her first boyfriend so that she can look after the old man. It shows how women’s wishes and aspirations were regarded as insignificant compared to the whims of men during the period. Again, as in the previous novel, the main preoccupation of the writer is race relations in the country and the ways to build trust and forge bridges so that a more harmonious and wholesome society might be created out of its multi-ethnic and multi-cultural population. The author’s suggestions for this are manifold, but his strongest hopes are manifest
in the cross-cultural unions between Gita (Indian) and Dahlan (Malay), and Siti Sara (Malay) and Yun Ming (Chinese), both of which metaphorically signify the syncretist possibilities of a polyglot, plural society that is currently (in the novel’s present tense) experiencing racial and religious strife.

Unlike Fernando’s encyclopaedic narratives that accommodate characters from different ethnic groups, Maniam’s *The Return* is relatively ethnocentric and examines the circumstances of the diasporic Indian community in Malaysia. It traces the lives of three generations of an Indian family by centring on the life and career of its narrator-protagonist, Ravi, a dhobi’s son born into a low caste Hindu family, who by a stroke of luck and sheer personal will makes good with his life. Ravi’s own background brings to the fore the problems of class and caste hierarchy within the Indian community. Ravi and his people are poor, partly because of caste discrimination as people of the higher caste want to retain the privileging status quo and make sure that their hereditary control and superiority over the subalterns is not lost. The impoverished state of the low class/caste Indian community is recounted in the long passages describing the life at the long house, where Ravi was born and spent his childhood. Gender hierarchy is addressed through the three female characters: Periathai, Ravi’s strong-spirited grandmother and his first ancestor in Malaysia; his unnamed mother, whose world remains confined to her kitchen; and Karupi, his stepmother. Ravi’s father, Naina’s, total control over his two wives and his occasional physical brutality towards them exposes the insignificance and inferiority of women in the India community at the time. However, in spite of the novel’s focus on the Indians alone, it allegorically addresses the syncretist potential of Malaysia as a nation in the way Ravi acquires a new subjectivity and identity and comes to defy and demystify the caste hierarchy represented by Menon and the ‘yellow territory’ (a forbidden area for people of the lower caste). Moreover, Ravi gives up the exclusivist and regressive outlooks of his grandmother and father and adopts a mobile and deterritorialised life-style, which also metaphorically signals a fresh start for his people who are required to be more flexible, progressive and accommodating in order to contribute more actively to the self-refashioning of the newly emergent plural nation.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Joss and Gold* has certain affinities with Fernando’s *Green is the Colour* as the novel deals with the same defining moment of the nation’s history and has a similar encyclopaedic narrative scope, accommodating characters and experiences from diverse cultural groups. Set against the backdrop of the riots of 13th May 1969, it focuses on the interpersonal relationships among Li An, an English tutor at the University of Malaya, and her husband Henry; Li An’s friends Gina and Ellen, and her university acquaintances Abdullah and Samad; Chester, an American Peace Corps volunteer; his American wife, Meryl; and Chester’s daughter with Li An, Su Yin. Again, like *Green is the Colour*, the novel does not depict poverty as a theme per se as the characters are by and large from the middle class and are not challenged financially, but the novel shows considerable interest in dismantling gender and race classifications to construct
a just, balanced and encompassing nation. The subject of the subservience of women and the necessity of rediscovering their agency and subjectivity is depicted in Li An’s step-father’s despotic treatment of her mother; in Li An’s own experience of total disregard from Chester, after he impregnates her and their ‘love’ child is born; in Gina’s loss of identity from an unremitting fear of her domineering father; and in the way Su Yin is abused by her peers and teachers at school. Against these images of the sufferings and subordination of women, Li An and Meryl act as Lim’s examples of emancipated females as they learn to become independent and self-reliant, without the need to depend on a man emotionally, economically or psychologically.

In addition to the gender binary, the author also pays substantial attention to the issues of racial stratification and equanimity. She suggests that the best way for Malaysia to forge a united, creole nation is to shun exclusivity and racial rigidity and engage in a process of creative negotiations and transactions between the different cultures. This is manifest in Lim’s rejection of the monolithic view of nationalism expressed by Abdullah and Samad, who believe that ‘like [should] stay with like … Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences…. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water’ (58). As opposed to this view, her protagonist, Li An claims that Malaysia is all ‘mixed, rojak’ and within ‘a few more years [it will become] a totally new nation. No more Malay, Chinese, Indian, but all one people’ (44–45) — which is also the author’s view and her hope for the future of Malaysia, similar to the writers of the short stories and novels discussed above. In spite of their differences in genre and narrative style, what brings these writers together is their recurrent tendency to interrogate issues that are endemic to Malaysia as a new nation and indicate ways that will make the country more tolerant, energetic and progressive in future, honouring the rights of all its citizens and treating them with equality and dignity notwithstanding their class, sex or race.

**Conclusion**

Malaysian literature in English has encountered many challenges since its modest inception in colonial Singapore more than fifty years ago, but the most excruciating of these challenges has been its express marginalisation with the introduction of the Language Act of 1967 and the subsequent adoption of literature policies that made Malay literature the country’s National Literature. This dichotomous position of the Anglophone tradition has compromised its prospects of becoming a growing centre of English writing, and in spite of its early promise, which saw the arrival of a number of serious writers, it has not been able to keep pace with the literary activities in some of the other post-colonial centres. This is not to say that the writers have not shown resilience to their unpropitious environment or that their allegiance to the local culture has not been deep, abiding or affirmative enough. On the contrary, the thematic explorations of their work suggest that they have constantly framed their narratives in relation to the place
or to the country’s social and political history, and have tried to contribute to the process of nation formation in a positive and constructive way. In addition, they have attempted to indigenise their medium and their inherited literary forms to express their difference from the metropolis and apprehend Malaysia as a new ‘frontier’. As a result, their works provide an important and authentic source for images of the national and cultural identity of Malaysia.

Given this contribution, it is important that works in English be seen as part of Malaysian national literature and the exclusive claim of one strand of literature to the centre of national culture be no longer perceived as a premise for the formation of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’. Having a national language policy can be helpful for the creation of a unified nation; in that sense the significance of Bahasa Malaysia should not be underestimated, but the language policy should not translate into a literature policy and the medium should not be the sole criterion for the definition of national literature. On the contrary, emphasis should be on the meaning and message of the writing as well. As long as a literary work participates in, in Soyinka’s phrase, the ‘process of self-apprehension’ (xi), and contributes to the formation and progression of nationhood and national identity, it should be seen as part of the self-constituting entity of national literature. Only when Malaysia adopts this inclusivist model of national literature, in which works and writers in all its languages can find an equal sense of belonging to the culture and engage in a fair competition with one another, without artificial barriers and privileging policies standing in their way, imaginative activities in the country will acquire a new impetus and new dynamism, transforming the current fissure in the literary scene into one holistic national enterprise, forming and reflecting its entire culture. In such an altered environment, literature in English will also regain its momentum and be able to compete with other post-colonial literary centres in a revived, robust and zestful spirit, realising the promise it showed with its first and second generation writers and building on it steadily, turning thereby its present sorrows and challenges into triumphs and glories in future.

NOTES

1 ‘Malaysian Literature in English: An Evolving Tradition’.
2 For a fuller discussion of the novel see ‘A Malaysian Existentialist Story: Lee Kok Liang’s London Does Not Belong to Me’.
3 For example, when asked how he felt about writing in English in the wake of the country’s language policy, Kee Thuan Chye replied, ‘I felt marginalised. I felt writing in English didn’t count for anything because there was a literature policy that recognised only literature written in Malay as National Literature. This was demeaning’ (135).
4 ‘Malaysian Literature in English: Challenges and Prospects in the New Millennium’.
5 Killingley’s ‘A Question of Dowry’ is available in Twenty-Two Malaysian Short Stories (ed. Lloyd Fernando). Anthony’s ‘Nannan’, Kaur’s ‘Pasang’ and ‘Through the Wall’, and Lim’s ‘Journey’ and ‘On Christmas Day in the Morning’, are available in Malaysian Short Stories (ed. Lloyd Fernando). The rest of Lim’s stories are available in her Two Dreams.
Fuller discussion of these novels as well as K.S. Maniam’s *The Return* can be found in my other essays: ‘Imagining “Bangsa Malaysia”: Race, Religion and Gender in Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*’; ‘Traversing Borders, Negotiating Identity: Portrayal of the Malaysian-Indian Diaspora in K.S. Maniam’s *The Return*’, ‘Nation, Gender, Identity: Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Joss and Gold*’; “My Country”/“Our Country”: Race Dynamics and Contesting Nationalisms in Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour* and Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s *Joss and Gold*; and ‘Self-Refashioning a Plural Society: Dialogism and Syncretism in Malaysian Postcolonial Literature’. See also Bernard Wilson’s ‘Legacy of colonialism: Issues of Identity in Lloyd Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*’, M.Y. Chiu’s, ‘Imagining a Nation: Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* and National Identity’, and Philip Holden’s, ‘Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global’.

WORKS CITED


——— 2007, “‘My Country’/“Our Country”’: Race Dynamics and Contesting


Syd Harrex

A VASE OF WILD DAFFODILS

Something far more deeply interfused
Wordsworth

You picked them a month ago and
despite the skittish tortoise-shell cat
vibrating with intimations of Spring
they had not been havocked yet, nor knocked
off their tea-tray table on wheels.
But let’s face it, they are looking
wrinkled, they are whiskering
a sort of rot on the white
lace periphery of egg-yolk visages,
just as I imagine Dorothy
and William were prone to, towards
the close, blinking at elegiac sunset
light while echoes of a sense sublime
shiver like rain along the hills,
and heartbeats droop to rest in the dales,
and next season’s daffodils slyly
prepare to bloom out of this year’s slime.

From *Chempaka*, the Muslim Tree of Death,¹ to Scarf-Wrapped Banana Plants: Postcolonial Representations of Gardening Images in Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory*

Bougainvillea; Casuarina; Banyan; Camphor; Jacaranda; Rubber Tree. At first glance, these trees and plants may appear native to southeast Asia, given the Malaysian² setting for Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* but, as Peter, the English octogenarian narrator, argues in a heated discussion with several Malaysians, these plants are just as foreign as he is. For example, Peter explains, ‘Hevea brasiliensis, the rubber tree, came from Brazil via Kew … Oil palm from Africa, Bougainvillea … Does it sound like a Malay name to you? Brought here from Brazil by Louis Antoine de Bougainville’ (321–22). The reader should note the irony in the fact that a transplanted Englishman — via an author himself who has wandered from Taiwan to Malaysia to England — points out this rootlessness. If these plants really are not from Malaysia, then what heritage and roots can the Malaysian,³ who has long lived under the yoke of colonialism, claim?

On the surface, Aw’s plot circles around a detective theme in which the reader examines the motives of individual characters in a darkening pre-World War Two atmosphere: each of the three narrators tells of events related to the war and love trysts from their own limited perspective; Jasper, the first narrator, voices his opinion of the actions of his father, Johnny, including the murder of a British colonial figure which unleashes a chain of events leading to Jasper’s birth; the second narrator, Snow, who exudes only innocence, apparently sleeps with one or more men, leaving the reader wondering about the identity of Jasper’s father; the third storyteller, Peter, later reveals surprising details about Johnny’s murderous tendencies and the love trysts. However, at closer glance *The Harmony Silk Factory* reveals, chiefly through gardening references, the complex and shifting heritage to which an individual may belong in a (post)colonial society. Aw’s theme of transplantation in *The Harmony Silk Factory* underscores the impact of (post)imperialism on southeast Asia.

Despite the narrative’s strong gardening motif, many of its critics overlook this theme and focus instead on the detective context, the structure, and the influences of other colonial writers of the twentieth century on Aw’s novel. Since the reader
faces the age-old question, ‘Who was my father?’, early on in the narrative through Jasper’s account, many of Aw’s critics focus on this mystery in the text. One reviewer, Neel Mukherjee, writes of Johnny Lim, ‘Who exactly is he? A fearless communist guerrilla who works with the grassroots to defeat the Japanese or a dirty collaborator? A self-made business wizard or a scheming manipulator? A doting husband to Snow … or a womanizing, corrupt, loose-living villain?’ (online). Another reviewer, Alfred Hickling, notes that Aw devotes a majority of the novel ‘devising a complex, contradictory case for the rehabilitation of Johnny Lim’ (online). Paying close attention to how gardening images surround particular characters will allow readers and critics to gain a deeper insight into each character and into the work as a whole.

Perhaps since Aw’s piece was listed for the Man Booker Prize, most of his critics target the rocky structure of the work. For example, Susan Coll writes that Aw’s ‘narrative might have benefited from some changes in exposition to bring the story into sharper focus …’ (10). Reviewer Donald Morrison notes that Aw’s work ‘doesn’t strain to be The Great Malaysian Novel’ (online), and Kirkus Reviews declares The Harmony Silk Factory a ‘sluggish, awkward account …’ (online). With the exception of an anonymous reviewer for The Straits Times (online),5 Paul Lloyd (online),6 Alan Cheuse, Anita Sethi and Fong Leong Ming, who highlight passages on gardening briefly, none of Aw’s critics scrutinise the gardening thread and its ties to (post)colonialism.

Despite their failure to notice the gardening references, most of Aw’s critics — far too many to name here — do discuss the odd parallels the book has with other British colonialist writers, including Somerset Maugham, Anthony Burgess and Joseph Conrad. For example, Hickling describes one section in which the characters slam around the sea as a ‘feverishly Conradian segment’ (Hickling online). Reviewer Anna Godbersen recognises that the jacket copy presents Tash Aw’s novel as … a counterpoint to the colonial literature of Conrad and Maugham’.7 Again, with attention to the gardening theme, readers and critics might obtain a more penetrating understanding of how Aw’s references to quintessentially imperial figures such as Maugham tie into the views he wishes to present about (post)colonialism.

Due to the lack of critical discussion to date, and due to the importance of the gardening themes in this work, I will explore how The Harmony Silk Factory becomes a test of what qualities the (post)colonial survivor must possess — as demonstrated through gardening images — in order to endure the aftermath of colonialism and postcolonialism. This theme is a very significant one in (post)colonial literature. Peter’s rant about so-called indigenous plants, as mentioned in the opening of this essay, boldly unearths the complex relation between botanical discussions and (post)colonialism in contemporary literature as a whole. For example, Jamaica Kincaid, author of A Small Place, expresses resentment at her colonial upbringing in Antigua. Kincaid slowly learns that ‘The botany she had
studied [as a child in Antigua] had been a catalogue of the plants of the British Empire, from which she had learned that the plants that she and other Antiguans had assumed to be native to their landscape — the mango breadfruit, among them — had been brought to the island by empire-bound botanists’ (Paravisini-Gebert 40). If Kincaid cannot claim breadfruit as a part of her Antiguan heritage, then what can she claim? Li-Young Lee, a U.S. American poet with southeast Asian roots, also ponders the transplanted state of being in The Winged Seed: using a convoluted narrative technique, Lee explores the various states in which a seed — morning glory in particular — is transported, whether in his father’s pocket, in the beak of a wren or through the caverns of his imagination. Lee uses the seed to represent the reproduction of the transplanted self through sex scenes and descriptions of the morning glory, but this quest to reproduce is hindered by perplexing questions of identity which often lead to fissured representations of the migrant.8

The uprooted and transplanted self is a trope in migrant and (post)colonial literature, although this troubled self is not solely represented by gardening images. For example, in the autobiographical work, Of Water and the Spirit, Malidoma Patrice Somé, a migrant from Ghana to France to California, discovers that he tends to eat his way through French grocery stores (6) as an impulsive means to resist his neocolonial mistreatment, and yet he struggles ‘to be a man of two worlds, trying to be at home in both of them’ (3). Le Ly Hayslip, Vietnamese-American author of When Heaven and Earth Changed Places and Child of War, Woman of Peace, stares at herself, ‘the curious woman in the hotel mirror — half Vietnamese, half American, and entirely bewildered …’ (167). In Lee’s case, he and his family moved disruptively from Jakarta to Hong Kong to Japan to Pennsylvania to Chicago. Kincaid’s mother also possesses a complex migration history, as she came from Dominica to Antigua, but she does not call herself a native of Antigua or Dominica since she is the descendant of slaves and colonists.9 Although their roots trace back to places as diverse as Africa and Vietnam, these migrants are united in their myriad expressions of confusion, resolution and determination as they grapple with their often forcibly transplanted lifestyles.

However, Peter, of Tash Aw’s The Harmony Silk Factory, emerges a bit differently from these narrators, as he represents the fictionalised coloniser, not the colonised. In the other narratives, the uprooted migrant recognises his or her inability to prevent transplantation due to slavery, war or colonisation, thereby seeking to grow authoritative new roots, chiefly through the power of narration. Of the above narrators, Hayslip is perhaps the only one who consciously or willingly migrates. Even then, the fall of Saigon put tremendous pressure on her decision. The other narrators, as descendents of slaves or exiles, did not have much choice. Their works also tend to be chiefly autobiographically based. However, Aw, a London resident who was born in Taipei and raised in Malaysia, steps away from this autobiographical pattern10 and endeavours to interweave...
the narrative voices and lives of the colonised and the coloniser together in three sections narrated by Peter, Snow, a straits-born Chinese, and Jasper, a bastard of Chinese and English descent. A manipulative narrator, Jasper twists his narrative into an invidious perspective for the reader, and Snow, his mother who naively accepts the changes colonialism brings, is destroyed by the fruit of the aftermath; but Peter, even as an elderly man, holds the reins of authority. He alone reveals the likely parentage of Jasper, and he cuckolds (and effectively silences) Johnny Lim, the Malay around whom the three narratives revolve. Even in a post-war, postcolonial society, Peter does not become a vanquished colonist, a fate that many Britons and Japanese endured in Malaya/Malaysia around the time of the Second World War. For example, Peter ends his tirade on the so-called native plants of Malaysia with a snort: ‘things thought of as native aren’t always what they seem, and … they shouldn’t be constrained by ideas of what belongs where. Some might say, for example, that since this is where I have lived for almost three-quarters of my life, I may be considered native’ (323 emphasis original). Peter pays no mind to the furore that results from this statement, and at this point in the story the reader wonders what characteristics allow the uprooted individual — or plant — to withstand the weather-beating of time and colonialism.

With his cape and Don Giovanni serenades in which he sings Zerlina’s part, Peter seems effeminate at best, and the cuckolded Johnny has the audacity to kill his father-in-law, a British foreman and others who hinder his climb to pecuniary success. The (post)colonial survivor, in Aw’s perspective, is not someone who plays a clear-cut role as a ‘victor’ or ‘the vanquished,’ as Kincaid calls it. In one case, Kincaid notes that the colonist can become a victim, falling into decline as he passes his prime. Using this model of the declining authority of the colonist, Peter should be the colonist-become-victim, the generation that fails to maintain its authority.

However, over eighty years old and a relic of the world war that ousted many of the English imperialists from southeast Asia, Peter has lodged his roots in the Malay soil and yet he demonstrates a flexible ability to adapt. In other words, a plant that wishes to survive in any conditions must adjust. Peter, too, survives the Second World War, three years of imprisonment in Changi (Aw 315) and the waves of colonialism by bending with the wind just enough to prevent its breaking his nature. He does not resemble a stiff British foreman who forces the natives to buckle under his will. In fact, Aw underscores the difference between Peter and Frederic Honey, the representative colonist who resides in Malaya. As one reviewer, Luke Beesley notes, ‘we see two halves of the British occupation in [Peter] and Honey’ (online). For example, in one scene, Honey apologises for Peter’s ‘un-Englishman’ conduct (Aw 144). However, Honey, who calls Malaya a ‘Bloody tinpot country’ gets a chiding from Peter, who says, ‘I shouldn’t complain…. We created it, after all’ (Aw 167). Aw further underscores how an inexorable will toward colonialism will push the coloniser toward eventual defeat.
through a reference to a transplanted rose bush. Peter sees a garden with a Buddha in it that belongs to an Englishman: ‘I glimpsed his garden, planted with a single rose bush. It bore no flowers, its branches were spindly, its leaves sparse. It had not taken to the hot winds of the seaside; I knew it would never survive this climate’ (Aw 305). Like Honey, this Englishman and his bush do not fit in. Peter learns this need to ‘not resist’ with his sharp observations of the country around him.

Peter’s ability to adapt is most clearly represented by his last name, Wormwood. This may seem like an odious name that Aw chooses to represent the pale, red-headed English coloniser, who may be read as a ‘parody of a Somerset Maugham character’ (Sinnett online) but Wormwood, unlike Honey or the other Britons who fled from Malaya after the Japanese invasion, does not exhibit inflexibility. It survives. It adapts. In his narrative, Peter explains,

*Artemisia absinthium*, commonly known as wormwood, is a hardy perennial with feathery silver-green leaves. It thrives in a variety of garden conditions, its fine foliage providing useful contrast to broader, darker leaves in mixed borders…. Even after the garden began its descent into dilapidation, the *Artemisia* remained vigorous, its pale green glowing amid the creeping, darkened tangle around it. (289–90)

So in a wild garden — or a war-zone — where other transplanted plants and people fall left and right, Wormwood remains.

Interestingly, the other lone survivor who remains at the novel’s end, Jasper, is perhaps not as hardy as wormwood, but Aw forces the reader to examine Jasper’s role closely. This leads me back to my earlier question: does Jasper possess the qualities that the (post)colonial survivor needs? The reader must first recognise that Jasper is not a plant, but a mottled stone. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines jasper as ‘an opaque cryptocrystalline variety of quartz, of various colours, usually red, yellow, or brown, due mostly to the admixture of iron oxide’ (online). A stone cannot grow, and this representation strongly deviates from the myriad gardening references that Aw incorporates throughout the novel. Physically, Jasper is a suitable name for someone who is a mixture of Chinese and English descent. A combination of Snow, the name given to Jasper’s mother who lives in an area where snow never falls, and Wormwood creates Jasper. Toward the end of the novel, Peter reflects, ‘Jasper. Clear as crystal, the foundation of a new Jerusalem’ (Aw 362). At first, this suggests that Jasper may represent the genuine survivor. However, a stone cannot grow in the sense that wormwood can, but it may be broken down over time by tree and plant roots. A stone is too inflexible. The opaqueness of jasper, the stone, also suggests that the future remains uncertain, unclear. Jasper, the stone, is anything but ‘clear as crystal’. Additionally, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes, a jasper is also a ‘rustic simpleton’ or a ‘fellow with contemptuous overtones’. These overt significances of Jasper’s name further indicate that Aw mocks Jasper’s resilience. Jasper himself is a murky, mottled combination. For example, he does not possess the same industriousness as Johnny Lim, and he seems rather consumed by the bitterness he feels toward
Lim and his own sheltered lifestyle. He becomes an icon of the ‘children of the dust,’ a common expression for Amerasian children, products of the Vietnam War who were shunned by both Americans and Vietnamese. Their hybrid status hinders integration or assimilation into the mainstream society.

Of course, Aw could also be using these images of stones and wormwood to demonstrate the futility of survival of the fittest. Perhaps none of his characters prove resilient enough to adapt to a new or shifting colonial climate. Aw reveals to Christopher Bantick, critic of The Harmony Silk Factory, in Naipual-esque fashion, ‘Every one of the characters feels like they do not belong. I felt this when I moved to England, and, in a way, even in Malaysia, as I was born in Taipei’ (A03). Furthermore, one of the refrains that echoes throughout the novel is Aw’s statement that ‘Death … erases all traces of the life that once existed, completely and forever’ (118). Peter clearly recognises the futility of continued existence namely through gardening. He is torn between wishing to pay respect to Malaysia by creating a garden, a repository of transplanted plants and trees that will thrive in Malaysia, and the knowledge that no one can ever recreate an enduring Eden or Paradise Lost. As the elderly Peter sets about his task of designing and developing his retirement community garden, he reflects,

[what spirit shall inspire this new Eden? The answer is obvious. Not the great gardens of England, but the ancient temple gardens of the Orient. Angkor, Sigiriya Yogyakarta. I read about them before setting out on the journey East, gorging myself on descriptions of these fantastic monuments now reduced to jungle-shrouded ruins. (241)

And he recognises that the austere French and British gardens will not survive in the Malaysian jungle-monsoon climate:

One shudders at the thought of the harshness to be found in the great French gardens — in Versailles, for example … where rows of trees are lined up like soldiers on parade. In spite of what the French would have us believe, I have always thought their gardens display a certain poverty of imagination, a failure of the romantic impulse. (245–46)

He insists that his retirement community garden in Malaysia will not be like the gardens of the French:

If anything, this will be a Wild Garden, a creation of seemingly casual beauty, whose charms are quiet, understated. Some of the borders are large and deep, others long and shallow; some are planted with tall shrubs, others with ground cover, many with a mixture of both. (246)

During these reflections, Peter seems to play the role of the imperialist who wishes to tailor the colonised land to his or her own taste, but as Aw slowly reveals, Peter simultaneously and self-consciously recognises the inevitability and futility of this accomplishment. Although Peter boldly states in one passage, ‘[t]he creation of paradise is not something I take lightly’ (246), death does ‘erase all traces of life …’ for the individual. If someone attempts to clear jungle land for a garden, it is a constant battle. In a world of big cities like Singapore and Kuala
Lumpur, the colonisation of nature and people seems to be a finished battle, but
one might remember Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’ — the great ruler’s
‘shattered visage’ and ‘trunkless legs’ are strewn about the far-reaching ‘lone and
level sands’. One might also think of Agnes Newton Keith’s writings in which the
Malaysian jungle, characterised by the rampant growth of illipi nuts and tampoi, is
represented as an indomitable force: ‘Light rains continue and every leaf quivers
with a leech looping madly with ambition to attach himself to a passer-by… As
the rain grows heavier, so do our feet, the jungle damp creeps like a chill in the
bones’ (213–14). In a like vein, any clearing that Peter creates will ultimately
be destroyed by the persistent jungle. His self-consciousness at this likelihood
emerges as he continues to plan his retirement community garden. He states,

[In creating a garden, we acquire, by force, a patch of land from the jungle; we mould
it so that it becomes an oasis amid the wilderness. It is an endless struggle. Turn our
backs for a moment and the darkness of the forest begins its insidious invasion of our
tiny haven. The plants that we insert — artificially, it must be noted, for no garden is
a work of Mother Nature — must not only provide shelter for the soul, they must be
able to absorb and then disperse the creeping darkness of the jungle around us. The
decorations do not merely adorn, they protect. They create a place where, at the end of
our lives, we may find peace. (256–57)

This passage demonstrates what Peter sees as a paradox: no-one can recreate
Eden, a natural work, and yet people continually strive to do so. For example,
in an earlier scene, a young Peter enthusiastically clears away jungle bramble
to make a place to celebrate his birthday. He gathers flowers and calls it ‘my
little garden’ (221). For this birthday celebration, he also tries to bake bread and
serve wine, and he fails miserably (222). Wine cannot be conserved or drunk
well in a monsoon land, as the equatorial sun will parch the imbiber, resulting
in a severe hangover. Bread cannot be baked easily in a humid land that is better
able to sustain soy and rice than wheat. Interestingly, Aw, like Peter, becomes a
transplanter. Finding himself an expatriate from Malaysia to England, Aw wraps
his banana tree ‘in scarfs [sic] for London’s marrow chilling winter’ (Lloyd
online). This scene is reminiscent of the rose bush scene; a banana plant will look
as forlorn and withered on an English balcony as an English rose bush near the
Malaysian sea.

However, unlike Honey and other British predecessors, Peter consciously
recognises this futility, and is able to adapt and survive for several decades in
Malaya/Malaysia, as a hardy wormwood plant. He notes upon his return the next
day to the birthday garden that he has just created,

I had brought down saplings with a machete, slashed away the shrubby undergrowth
and broken off the lower branches … but now it seemed that love’s labour was
lost. The clearing no longer seemed as clean and virginal as it had when I left it:
its boundaries were obscure, encroached by plants that seemed to have crept into its
confines overnight. Outlines of dead logs I hauled away remained impressed on the
damp earth, scarring the ground with their funereal shapes. Broken branches littered
Lim joins the young Peter in his quick efforts to ready the garden for his celebration, but Peter already is adapting: ‘Johnny and I spent many hours clearing the chosen site of debris…. We talked about the kinds of food the jungle could offer us — some root vegetables, possibly an edible flower or two, fish from the sea in abundance’ (339). Peter’s collaboration with a Malay native and his reflection on using available resources, and not just his English-imported foods (bread and wine), shows that he is able to work with the bumiputra and land to ensure his survival.

Although Peter ultimately betrays Lim, his behaviour in this passage and elsewhere throughout the book demonstrates his willingness to use native elements to make them harder — and not to squash them under his thumb. In many instances, Aw provides a clear glimpse into the importance of culling the best of many products from many cultures to create a better climate for the postcolonial survivor. He does this most obviously through Peter’s use of some Malay terms. Tongue in cheek, Peter swears that he has never picked up any language: ‘after sixty years of living here, the process of linguistic osmosis hasn’t worked … I have remained wonderfully impervious to Malay and Chinese …’ (236). Yet in the same breath, he adds, ‘my English … has been leached out of me’ (236), and in another passage he repeats, hujan, the Malay word for rain (358). Peter is subject to ‘linguistic osmosis’, despite his claim to the contrary.

Perhaps the most powerful description in which Aw demonstrates how a combination of old and new cultures will ensure survival of the postcolonial individual and society, emerges through a seduction scene that reveals itself somewhat like a Shakespearean play-within-a-play with overtones of shadow puppetry, a popular Malay pastime. These storytelling techniques are, again, mixed in with myriad allusions to gardening. Peter remarks, as he unfolds a twist on an earlier scene, ‘the first player stroll[s] on to the stage, skirting the ramparts of the gorgeous painted set’. He then mentions star-crossed lovers (351), like Romeo and Juliet, and by the end of the scene in which Peter apparently seduces Snow, ‘the ruin has faded into the distance and we find ourselves in a clearing in the forest, a strange garden of restrained beauty, adorned by a single frangipani tree’ (353). Since Snow notes this tree in her earlier narrative, too, by odour, the reader begins to recognise the indication that a rape-seduction may have taken place, and then Peter concludes, ‘

Only the two true lovers remain. They sink to the ground in desperate embrace. He kisses her brow. Only now do they both realise that they have found someone who cares for them. It is the only moment of truth they will ever experience in their whole lives. The spotlight expires and the lovers dissolve into the deep dark night. (353)

This reference to lovers in shadows — as in shadow puppetry — demonstrates that readers may not have a three-dimensional insight into what transpired.
Since the reader only hears about the rape-seduction from Peter, and not from Snow, who abruptly lowers the curtain on reference to the scent of the frangipani tree, or *chempaka*, the Muslim tree of death (314), the reader is left wondering whether the sex was consensual — perhaps to Peter it was, if it occurred — or non-consensual, for how can sex between a white male coloniser, if one may call Peter such, and a colonised subject female ever be anything but rape? Regardless, Peter closes his play-scene with these words:

I watched her bathe in the cold dawn stream… I sat naked on the grassy bank, my wet skin pricking in the dewy air…. Even then I knew, of course, that we would never be together again…. Only we would know what had passed between us. I wanted to believe that this secret acorn would flourish in its hiding place and one day grow into a stately invisible oak; but even as we walked back through the lightening dawn I knew it would not happen. Our secret was always destined to fester, growing more unhappy with each passing day, for such is the bitterness of Wormwood: it poisons everything.

These words could signify that Peter’s seed did not take (and that someone else’s did — that of Honey, perhaps, or the Japanese officer, Mamoru Kunichika, with whom Snow flirted) or that his seed did take, but was not the oak he wanted, but the bitter wormwood (or Jasper).

Additionally, Aw’s numerous implications regarding Peter’s effeminacy may cause the reader to question the reliability of his account. For example, in one scene, Peter recalls his jealousy at seeing Snow and Kunichika swimming together, a scene Snow also possibly censors. Peter reflects,

The bitter seed had been sown inside me. I tasted it at the back of my mouth and felt its dark, dirty tentacles creeping slowly inside my body, probing for where I was weakest…. My dreams [that night] were filled with a single repeating image, that of Kunichika violently ravishing Snow…. They pointed at my limp penis … I tried furiously to resurrect it, pumping it with both fists. (293–94)

As a result, the reader may wonder if Jasper is actually Kunichika’s child — or Honey’s. Aw’s ambiguous references to Jasper’s ‘pale and unblemished skin’ (18), do not provide a clear answer, as he also describes Kunichika’s skin as ‘white’ (309) several times. A reader might conclude that Snow has had sex with all three men — Honey, Peter and Kunichika — but I stand by my argument that Peter remains the sole penetrator. The reader cannot take too seriously Aw’s insistence that Peter is just an effeminate ‘parody of a Somerset Maugham character’, for Peter’s role is far more capricious than that of a mocked colonial figure. Aw acknowledges that he himself is the ‘flipside of his character Wormwood’ (McMillan online), and yet his essence cannot be extracted from Wormwood’s, as Aw, too, is an outsider who crosses boundaries.

If Aw really wanted to shake the colonial roots in his novel, he would have let Lim speak. As Alice Jones, a reviewer of *The Harmony Silk Factory*, states, ‘it’s an interesting feature to have a book centred around a person who is only ever looked at through the eyes of others’ (2005b online). This work cannot shake its
Maugham, Conrad and Burgess influences if its colonised native, Lim, cannot use his own voice to express his views. In an interview, Aw even confesses, ‘I wanted the narrators to talk about Johnny more than they finally did. I realised that even when they talked about him, they were actually revealing more about themselves’ (Nayar online). Lim becomes subject to voyeurism; despite his pecuniary success, he remains a voiceless, cuckolded native. The reader should also note that Lim, who has a knack for repairing machines, expresses virtually no interest in gardening. Aw’s myriad evocations of survival of the fittest in a (post) colonial climate, discussed throughout this essay, support my conclusion. In other words, like Honey, Lim’s inexorable will breaks him. Lim represents the wild Malaya: the more the British (or Japanese) try to box Lim and his country into a neat, English garden, the more the jungle and Malaya/Malaysia will resist until death. For example, in one passage Peter and Lim (a staunch communist) discuss survival in an impending war zone:

If I choose correctly, if I help the Japanese, I will have everything I desire. They will protect me. I will be richer than TK Soong [Snow’s father], richer than anyone else in the valley, more powerful. But if not, then I lose everything I have. My shop, certainly, but also my wife. (334)

Peter replies, ‘Principles are one thing, survival is another’ (334). The reader is never entirely certain, however, if Johnny ever allies with Kunichika. Snow’s sudden death and Lim’s obituary suggest otherwise: ‘it is believed Kunichika attempted to coerce [Lim] to aid the Japanese military efforts…. Rumours of Mr Lim’s collaboration with the Kempeitai [the Japanese secret police headed by Kunichika] were rife but never substantiated’ (338). Jasper’s repeated lamentations on his father’s inflexibility further reveals that Lim emotionally died when Snow died, thereby underscoring his inflexibility. He only existed as a pecuniary machine until his physical death in his seventies.

As a result, Peter alone shows a growing ability to work with Malaya/Malaysia’s soil and people to create a garden or a land that respects the old by making it stronger and mixing it with new elements. For example, in regard to his retirement community garden on which he reflects many years after his birthday garden, Peter notes,

My garden … will travel to China and Japan and other temperate Eastern climes, proudly displaying cloud-pruned Japanese holly, Chinese peonies, pink cherry blossom, bitter orange, tiny gnarled bonsai. Thus I will emulate not only Victorian gardeners but Oriental emperors too, the very ones who created the gardens that first inspired this endeavour. Like the Emperor Chenghua, I will create a microcosm of all that is beautiful here. (267)

For, as he argues in the passage I used in the opening of this essay, ‘things thought of as native aren’t always what they seem, and … they shouldn’t be constrained by ideas of what belongs where’ (323). By making a hybrid garden, Peter ensures the survival of transplanted plants — and people.
Aw himself does not believe in shoving people into categories of ‘what belongs where’ which is why Peter insists he can crisscross social and other boundaries despite his impishly pink skin. Aw spent his formative years in Malaysia, but he has lived in England for fifteen years (Newman 5). As a result, he, too, crosses boundaries, sometimes as an insider, other times as an interloper. His London flat is Victorian-style, all done by his own hand (Newman 5). Born in Taiwan, can he consider himself as Malaysian, as a successful writer in which literature is not highly regarded in a science and engineering-driven society? (Newman 5).\(^22\) Aw is a case in point where the aspect of colonialism merges with the next generation so synthetically that it really can no longer be called colonial. Aw explains, ‘I’m not self-conscious of writing to a Western audience, but I am conscious just in general about writing a novel that crosses lots of boundaries…. The world we live in now is so exposed to different cultural sources it’s probably less of a problem than we think it is, and we do Hoover up influences from all over the place’ (Newman 5).

Another Malaysian interloper-writer, Lloyd Fernando, born in Sri Lanka, also speaks at length in his scholarly writing of this appropriation of cultures and languages, which thereby renders the term, colonial, obsolete. His words echo Aw’s attitude toward ‘Hoovering up’ myriad influences. As Fernando’s wife, Marie, explains, the use of English in Malaysia is no longer colonial. You can’t call it colonial anymore. It’s been taken over by all the different countries in which English was left as a legacy. You have Indian English, and West Indian English, U.S. English and all the other varieties of English. So, it no longer just belongs to England…. A language does not just consist of words. It has a whole history and culture behind it. A whole history of ideas. And you can’t just clean that out. And the best way to master English and the globalization that is taking place, is not to reject English or to use it merely as a utilitarian tool, but to understand its cultural roots and its creativity best experienced in its literature…. But a great debate is still going on about the cultural legacy left by the English on the native peoples. How do you handle it? How is it justified? Do you just remain resentful and reject it? Or do you try to make it your own just as much as your own native language? (9)

Peter, and others like Aw, consciously play this game via gardening; they incorporate the language, the cultural habits, and the plants, trying combinations of old and new to create a stronger synthesis. Can a new type of banana plant emerge in London? Can the origins of the banana plant really be relegated to a southern clime, when non-human transplanters, such as birds, also play the gardening game? In one passage, Peter says,

\[I\text{ don’t suppose anyone will ever know the mysteries of migration. I have always loved the idea of being a migrating bird, a hawk or some other raptor, riding the warm thermals across the vastness of continents, all of Asia under my wings\.\ldots\text{ There would be no plan for my journey, no map, no coordinates. And yet I would find my way, guided by forces too powerful and ancient for me to discern; I would simply follow my destiny. (295–96)\]  

The bird, long a carrier of seed, confounds the ‘mysteries of migration’ (295), demonstrating that the human-coloniser is not the only one who grapples
with transplantation. Peter may consciously plant lily-of-the-valley, which may ‘become naturalised’ in Malaysia and eventually ‘exported back to England’ (267) as may his feathered friends, a practice which forcefully undermines the ability of the (post)coloniser to uphold his or her role as the unvanquished Ozymandias of southeast Asia.

NOTES

1 Chempaka is the Malay word for frangipani (*The Harmony Silk Factory* 314).

2 In this essay I have been careful to distinguish between Malaya and Malaysia. After the Second World War, Malaya became Malaysia, so references to ‘Malaya’ indicate the pre-wartime period.

3 A Malay is someone who is considered to be a Malay, and therefore a Muslim, by birthright. A Malaysian is not necessarily someone who is a Muslim Malay; a Malaysian can be someone who is of Chinese or Indian descent who lives in Malaysia.

4 ‘Aw, Tash: *The Harmony Silk Factory*. (Book Review’), *Kirkus Reviews* 73.1. See also the review from *Publisher’s Weekly*, in which the reviewer states, ‘Aw’s prose, though often witty and taut, is not equally convincing in all its guises’ (*The Harmony Silk Factory*. [Book Review’]. *Publishers Weekly* 252.7 [Feb 14, 2005]: 52.

Hickling notes, ‘unreliable narration is a tired old trope now, and the reader is left to make up his or her own mind whether the obfuscation and contradictions inherent in this [work] are a product of the book’s maddening inconsistency, or its mysterious appeal’ (online). Hickling, who compares the narrative to a ‘bolt of raw silk’ (online) perhaps provides the most incisive review of Aw’s narrative strengths and weaknesses. See also Godbersen’s comment on ‘plodding’ sections in her last paragraph of her review, *The Harmony Silk Factory* by Tash Aw: Love in the Time of Communism and Colonialism*. The negative reviews, particularly in regard to the fact that one or more of the narrators has a weaker voice or that Aw’s narrative style proves inconsistent, are too numerous to cite fully here.

However, I do not mean to imply that none of the reviews were positive. Other reviewers praised Aw’s stitching together of narratives. For example, Tom Adair writes, ‘Aw sings it like a chorus, in perfect pitch, in a book to be prized’ (online). Fong Leong Ming presents the most astute criticism of Aw’s work: ‘many other questions litter the novel, requiring an able hand to weave all these threads into a fine tapestry in the end. Which Aw does of course but I suspect, like his intentions to elicit different responses to different perspectives, not all will feel the same sense of fulfilment or satisfaction on putting down the book after the last paragraph is read’ (online). In the real world, loose ends are not always tied up neatly in a package, and so I find Aw’s boldness in leaving loose ends refreshing, and not troublesome. See also Lucy Clark and Anita Sethi’s discussions of ‘loose ends’ at the end of their reviews.

5 This reviewer says, ‘horticultural metaphors aren’t for the faint of heart in the literary world … look who’s done it in the past: Shakespeare compared a woman’s lust to rampant weeds and Gabriel Garcia Marquez [sic] created a magical South American world lush with sentient foliage … Tash Aw, however, tends toward the well-kept garden as trope in his debut novel, *The Harmony Silk Factory’* (‘Hot off the Presses’, *The Straits Times* 4 September 2005).

6 Lloyd notes: ‘In the tiny yard of a basement flat in London, a banana tree grows. Its gardener, Tash Aw, wraps it in scarfs [sic] for London’s marrow chilling winter’
Cheuse, too, recognises the Conrad and Burgess link (2005), and Maggie Gee mentions one Conradian scene briefly. See also Carolyn T. Hughes’ review, in which she references Conrad, Burgess and Maugham; she notes that Aw wishes to ‘offer a non-Western viewpoint’, although sections of the novel quote heavily from these three writers, not to mention British writers such as William Shakespeare and Percy Shelley (online).

The myriad references to British literature likely stem from Aw’s years in England, although Malaysians fell subject to British educational policies, even after the Second World War, and encouraged subjects to read and be tested like British students. Shirley Geok-lin Lim discusses this trait at length in Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands. See her remarks about the ‘British style exam[s]’, which remained in place until the 1969 race riots and her discussion that ‘Mother Superior [at school] was always white’ (186; 69). In Aw’s own narrative, Johnny Lim reads Shelley to better educate himself; Aw, who confesses that Peter’s narrative ‘draws from lots of western sources’ (Newman online), refers to Dickens’ phrase, ‘the best of times’; descriptions of the climatic moment on Seven Maidens islands when the war begins and when Snow is seduced or raped resemble Conrad’s narratives; Aw mentions chickens when a death occurs in a William Carlos Williams-like moment; and his closing words, ‘Consummatum est’, echo Dr. Faustus (244; 307; 13; 200–205; 21; 362). The literary references, while intriguing, are too numerous to discuss in this essay.

See my essay, ‘Collecting Seeds of Destiny in Li-Young Lee’s The Winged Seed: A Remembrance’.

In My Brother Kincaid outlines the ancestry of her mother, Annie Richardson Drew. Richardson Drew’s ‘mother [was] a Carib Indian of Dominica … her father, part Scot, part African, of Antigua …’ (72). For more information on recent migrant narratives (chiefly to the United States), see my work, Transcultural Women of Late Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas.

Aw insists that The Harmony Silk Factory is not autobiographical: ‘The book is not based on any experience directly related to my family … [S]tories of the entry of the Japanese in 1940 are imprinted on me. Everyone knows someone who had a terrible experience in the war. When you are a child the stories stay with you’ (Bantick A03).

The straits-born Chinese hold a high status in Malaysia, although they are not ‘natives’ so to speak, as their ancestors are from China and not from island or peninsular Malaysia. In her autobiography, Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian-American Memoir of Homelands, Shirley Geok-lin Lim explains that being a ‘nonya, a Malayan-native Chinese woman’ and a baba, a male of the same status, was ‘a position that conferred enviable status in a society of immigrants, transients, and undocumented labourers from China, India, and the Indonesian islands. In the late 1930s, there were almost two million Chinese living in the different political territories of the Malayan peninsula, and only a minority of them were Straits-born, a term I was to hear pronounced with pride all through my growing years’ (12; 35–36).

I do not mean to imply that Kincaid does not recognise the slippery slope between the coloniser and the colonised. However, she carefully considers the roles of the victor and the vanquished; in Lucy she asks, ‘How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?’ (40–41).

Kincaid’s narrator says, ‘It was at such a moment in my husband’s life that I met him, the moment when defeat, his own, that of the people he came from, was secure’ (1997a 217). She also says, ‘I am of the vanquished, I am of the defeated. The past is a fixed
point, the future is open-ended; for me the future must remain capable of casting a light on the past such that in my defeat lies the seed of my great victory, in my defeat lies the beginning of my great revenge’ (1997a 215–16).

14 Another reviewer, Carlo Wolff, calls Honey ‘an unlucky colonial opportunist’ (online.)

15 ‘jasper, n.’. This definition also says, ‘1952 GRANVILLE Dict. Theatr. Terms 103 Jasper, the traditional name for the villain of the piece in melodrama’.

16 For example, see Christopher Olgiati’s documentary, Vietnam: Children of the Dust.

17 See also Aw, 4; 149 (in references to fading photos of ancestors); 187; 285; 330; and 359.

18 See the passage where a Malay says to Peter, ‘You told me that this garden — any garden — is a re-creation of the Garden of Eden … It is the recapturing of Paradise Lost’, and Peter responds, ‘I think I may have been misinterpreted …’ (256). See also Aw, 319 for other references to Eden and paradise.

19 This is the Malay word for ‘son of the soil’.

20 This scene also has echoes of Hamlet, with the play-within-the-play set-up. The whole scene on the island also reminds the reader of The Tempest. As critic Mark Sinnett notes, ‘There ensue … sea-storms of Shakespearean proportions’ (online). For example, Johnny tells Peter prior to their departure, ‘If this is primitive then I am a savage’ and he holds up his arms in a ‘strange gesture … intended to be theatrical in its effect’ (149). In this case, Johnny represents Caliban, in love with Snow/Miranda. This case in point is just one of many in which Aw references British literature.

21 Upon arriving on the island, Peter discovers the ruins of a house. This scene echoes Rani Manicka’s The Rice Mother in the post-war sections. Manicka’s text is also multiply narrated, although its plotline revolves tightly around its nuclear family, and does not focus on the impressions of ‘white men in white smoking jackets drinking pink gins’ (Murray Waldren online).

   The house ruins on the island in The Harmony Silk Factory also remind readers of ‘Kellie’s Folly’, or Kellie’s Castle, near Ipoh, Malaysia. Aw mentions Kellie’s Castle early in the narrative (20); this castle was built by a tin and rubber entrepreneur Scotsman, William ‘Kellie’ Smith, who perished before completing the castle. It stands, unfinished, an icon of the vanquished European coloniser.

22 Aw says, ‘When I was growing up people just didn’t read really. There weren’t bookshops to speak of even five years ago. But suddenly there seems to be a huge hunger for books’ (Newman, 5). During my six-week stay in Malaysia with the Fulbright-Hays program, I saw little evidence of encouragement for writers although I visited bookstores in the major cities such as Kuala Lumpur; school administrators praised students with math and science abilities, refusing to acknowledge that students might have interests in the arts. For example, the top sixty percent of students in a given school will study the sciences and mathematics if they do well in tests. The remaining forty percent is relegated to the humanities. When asked what happened if a top student wanted to study the humanities, administrators disregarded the folly of this notion.
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Syd Harrex

‘BARD-BIRTH’

(for Ken Arvidson who invented that term on awakening to ecstatic noise in the
bird-bath outside his bedroom window in Adelaide, a far time ago)

The past incorrigibly iambic,
Eros spawns your sonnets with felt-tipped tongue
to suit your pumping lines, yet when you’re hot
rules are there to crunch between trochee thighs
so readers can mould simulacrum truths
into things of beauty. This is the way
a love play, out of sorts with death, makes good
the sad business of lost brotherhood.
From your example we learn the salving
art of redressing errors so they seem
not to have happened; magical logic
that cossets candle flames against the draught
with firefly phosphorescence in a glass
luminously, as fitful shadows pass.

(from Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets, 2007, Lythrum Press, Adelaide, p. 1)
Syd Harrex: Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet

Encore, the west wind iterates, encore,
under the eaves of the house of the heart
and in the cavern of the pulsing ear
until – come the somersault of the year –
it’s time for flittering wings to rehearse
the oldest journey in the sky of verse.
(2007a 99)

With the publication in December 2007 of *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Syd Harrex’s sixth volume of poetry, the time seems right to mount a retrospective. Retrospectives are common in the world of visual arts, but not something ‘done’ in the literary world, except perhaps in the form of a festschrift — a form more generally reserved for retiring scholars. Aspiring young poets and their more practiced peers find publication space in journals like *Kunapipi* that provide a place for the cohabitation and intercourse between new creative and scholarly work, but these journals could do more for the established poet. Scholarly essays might engage with a poet’s oeuvre (although the word-limit of an article is often insufficient to do justice to the work’s entirety), but rarely is space given or allowed for the exhibition of that work. Copyright permissions and costs are often prohibitive, but more, a tradition of the retrospective has not been established in the literary field (except perhaps in the form of a publisher’s reprint [often posthumously] of an author’s works, or a volume of collected works). So before Syd Harrex, and other poets of his generation, ‘gratify some undertaker’(1994a 25)¹, I thought it timely to institute such a tradition.

The retrospective gives readers an opportunity to (re)discover a poet whose work does not have the kind of reach afforded by the big international publishing houses. Harrex’s first volume of poetry, *Atlantis and Other Islands* (1984), was published by Dangaroo (Mundelstrup, Denmark) — the press founded by Anna Rutherford in tandem with *Kunapipi*. Dangaroo books were often distributed at conferences of commonwealth writing and book fairs, having arrived at the venue in the back of Anna’s four-wheel drive or in her backpack; and although Anna delighted in telling me that she did not really like poetry much (knowing how much I did), she managed to publish and sell quite a bit of it. Harrex’s next two volumes, *Inside Out* (1991) and *Dedications* (1999), were published with Wakefield Press, an independent book publishing company based in Adelaide,
Syd Harrex: Retrospective of an Autumnal Poet

South Australia. The fifth and sixth volumes, *Under a Medlar Tree* (2004) and *Dougie’s Ton* (2007), were produced by Lythrum, another small publishing house, also based in Adelaide.

All five slim volumes have been designed and produced with an aesthetic eye — they look and feel ‘good’ as a book should; but the fourth volume, *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* (1999), is an objet d’art. It is a ‘Writers Workshop Book’ published by P. Lal (Lake Gardens, Calcutta). The book is a beautiful limited edition: ‘gold-embossed by hand, hand-stitched & hand-bound by Tulamiah Mohiuddin with handloom sari cloth woven in South India’. Lal’s credo is printed at the back of the volume. Here he notes that ‘[a]lternative publishing is desperately needed wherever commercial publication rules’ because of the nexus between ‘high-profile PR-conscious book publishers, semi-literate booksellers, moribund … libraries, poorly informed and nepotistic underlings in charge of book review pages … of most national newspapers and magazines, and biased bulk purchases of near worthless books by bureaucratic institutions…’ (np). This credo sounds more like a diatribe than a statement of belief; but although this might be Lal’s (biased) perspective on the book trade in India, much of it sounds all too familiar to the Australian editor of this journal. However, whilst I believe that independence is something to be valued, the difficulties of distribution attendant on cottage-industry publishing is in part reason for my decision to institute the new tradition of a literary retrospective in this journal; the inherent irony is of course that *Kunapipi* too is a cottage industry and its distribution and accessibility is dependent on the loyalty of friends and colleagues, the inclination of individual subscribers and the buying policies of libraries. Yet whilst independent publishers allow copyright to remain with authors, the retrospective does not come at any cost. ‘*All* copyright,’ Lal notes of Writers Workshop publications, ‘remains with the writer’ (emphasis his) as of course it should if respect for the author’s intellectual property rights is to be honoured.

Perhaps my introduction to Syd Harrex’s work is too much of an introduction to the publishing industry and the publication of poetry in particular, but then, this is the first retrospective I have mounted and it seems it must come with the usual explanation of *raison d’etre* and indeed, something of a credo. So to the poet and his poetry, and my selection of poems…. I have titled this piece ‘Retrospective for an Autumnal Poet’, not so much to indicate that the poet is in the Autumn of his life (although he is that), but to suggest something about the mediative quality of Harrex’s poetry that tends, even in its earliest incarnations, to nostalgia — by which perhaps I mean an awareness of, even a dwelling on, mortality and the inevitability of loss. This is an inevitability tempered by a faith in life, love and beauty. Keats is never far away (as acknowledged by Harrex in the epigraph to his first volume, *Atlantis*, and carried by the west wind of ‘Encore’ into his latest volume, *Dougie’s Ton*).
An overt example of Harrex’s nostalgic tendency is the poem, ‘All a Green Willow’, included in the volume *Inside Out*:

A boy’s year like mine
had just two seasons:
Aussie Rules and Cricket.

The discovery of girls
and swimming after tennis
also glowed with summer good,

but the time on which I gloat
is saturated by the smell
of linseed oil in willow wood.

Rich then and complex now
the leather rush of red, the race
across the stain of green:

They helped me read a poem’s
beauty through, see its stumps of birth
and death, with life running in-between.

(1991a 19)

To describe a poem like this as nostalgic is a bit misleading, for unlike Keats, Harrex does not dwell in, or feed on, melancholy, rather, the place where he is now is constantly evaluated in light of where he has come and what brought him here — the experience of a life that gives precedence to the art of friendship (a green willow). ‘And that’s how death should be / the past nurturing the future’ Harrex writes in ‘The Rain it Raineth Every Day’. ‘So be yourself,’ he enjoins:

So be yourself … once insignificant
now a chiseller of messages
on headstones (a dying art you say)
but a decent way of making a living.

(2004a 15)

A warm sense of humour and an (extra)ordinary humanity, pervades Harrex’s poetic observation and reflection. The poem as a cricket pitch, or indeed, life itself as a cricket pitch, is a metaphor that might seem either forced or clichéd but Harrex manages to avoid both pitfalls. The poet is well-aware of the dangers, remarking in the sonnet, ‘Surviving Clichés’, that:

Some simple words refuse to serve our needs
without banality, while true and tried
experience decays to platitudes.

(2007c 53)

But some simple poems do not refuse to serve the poet’s needs. ‘All a Green Willow’ retains a simple integrity — it carries the aura of being truly felt. The achieved effect of ‘truth’ is the poet’s craft — an art so skilled that it gives the appearance of artlessness. Perhaps this is just an indication of my personal...
preference, but for me Harrex’s best work is that which is not asked to carry too
great a burden. Some of his more recent work feels too weighted with words, too
baroque for my tastes; and sometimes I find his poetry too male, even too ‘Aussie’
in that ‘true-mateship’ (2007b 100) style that has the effect of excluding women
merely by being male.

Cricket here is a good example, his latest work being titled *Dougie’s Ton & 99
Other Sonnets*: I did not know what Dougie’s ‘ton’ was, and on enquiry I was told
that it was obvious I was not a true-blue Aussie — but then I am not sure what
that is, or even whether Harrex himself would qualify. The poem makes all clear;
a ‘ton’ being a century, ‘Dougie’s ton’ is placed at the end of the volume, on page
100, the 100th of 99-plus-one sonnets. The poem is about cricket and not about
cricket: it is a dedication and a memorial to friends and heroes, not only those of
the sporting world, but those met through literature. ‘Doug’s genius for timing’ is
a thing akin to ‘Pound’s “Make it new”; Eliot’s *Observations*; / Our undefeated
’48 side’. I like the way Harrex is unafraid to put together the ordinary and the
extraordinary, or to find the extraordinary in the ordinary; and I like the way so
much of his poetry is about poetry.

For Harrex, poetry is a lived experience — it colours who he is, the way he
sees the world and the way he gives that world back to himself and his readers in
his poetic art. ‘Walking Out in the Clare Valley’2 is a perfect example (but then so
are all the poems I have chosen for this retrospective). In a poetic exemplar of the
Romantic ethos (whose title calls to mind the Romantic poet John Clare) Harrex
wonders as he wanders in nature: writing is mind-walking that takes its pace and
rhythm from the body. Stanza six reads:

>A large log
across your path
invites you to sit
a while and rest
between stanzas.

Like your last footsteps,
your thoughts are melting…

Limb, eye and mind are as one with, and yet distinct from, the world through
which they travel:

>But suddenly I shudder
in my tracks, stopped by an idea
that all I breathe.
touch, taste, see, hear,
is only magic waiting to vanish,
as men ordain,
in everlasting death.

The ‘ritual of renewals’ after bushfire, as ‘secure as the sun is secure’, reminds the
poet not only of the cyclic nature of life in which death never has the final word,
but of the singleness, the solitariness of human life, divided from the natural world by consciousness:

Winter rains raise the word of death to speech of seed and leaf; the single human has only one life’s chance of being heard.

Syd Harrex has taken his chance, and like Li Po, has flexed his kite’s finger string and palmed poems out of skies:

So perfectly lazy is this windless honey-smooth winter’s room that the crows’ cries, normally belligerent as saw screams in a mill, are slipper-quiet like slow motion images in a sky-blue day-dream when the most leisureful place on earth is the Australian bush; its charade silences, its bird palpitations, the insect treks like corpuscles through the veins, delivering a solace message short as a telegram used to be, yet long as ancient day or night in a haiku read in the glow of a full moon, and rain splintered sun-signs, hieroglyphed in stone.

(2007d 51)

NOTES
1 See p. 33 of this issue for the poem in full.
2 See p. 73 of this issue for the poem in full.
3 A slight misquotation of the last haiku of ‘Four Haikus’ from Medlar Tree, p.31 (a poem by the way in which cricket insinuates itself in artful manner yet again, the third stanza / haiku reading: ‘Like a Chinese scroll / the willow of Lara’s bat / unfolds boundaries’).

WORKS CITED
Harrex, Syd 1984, Atlantis and Other Islands, Dangaroo, Mundelstrup, Denmark.
——— 1999, No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy, Writers Workshop, Calcutta.
ABSTRACTS

BRENDA COOPER

‘Returning the Jinns to the Jar: Material Culture, Stories and Migration in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s By the Sea’

This essay traces the relationship between migrant identities, material culture, stories and the language in which they are told, in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel, By the Sea. It demonstrates that Gurnah has structured his narrative around travelling and metamorphosing objects within the context of the history of trade and cultural contact, which pre-dates colonialism and post-dates independence in Africa. Within the particular history of Zanzibar, Gurnah demonstrates how men like his protagonist, Omar — perhaps like himself — play out their painful in-between roles of being neither one thing nor another, neither Asian nor African. Within these fluid shape shifting boundaries, nothing is pure. England is both the coloniser and the new family; Zanzibar is both home and prison; The Thousand and One Nights is both Arabian and mongrel, appropriated, butchered, stolen, adapted and available for boundless manipulation. Caught between the African new nation, where dictators flourish in the fetid soil of postcolonial grabbing, and the cold English ocean, the essay describes how Gurnah’s protagonists struggle with their stories in order to make flesh, bone and marrow out of crushing allegories.

SARA E. COOPER

‘Humorismo en Cuba: Bohemia Comics from The Year of the Revolution’

One of the tenets of the new political and social agenda of the 1959 Cuban Revolution was gender equality, based on a respect for the valuable contributions made by women to the insurrection itself and to the building of a new society. With such a background, one expects to encounter a decidedly new approach to the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in the revolutionary press, something that would contrast with the sexist, racist, and classist images from Batista’s era. Even in the ‘low-brow’ cultural milieu of cartoons and caricatures, one might see a filtering through of the revolution’s high ideals. Nevertheless, cartoons from the first year of the Revolution show a still ubiquitous misogynist and patriarchal representation of gender and relations between the sexes. This essay describes and analyses how men and women are depicted in the cartoons of the time, and shows how this reflects some of the existing tensions and incongruities of the early revolutionary period.

LIZ MONDEL

‘V.S. Naipaul: The Melancholy Mandarin’

V.S. Naipaul is often appreciated for his artistic sophistication and insight but criticised for perpetuating colonialist discourse. His complex literary persona
invites an analysis that sheds light on his puzzling colonialist textual responses to India and England, which are evident in a broad range of his writings, but which have particular problematic focus in the ‘Indian trilogy’ of his travel writing. In an analysis grounded in psychoanalysis and in Julia Kristeva’s idea of the abject I argue that Naipaul shows evidence of melancholia born out of the specific nature of his experiences as a diasporic Indian, in the belief that we have not yet understood the full impact of empire.

PAULINE T. NEWTON
‘From Chempaka, the Muslim Tree of Death, to Scarf-Wrapped Banana Plants: Postcolonial Representations of Gardening Images in Tash Aw’s The Harmony Silk Factory’

Tash Aw’s The Harmony Silk Factory employs gardening references to reveal the complex and shifting heritage to which an individual may belong in a (post) colonial society. Aw’s theme of transplantation underscores the impact of (post) imperialism on southeast Asia. Since none of Aw’s critics offer an essay-length discussion of the gardening themes, this work explores how The Harmony Silk Factory, winner of the Whitbread Book Award for First Novel, becomes a test of what qualities the (post)colonial survivor must exhibit — as demonstrated through gardening images — in order to endure the aftermath of (post)colonialism.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM
‘Interrogating Malaysian Literature in English: Its Glories, Sorrows and Thematic Trends’

The objectives of this essay are three-fold: first, to examine the socio-political circumstances surrounding Malaysian literature in English and the successes and failures of the literature arising from that circumstance; second, to enumerate and interrogate the various themes and ideas preoccupying the writers of this literature; and finally, to suggest ways to read Malaysian literature in English as part of the national formation or national enterprise, integrally related to the political and social history of the country. The questions that the essay addresses are: Why has Malaysian literature in English failed to keep pace with the growth of literary activity in other post-colonial centres? What are the future possibilities of this literature, and how have the writers, in spite of their marginalisation in the national culture, contributed to the formation of a post-colonial national identity in the Malaysian plural society? What are some of the abiding postulations/moorings in this body of literature and why/how have they found their anchorage in the sensibility of the writers? How can we see the literature as an offshoot of the ‘parent tree’ of Malaysian literature rather than as an isolated stream, or ‘Aimless Literature’ (as suggested by Ismail Hussein), having little to do with the indigenous tradition of the country? The essay focuses on the works of some of the major writers of the tradition, especially short fiction.
ORNRA RAZ
“‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’: The West Indians and the Church in An Unsuitable Attachment by Barbara Pym’

An Unsuitable Attachment, by the British novelist Barbara Pym (1913–80) realistically depicts a 1960s North London parish which included a growing population of West Indians. Yet, in spite of their not insignificant number, the immigrants remain strangers in their new environment. Pym subtly documents the confusion, anxiety and ignorance in the attitude of the Church and the parishioners towards the newcomers. Pym wrote the novel two years after the Notting Hill racial riots of 1958, which are specifically mentioned in the novel. Having already witnessed some of the consequences of that rift, An Unsuitable Attachment reveals an overall pessimistic assessment of the commitment of the Church and British society toward improving race relations and criticism of the way they were received in Britain in the early 1960s.

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA
‘Paper(less) Selves: The Refugee in Contemporary Textual Culture’

This essay focuses on representations of refugee selfhood in contemporary print and visual culture, drawing on selected novels by Kiran Desai (2006), Patricia Schonstein Pinnock (1999) and Simão Kikamba (2005), and Stephen Frears’ film, Dirty Pretty Things (2006). It explores the often conflicting range of refugee subject positions these authors rehearse in their treatment of refugee experiences, notably through the creation of ‘refugee’ characters, and proposes a reading of ‘refugeeness’ as a continuum that encompasses ‘asylum seeker’, ‘illegal migrant’, ‘economic migrant’ and ‘refugee’ proper. Specifically, it considers how refugees, broadly defined, negotiate their paradoxical desire for, and fear of, anonymity and recognition, ‘unbeing’ and ‘being’ within and without the confines of the nation-state. The essay borrows from sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s work on a ‘liquid’ and ‘wasteful’ modernity as well as on Bauman’s use of Giorgio Agamben’s writing on nationalism, identity and ethics.

OUYANG YU
‘Against Autobiography’

For years, the author has dreaded the very idea of autobiography, the need to expose oneself till one becomes completely transparent, like a landscape without mist, a sky without clouds. ‘Against Autobiography’ is both an expose of that fear as well as a declaration of freedom from information, gratuitous information as raw material for the prying eye, the Gaze, the exotically bent, in a market trend that sweeps everything else aside: the subtleties of self whose infinite fictionalisabilities remain to be explored.
ANTHONY (ACE) BOURKE is an independent curator, specialising in colonial and Aboriginal art. He is completing his MA (Research) at the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, examining the evolution of a curatorial style, especially in relation to his own colonial ancestors and their various encounters or relationships with Aboriginal peoples. A component and illustration of this is the exhibition *Lines in the Sand: Botany Bay Stories from 1770*, staged at the Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Sydney, Australia (28th March–11th May 2008).

ANNE COLLETT lectures in the English Literatures program at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her research interests lie predominantly in the areas of postcolonialism, women’s writing and poetry. She has published critical work on the poetry of Judith Wright, Kate Llewellyn, Kath Walker, Antigone Kefala, Ouyang Yu, Margaret Atwood, Joan Crane, Olive Senior, Pauline Johnson Tekahionwake, and most recently Alec Hope and Kamau Brathwaite (forthcoming).

BRENDA COOPER is the Director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town, with a joint appointment as Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature. Her books include: *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Seeing with a Third Eye* (Routledge 1998); and *Weary Sons of Conrad: White Fiction Against the Grain of Africa’s Dark Heart* (Peter Lang 2002). Her latest book is *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language*, forthcoming (James Currey 2008).

SARA E. COOPER is Associate Professor of Spanish and Multicultural & Gender Studies at California State University, Chico. Her research interests centre on contemporary Latin America, Cuba in particular, especially issues of gender, sexuality, humour, family, and graphic narrative. She is the founder and current Executive Committee Chair of the Cuban and Cuban Diaspora Cultural Expression Discussion Group of the Modern Language Association. Cooper is editor of the essay collection, *The Ties That Bind: Questioning Family Dynamics and Family Discourse in Hispanic Literature and Film* (UP of America 2004); she has published articles in *Cuban Studies, Chasqui, Confluencia, Ciberletras, Letras Femenina*, and several critical anthologies. Her special issue of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, on Lesbian Images in International Popular Culture, is forthcoming. Cooper also is a translator of literary fiction, especially works by Mirta Yáñez. Her current research explores the trajectory of humour in literature, film, and popular culture in post-revolutionary Cuba.

LIZ MONDEL is currently completing her PhD at the University of Wollongong. Her thesis explores the legacy of Hegel’s master-servant idea in current postcolonial literary theory and proposes a model for the reading of unequal power relationships in postcolonial fiction. The model emphasises the emancipatory potential for the servant inherent in Hegel’s own thesis, and it is applied to several readings of contemporary Indian fiction in English.
PAULINE T. NEWTON, a lecturer in rhetoric at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, spent the summer of 2005 in Malaysia and Singapore courtesy of the Fulbright-Hays summer seminar abroad program, and is developing a narrative on her discoveries pertaining to Southeast Asian writers and their cultures. In 2005, she published Transcultural Women of Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas (Ashgate Publishing) and ‘Collecting Seeds of Destiny in Li-Young Lee’s The Winged Seed: A Remembrance’ (Southeast Asian Review in English).

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM is professor of English at the International Islamic University Malaysia. He is the author or editor of seventeen books, including: One Sky, Many Horizons: Studies in Malaysian Literature in English (Marshall Cavendish 2007); Peninsular Muse: Interviews with Modern Malaysian and Singaporean Poets, Novelists and Dramatists (Peter Lang 2007); and Saul Bellow and American Transcendentalism (Peter Lang 2004). Quayum’s scholarly articles on American literature and Post-colonial literatures have appeared in journals in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Singapore, India, Taiwan and Malaysia.

ORNAA RAZ is a Lecturer in English at the College of Management, Israel. She holds graduate degrees from the University of Missouri-Columbia and the University of Iowa, and received her Ph.D. in English Literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her book, Social Dimensions in the Novels of Barbara Pym, 1949–1963: The Writer as Hidden Observer, was published by Mellen Press in April 2007. Her current field of interest is culture and society and the literary manifestations of social changes in England during the 1950’s.


TONY SIMOES DA SILVA teaches in the School of English Literatures, Philosophy and Languages, at the University of Wollongong. Recent or forthcoming publications include essays in Third World Quarterly (2005), Connecting Cultures (Routledge 2008), ARIEL (2008) and Transnational Whiteness Matters (Lexington Books 2008).
ROBERT SULLIVAN belongs to the same Northland Maori tribe (Nga Puhi) as Hone Tuwhare. He has written six collections of poetry, including *Star Waka*, *Voice Carried My Family* (both Auckland UP), and *Shout Ha! to the Sky* (forthcoming from Salt Publishing, UK). He has won several literary awards for his multi-genre work and editing. He co-edited *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* (Auckland UP 2003) with Albert Wendt and Reina Whaitiri, the first such anthology to be edited entirely by Polynesians. He is currently Director of Creative Writing at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa.

To date, OUYANG YU has published forty-three books in the field of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, literary criticism and literary translation. His latest publication of non-fiction is *on the smell of an oily rag: speaking english, thinking chinese and living australian* (Wakefield Press 2008).
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