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Front Cover: Detail of *Big Raven* by Emily Carr, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.11 (Photo: Trevor Mills)

*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.
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EDITORIAL

I have just finished reading Unity Dow’s *The Screaming of the Innocent*, a novel published in 2002 that reveals the practice and concealment of *dipheko* — the ritual murder of primarily pre-pubescent girls — in contemporary Botswana. It is a deeply disturbing novel, not so much for its revelation of the terrible violence done to the most vulnerable members of a society by those in positions of power and responsibility — the news media are replete with such stories every day of the week; nor by the revelation of a complicit silence that is perpetuated by all who see and hear but will not speak. The silence of the fearful or those guilty either by act or association is again a position with which we are all too familiar, our everyday environments at home and in the workplace offering any number of ordinary examples that corroborate the extraordinary. Rather, it is as Margaret Lenta and Margaret Daymond suggest in interview with Unity, the revelation of terrible guilt by one least suspected that is so shocking:

Amantle looked at the gentle old face before her: was it the face of a man full of compassion and love? The face of a brutal killer? The face of a brave man? The face of a coward? The face of a man who’d held down a twelve-year-old girl as she was being cut up live, screaming, struggling, begging, bleeding? Was he a man who’d reached out to a grieving mother and offered her true friendship and support? Was he a monster? (215)

Yet the shock is not so much that a man portrayed as gentle and sympathetic, indeed empathetic, should be capable of an act of ‘inhuman’ atrocity; but the recognition of our possible selves in that act. As Unity observes, ‘For me it was like investigating the potential for evil in all of us. Naturally that idea would tend to shock each one of us — that it could have been any one of us; that it could be someone we like very much. So who are these people who commit murders?’ (52). What is most disturbing is the idea that an act of almost unimaginable violence may indeed be very human — human because it is in fact imaginable — not only as one drawn into such an act by fear or cowardice but as one drawn into such an act because compelled by the allure of horror and its implicit entanglement with power and desire. How then are we to eradicate such unconscionable acts when they lie so close — so deep and yet so near the surface?

*Cruelty has a human heart*

*And Jealousy a human face;*

*Terror the human form divine,*

*And Secrecy the human dress.*

(‘A Divine Image’, *Songs of Experience*, 1794)

The words are William Blake’s, for I have begun teaching the Romantics this week — a course in which I emphasise the importance of imagination and empathy in achieving a more equitable, free and humane society. The Romantic
poets believed that political goals could be achieved through poetic means — the latter would encourage and inspire the former; but the cynic in me, or the accumulation of life-experience, recognises that the relationship between the two is neither natural nor easy. Empathy would not seem to be enough. I can imagine the suffering of another as though I myself were suffering, but this act of imagination does not necessarily generate an equivalent action in the real world of human affairs. Literature inspires me but does it also lend me the courage to act? I do not have answers, but I would concur with Blake that, 'The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, & breeds reptiles of the mind' (The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, 1793). I have to continue to believe that when literature brings awareness where there was ignorance, and acknowledgment where there was denial, there is at least the possibility of change. Unity Dow’s novel does not end on an uplifting note — the enemy vanquished and the battle won — but neither does it end with defeat. It is a call to action:

Her thoughts flew about in her head as she searched for a reason. Is there a monster lurking in all of us? And if we’re so paralysed by fear, if we don’t dare face this evil, who will heed the screams of the innocent? (215)

Many of the essays in this issue challenge or reveal a challenge made to orthodoxy or unhealthy, even dangerous, stagnation of opinion. They include visual artists like Mary Alice Evatt and Emily Carr, writers as diverse as Jamaica Kincaid, Dymphna Cusack, Albert Wendt, Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Judith Wright, dancers like Elizabeth Cameron Dalman. Many of the essays examine the injustices created and perpetuated by social orders that enshrine hierarchies of power and define themselves on principles of exclusion; but I have chosen to focus this editorial on Dow’s call to action because the horrific nature of the reptile revealed when the stagnant water is stirred is particularly compelling and makes an urgent claim upon us.

Anne Collett

NOTES
Nationalism in India, as we see from the wheel in the centre of the flag, and as we know from the story of Gandhi, has been constructed partly on the economics and symbolism of textiles. Emma Tarlo has catalogued the development of ‘national dress’, and state governments in India enshrine certain kinds of textile production as national culture by propping up handloom co-operatives. This text of identity and cloth has become so accepted that Dipesh Chakrabarty now reports we can tell a politician on the make by his hypocritically rigorous adherence to khaddar wear. Such a national text/ile overlooks a different story of cloth in one non-British colony, India. Its politics reveal how, nationally, the symbolism of Gandhian homespun has masked the perpetuation of caste discrimination.

The histories of marginalised communities in India testify not only to their oppression at the hands of an alien imperial power but also to internal oppression and the continued struggle to survive. Postcolonial theory has worked mainly with nation frameworks and needs to respond to this double-colonisation in post-colonial societies. In the Indian context, the uprising of dalits (who include ‘untouchables’) informs us how different social, economic, political and religious institutions excluded them from the constructions of national identity according to traditional Hinduism. According to Gail Omvedt, this poses a major challenge to the way nationalism is constructed as Gandhian/Hindu and fails to be questioned even in Marxist contexts:

The theoretical challenge posed by the dalit and anti-caste movement was not simply concerned with replacing ‘class’ by ‘caste’. It sought a revised methodology of exploitation, a combined class-caste analysis. (122)

The limits of the national story as a Gandhian anti-British movement are revealed if we consider the texts and textile work of French Pondicherry. The literature available on Pondicherry can be broadly classified as colonial and post-colonial. The Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai (1736–1761), and V. Subbaiah’s Saga of the Freedom Movement: A Testament of my Life (1973), constitute the colonial phase and the novels of Pirabajin (in Tamil) — Vaanam Vasappadum (1993) and Kanneerāl Kaappomme (1998) — belong to the post-colonial phase. Of the two texts in the colonial phase, the Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai gives us a detailed picture of how the French handled caste and managed their textile trade.
This image was produced by the Dalit Media Network as part of its campaign against caste oppression and was displayed at the Durban conference against Discrimination
(Fundamentally, whereas the British prevented dalits from entering the army and civil services, the French sought to empower them. They did not, however, disturb the caste structure of textile production in Pondicherry, and so avoided anti-colonial unrest.) Subbaiah’s autobiography gives an account of the industrialisation of the textile trade in Pondicherry, the birth and growth of trade unions, and their complex relationship with the union of India. Subbaiah’s support for unionising mill workers left him unmoved by Gandhi’s traditionalist cultural nationalism. Rather, he contacted the socialist leader Jawaharlal Nehru and at his suggestion went to Paris. There, he negotiated a ten-point plan for labour reform and Pondicherry had the honour of being the first state in Asia to have an eight-hour week with weekly holiday for its factory workers.

Despite the evident differences between Subbaiah’s story and Congress swaraj history, Pirabanjan in his novel, Kanneeraal Kaappomme, manages to represent Subbaiah as a hero in the national mould. This transformation was made possible by Subbaiah’s pan-Indian connection on two levels: he maintained contact with the leaders of the Indian National Congress, and he shared the ideology of Indian communists. Also, due to his class-based attention to workers as a whole, he remained silent on issues of caste, thereby allowing his co-option into a Union of India, Gandhian history. It is only later, with Paavannan’s Citaralkal (1990), that we find a critique of both colonial and national regimes grounded in the particular history of Pondicherry. This history, as in the rest of India, is significantly shaped by the production and trade in textiles and by traditional Hindu strictures on caste.

II

As Sabita Radhakrishna points out, the Atharva Veda personifies the day and night as two sisters weaving, with the warp symbolising darkness, and the woof, the light of day. One of the hymns in the Atharva Veda illustrates this:

The sacrifice drawn out with threads on every side stretched by a hundred sacred ministers and one. This do these Fathers weave who hitherward are come; they sit beside the warp and cry, weave forth, weave back. (7)

The vedic hymns give religious sanction not only to textile trade but also to makers of these textiles. For the master weavers, the production of fabrics is not a mechanical labour but an attempt to preserve their cultural/religious identity. The weavers of Orissa, in India, follow a custom of weaving ‘the first verse of the “Gita Govinda” into a red tie-dye silk scarf, which forms the main ritual at the Jagnath Puri temple’. The weavers of Kanchipuram in South India claim ‘descent from sage Markanda, believed to be the weaver’s God who wove the first fabric from the lotus fibre’ (Radhakrishna 8–9).

The use of textiles in religious rituals and the location of the weaving community around temple towns made the textile industry a birthright reserved for castes close to Brahmin priests. The right to weave cloth settled exclusively
on one community, the Kaikollars (also called Mudaliars). Introduction of special costumes in Madurai during the Vijayanagar empire, however, prompted the spread in Tamil Nadu of Sowrastrians and Kannada-speaking Devanka weavers. The Telugu-speaking Padma Saliyars also played a major part in the textile trade of Tamil Nadu, especially in Kanchipuram during the tenth century. Each community ‘owned’ specialist aspects of the industry such as preparing dyes, making fine quality cloth, and so on. Towns were geographically divided according to caste.

This exclusion continued even during the era of industrialisation. Vasant Moon, who edited Dr. Ambedkar’s writings and speeches, in his autobiography, *Growing Up of an Untouchable* says, ‘In Mumbai, Mahars (the untouchable castes) were not supposed to touch the thread. So they did not get employed in the weaving department’ (79). However, he also notes that in other areas industrialisation did open up opportunities: ‘Here [in Nagpur] weaving was a major occupation of our people [Mahars]. Because of this there was no ban on weaving work in the mills. The condition of our people improved because of the textile mills’ (79). In Pondicherry, the Koliyur caste, regarded as untouchables, were involved in weaving cloth for everyday use. Despite this, they were not regarded as fit to mix with the rest of the society.

Whatever the regional differences, Dalit workers were increasingly excluded from trades as they became potential competitors with traditional occupations. In the case of the Mumbai mills, they were not appointed in the weaving department because the labourers may have had to use their saliva as paste to join frayed strands of thread. This threatened other workers with pollution, which is the religious basis of social divisions under brahmanic Hinduism. Dr. Ambedkar fought against this kind of caste-based discrimination. When the Communist Party, headed by S.A. Dange, refused to join him, he broke his alliance with the party.

It is on this point that Dr. Ambedkar waged his first battle against Mahatma Gandhi. The caste system, he said, is not merely a division of labour, as Gandhi believed. ‘It is also a division of labourers’ (47); but Gandhi maintained that

Varna and religion are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of varna teaches us to earn bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. (1990 108)

Here Gandhi’s use of the words ‘ancestral calling’ and ‘duties’ shows his strong belief in the *chaturvarna* order. While he opposed imperialist expropriation of resources and trade based on Indian cotton, his spiritualised vision meant that he saw the growth of mill industry as a hindrance to his anti-colonial struggle. He claimed workers could ‘establish in thousands of households the ancient and sacred handlooms and they can buy out cloth that may be thus woven’ (2001 57). This anti-modernist stand had the effect of perpetuating class/caste hierarchies,
even though his ‘spinning wheel’ became the symbol of a democratising and modernising India.

III

A different politics existed in the French-occupied territories. Unlike the British East India company, which focused exclusively on its military power and trade, the French East India Company focused on the five major spheres: colonial administration; finances in India; the administration of justice; relations with Indian rulers; and commercial activity. This shaped the colonial experience of French India, where ‘the formula most frequently applied was: much subjection, very little autonomy, a touch of assimilation’ (Grimal 60).

From an Indian point of view, foreign traders were expected to have their dealings only through the *qaspa*, the entrepot of the trading communities. In the South, the British played one group against another to challenge the Moghul monopoly of Indian trade. The French, on the other hand, did not disturb the *qaspa* system and respected the Hindu and Moghul kings of the princely states in order to protect their trade. They merged so well with the native political structure that the ‘prestige of the governor’ was high and the social fabric stable (Ramasrinavasan 35).

Among the French governors, it was Legoux de Flair who first identified the great variety of fine Indian textiles and enabled François Martin to build the textile trade in Pondicherry. Besides giving a detailed account of the use of indigo and the procedures for treating textiles, Legoux made an important observation about the organdy textiles, famous in Pondicherry. In his book, *Historical, Geographical and Political Essay on Hindustan, with a Description of its Trade* (1897), he says:

> The Indian way of holding the weaving combs between the hands of the weaver and the warp of the weave, as the thread unwound itself from the cylinder of the loom, resulted in cloth that was more smooth and evenly woven than the cloth on European looms. (qtd in D’Souza 322)

Trading officials were not satisfied merely with the technical details of textile production. In his *Memoirs*, Vol. I, Martin says: ‘To work with the French East India Company, efficiency alone is not enough. One must have thorough knowledge in all social and cultural sides’ (qtd in Sebastian 34). Hence he describes the caste-based textile trade, mentioning that there were 30,000 weavers living in Pondicherry and they all belonged to the Kaikollar caste.

It was Governor Dupleix (in office 1742–1754) who established the French empire in India and provided a model for the British. Ananda Ranga Pillai’s diary gives us details regarding the state of trade, economy, religion and so on during his regime. He said that society was divided into right and left hand castes. The merchant caste, Chetti, belonged to the left, whereas the castes associated with weaving, Mudali and Pillai, belonged to the right. The Pariahs
(untouchables) lived in segregated colonies (iv 340–41). Kaikollar weavers lived in large numbers at Tiruvadigai, Panruti and Bahur, and Governor Dupleix told the company officials to bring all the weaving castes to Pondicherry. He inspected the sites and built houses for them, and gave them money besides supplying tax-free yarn, for two years. Dupleix himself was involved in private trade with the weavers (Pillai 157).

Although the French actively supported the welfare of Pariahs (when there was a rice shortage, for example, soldiers would shoot horses and distribute the meat amongst the community), there was little interference with traditional social practices. Within the European cultural frame, the French did take measures to eradicate untouchability. Father Lourdeu was shocked to see a wall separating untouchables from other caste Hindus inside the church. He persuaded Governor Dupleix to have it removed. Another priest, Fr. Kollas, who took a special interest in the upliftment of untouchables, was named after an untouchable community, ‘para Kollas’.4

Outside direct cultural control, social reform was limited by the need to maintain the colonial economy. The weaving community was very influential at that time. When the governor decided to demolish the Vedapuriswarar temple as part of his protective measures against possible British attack, weavers decided to leave the town. The governor interrupted them on their way and brought them back with an assurance that the temple would be protected (Divyan 25). During the period of Dubois, caste councils were formed to administer local economic and religious matters and to safeguard traditional Indian customs. It is this complex mix of the French policy of assimilation and its practice of non-intervention that poses a challenge to uniform stories of anti-colonial struggle.

According to Pillai, Dupleix was aware that Chettis sometimes cheated the Company in the cloth dyeing industry and in the sale of cloths in which they had a share. Otherwise the textile trade was well regulated. Blue piece goods were sold at 50 per cent profit; coarse cloths, striped and ordinary, at 20 per cent; Bandar cloths and fine Chennai chintz at 20–25 per cent; and chintzes of Pondicherry at a loss. Contracts with native merchants and middle-men were entered into every year. When they were signed guns were fired and some yards of red-cloth was presented to the merchant as a gift in accordance with custom. Villages were leased out to textile workers by landlords of the Reddi caste.5

Remarkable changes occurred after 1783. The French were not ready for any more battles with the British. Panic-stricken trading communities and the upper classes departed with their families to Venkatapettai, Cuddalore, Porto Nova and other places. This created a vacuum in the textile trade. As a result, Gaebelé Mills (now Bharathi mills) was established in 1892 and the Rodier mills (the Anglo-French Textiles Ltd., now known as Pondicherry National Textiles Corporation) in 1898. The remaining weavers and farmers left their traditional labour and became mill workers. Since the mills also freed weavers from the
series of payments to agents for supply and purchase from the trading community, and since they were given a salary in advance because of the demand to maintain export production, they were generally quite happy to become factory workers (Raja 80-81).

This changed when salaries and jobs were cut back. Cotton used in Pondicherry mills was purchased from Switzerland and production costs increased. The French administration adopted regressive methods to put down the protesting mill workers. In the firing ordered on July 30, 1934, twelve mill workers were killed, which resulted in an intensified agitation by trade unions. It was regarded as the beginning of the freedom movement in Pondicherry. Nonetheless, this was primarily a matter of labour rights and not of anti-colonial hostility. Later, during the period of Governor Fernand Leveque, Indian nationalists like Aurobindo, poet Subramania Bharathi, V.V.S. Aiyar and V. Ramasami Iyengar were given political asylum from the British Raj. As exiles in French India, these activists mounted no local protests. However, their activities against the British led indirectly to the formation in Pondicherry of a French India National Congress, the French India Students’ Congress and the Students’ Federation. The followers of these groups opposed communists and later supported merger with the rest of India.

IV

It is only with the emergence of dalit movements in India that we realise how the colonial powers handled internal colonisation in order to expand their trade and empire. These intersecting histories — of weavers, of textile trade and of colonial Pondicherry — show us how Indian nationalism as constructed in Anglocentric colonial history and postcolonial theory obscure the condition of dalits. This helped construct a narrow nationalism as can be seen in the postcolonial literature on Pondicherry, especially in Pirabanjan’s Kanneeraal Kaappome. In the preface, Pirabanjan makes a bold claim that the French colonial masters are worse than the British:

Just as the British ruled India, our Pondicherry was occupied by the French. Our state includes, Puducherry (now called Pondicherry), Mahe, Yanam, Karaikal and Chandranagore. The French were in no way less imperial than the British. Even worse than the British.

We had to spend at least 75 years to free our holy land from the French. Many warriors had to shed their sweat and blood to win our freedom. (6 my trans)

It is in this context that he tells the story of Subbaiah, disregarding his opposition to union with India and converting his proletarian battle against the capitalists into a nationalist struggle. In the process, it is forgotten that dalit subjectivity could neither identify itself with the mill management nor with the trade unions, as both came out of the colonial preservation of traditional caste communities centred on the textile industry.
Unlike Pirabanjan’s *Kanneeral Kaappome*, Paavannan’s novel *Citaralkal* was not influenced by any urge to identify itself with Indian nationalism. If the former is concerned about colonial capitalists, the latter is about a crisis that occurred due to the global economy. In *Citaralkal*, the narrative expresses the problem faced by the workers when Anglo-French Textiles was closed in the early 1980s. The book highlights the humane approach of the French in contrast to the Pondicherry Textile Corporation controlled by the native government. It thus echoes the anti-merger sentiments of the trade unions articulated by Subbaiah and resists the possibility of being read within the framework of Congress nationalism.

In a way, both Pirabanjan’s nationalist *Kanneeral Kaappome* and the regionalist narrative of Paavannan’s *Citaralkal* remain conservative from the point of view of dalit oppression. They share the nationalists’ accusation that dalits were pro-British — based partly on Dr. Ambedkar’s avoidance of state containment when he said to Gandhi, ‘I have no homeland’ (qtd in Keer 166). As the dalit intellectual Chandraban Prasad said, for dalits the civil society is more oppressive than the state, so they cannot share the anti-colonial ideology of caste Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar, who understood this problem, was ‘practically hankering after a nation without having to insult his own, his community’s humanity’ (Nanda 23). He seems to ask: Is it possible to talk of Indian national identity and colonial experience without addressing the caste question? A focused history of text and textile such as this suggests it is not.

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**NOTES**

2. Chaturvarna order is the Vedic theory of the origin of castes — the fourfold division of society in Hinduism. According to this, Brahmans were supposed to have been born out of God’s head; Kshatriya, rulers, from God’s chest; Vaishyas, merchants, from thighs, and Shudras from the feet. Dalits do not constitute part of this structure.
4. Pirabanjan’s novel, *Vaanam Vasappadum* provides these details in pp. 350-2. His contributions to various other fields can be seen in Jean Lafrenez Mep’s *History of Pondicherry*.
WORKS CITED
Chakrabarty, Dipesh 2001, ‘Clothing the Political Man: A Reading of the Use of Khadi/White in Indian Public Life’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 4.1, pp. 27–38.
I MODERNISM VERSUS MODERNITY

Modernism is a large, loose, and baggy monster of a term, which struggles to encompass a diverse set of creative practices and cultural assumptions with European origins and a field of reference that has since become unevenly global. I propose to use the example of two writers from outside Europe in order to argue that the tension between artistic modernism and societal modernisation characteristic of European culture in the early part of the twentieth century is reproduced — or, more precisely, transfigured — in postcolonial contexts during the latter half of the twentieth century in differential ways that go beyond the initial correspondence or indebtedness to European forebears.

My argument is based on the widely recognised distinction between modernism as a phenomenon which found its most concentrated expression in European and American art during the early decades of the twentieth century, and modernity or modernisation as the historical realisation of the European Enlightenment project of instrumental rationality, with progress as its goal, and the technological rationalisation of nature and human institutions as its means.

Modernism as a cultural referent suffers from the effect of several ironies. Its efficacy as a descriptive term remains overshadowed by the fact that it is a retrospective nomination, described vividly by Stan Smith as ‘a movement constituted backwards, like Beckett’s series of doggy obituaries, the new dog endlessly buried for the sake of dogs to come’ (240). The notion of ‘modern’ implies a link with the ‘new’, the ‘contemporary’, and ‘the avant-garde’. Yet, as Raymond Williams noted laconically, ‘What was ‘modern’, what was indeed ‘avant-garde’, is now relatively old’ (Williams 52). Thus ‘modern’ is balanced equivocally between a denotation that is historically specific and a connotation that evokes perpetual novelty. More seriously, theorists of diverse ideological persuasions, ranging from American New Criticism to the European intellectual Left as exemplified by Lukács and Adorno, have identified aesthetic autonomy as one of the principal traits unifying most forms of modernism. However, as noted by Peter Bürger in the 1970s, the post-Romantic modernist myth of the autonomy of art inhibits analysis of its aesthetics as ‘the normative instrumentality of an institution in bourgeois society’ (lii). This repression becomes particularly noticeable when modernism is transplanted outside Europe, where its role as an aesthetic principle cannot avoid engagement with the very different social
formations and political ideologies it encounters in postcolonial societies and nations, as I hope to illustrate later.

The autonomy imputed to modernism is misleading in yet another respect: as a movement affecting the arts, modernism is often treated as if it were largely unrelated to the older and concurrent phenomenon of European colonialism. Yet, as many commentators have reiterated, modernist art provides ample evidence for a significant relation between its aesthetic strategies and the impact of colonialism on the cultures of the colonising nations.

In Europe, the relation between modernism and modernisation either generated what Perry Anderson calls ‘cultural despair’ (28), which can be illustrated from a diverse range of writers from Weber to Ortega, Eliot to Tate, and Leavis to Marcuse, or it subsidised various forms of utopian optimism, from Marinetti to Le Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller to Marshall McLuhan. When modernism is transposed outside Europe, the antithesis between despair and utopianism is reproduced in intensified form, and accompanied by several additional ironies.

II MODERNISM AND COLONIALISM

The first irony to the perpetuation of modernist practices outside Europe and the USA is that both the agonistic and the emancipative aspects of modernism were mediated to cultures and societies outside Europe through colonialism, whose institutions were always equivocal between exploiting and educating their colonies. While modernist writing and art were either ambivalent or critical towards the spirit of colonialism, their influence could not have spread to regions outside the West without colonialist institutions and mind-sets. This means that the spirit of radical individualism and experiment that is central to modernism travelled to the colonies and the newly-independent nations of the mid-twentieth century belatedly, either as imitation, or as the local and belated re-enactment of the dialectic between modernity and modernism whose characteristic preoccupations had first developed in the context of European societies and cultures. The transposition raises a question that affects every theory of modernity: is it to be treated as an undifferentiated and global phenomenon, or are its various asynchronous manifestations culture-specific? That is, does modernisation follow the logic of its development regardless of cultural difference, or does it undergo modifications relative to cultural difference?

In a recent essay on ‘Two Theories of Modernity’, Charles Taylor recommends cultural — as opposed to the more widely prevalent acultural — explanations of modernity. The acultural approach supports the assumption ‘that modernity comes from a single, universally applicable operation’, and thus ‘imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialisation’ (Taylor 180). In contrast, Taylor argues, a cultural explanation is better able to recognise that ‘transitions to what we might recognise as modernity, taking place in different civilisations,
will produce different results that reflect their divergent starting points’ (182). The differences are not merely a matter of belated derivativeness. Modernism, as Anderson notes, was ‘a complex set of aesthetic practices’, and ‘the product of a historically unstable form of society and an undecided epoch’ (53). When reproduced outside the West, its strategies have had to respond and adapt to instabilities of a different nature from those confronted by writers like Conrad, Eliot, Valéry, Joyce, Mann, Pound, or Faulkner.

European modernism is equivocal in its attitude to three major issues: colonialism, gender, and the political Right. The anomaly in respect to gender has several consequences for any narrative of modernism. Bonnie Scott, in Refiguring Modernism, draws attention to how ‘the men of modernism, from Pound through Forster, did not have a framework that could include or contain Woolf, West, and Barnes’ (179). As for the reactionary politics of modernism, Pericles Lewis notes, ‘The political paradox of modernism was that literary experiment sometimes participated in the turn to authoritarian nationalism of a d’Annunzio, but just as often led to the cosmopolitan revaluation of national identity implicit in the multilingual punning of Finnegan’s Wake’ (211). When modernist practices are imitated or adapted outside Europe, such equivocations acquire a very different cultural resonance, which supports Charles Taylor’s recommendation that modernism is better accounted for as a plurality of culture-specific phenomena.

The second irony to modernism is that while its European manifestations (as in Conrad or Eliot) exposed a dark underside to the Enlightenment will to progress, the historically belated assimilation of colonised societies into the project of modernity did not permit their writers a corresponding degree of scepticism about the Utopian elements of that project, either in terms of postcolonial nationhood, or the asymmetrical development of capitalist globalisation.

The third irony to modernism is that while its European manifestations — from Gauguin to Picasso, or Lawrence to Eliot — drew upon the otherness of the non-European in transforming its self-image, non-European modernisms could hardly do the same. Instead, they have often ended up discovering or inventing oppositional alterities from within their own cultures. As remarked by John Jarvis in Transgressing the Modern: Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness, ‘The other … retains the capacity not just to inspire fear, but to tempt and fascinate. Disgust and desire can be very close’ (1). My examples will attempt to show how the dialectical play between disgust and fascination in modernist writing outside Europe generates typologies which differ markedly from the role played by the non-European Other in European modernism.

The converse generates a fourth irony. If Europe was busy imaging itself indirectly through its many Others, the colonised were busy trying to gain assimilation into Eurocentric modes, and one of the ways this could be done, as noted by Simon Gikandi, was for ‘colonised writers to use forms and figures borrowed from European modernism as a point of entry into certain aspects of
Western culture’ (15–16). Even if many European modernists may have nursed reservations about colonialism, the influence of modernism outside Europe thus became complicit with a very different agenda, which inadvertently fed the growth of Europe’s continued cultural dominance in a post-imperial era.

Having described modernism as a complex notion riddled with ironies, I propose to examine the implications of the general claims sketched above with reference to the novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer (from Indonesia), and the poet Arun Kolatkar (from India). I propose to argue that in the narratives of Pramoedya, we encounter a tension between modernism as a form of narrative technique and modernisation as a form of socio-historical necessity. In Kolatkar’s case, a surreal poetics grapples with an internalised disenchantment with tradition that is empowered by a habit of skepticism derived from post-Enlightenment rationality. Kolatkar comes from the kind of Sanskritic culture invoked by a modernist like T.S. Eliot. Ironically, it takes an outsider like Eliot to make a value of that which evinces distaste and satire from an insider like Kolatkar. The rapt and needy Orientalism of Eliot turned from his time and place to the Brahmanical pieties of Indic culture for succour and ‘Shantih’. In reverse analogy, Kolatkar berates the internal colonisation practiced on Indian society by its Brahmanical belief systems. Eliot’s distraught disbelief drew grateful sustenance from Indic religions; Kolatkar derives his sardonic and subversive attitude from European models of post-Enlightenment scepticism. The two examples will suggest the more general conclusion that the predicaments of modernism outside Europe become radical transpositions of the ambivalent relation between modernity and modernism in Europe.

II PRAMOEDEYA: THE PRICE OF SOCIAL MODERNITY

Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s Buru Quartet (comprising This Earth of Mankind, Child of All Nations, Footsteps and House of Glass) was composed during a fourteen year detention in a work camp for political prisoners on the Indonesia island of Buru. The novels have been translated into English by Max Lane, who — the Penguin edition indicates — had to leave the Australian embassy in Jakarta in 1981 for having translated Pramoedya. The narrative began as orally composed stories told by Pramoedya to his fellow-prisoners when he had no access to his papers or to writing materials. They were eventually transcribed over the period from 1975 to the late 1980s. That a writer so dedicated to the cause of the idea of nation should be imprisoned by an incarnation of that nation, and his books banned by successive nationalist regimes, constitutes one of the abiding ironies of postcolonial nationhood in Southeast Asia.

The quartet offers a complex and ambitious dramatisation of the impact of, and resistance to, Dutch colonial rule in the East Indies over a period ranging from the 1880s to the 1920s. As a sequence, it provides acute historical analysis in the form of a fictional chronicle. It also represents an instance of what I propose to describe as a specific kind of post-modernist writing, while conceding
that ‘post-modernist’ as a term is even more problematic than ‘modernist’, especially when applied to writing outside Europe or the West. It is used here in the specific and dual sense of writing which assimilates — while remaining distinct from and subsequent to — modernist practices.

Pramoedya’s novels may have had their origins in oral story-telling, but the narrative they constitute is marked by a distinctive self-reflexivity which aligns them firmly with the conscious and writerly manipulation of narrative point-of-view. The manner in which distance in attitude and tone is modulated — between implied author and implied reader, and between author, reader and the fictional narrator — would not be possible without the implication of a written text, patterned to point up contrasts that would be difficult to sustain in oral narrative.

The Buru Quartet is narrated from the point-of-view of two dramatically opposed protagonists. This technique has antecedents in the multiple narrative perspectives exploited by novelists such as James, Ford Madox Ford, Conrad, and Virginia Woolf. In this context, the notion of ‘antecedents’ is meant to suggest a technical lineage and a set of elective affinities, rather than direct influence. In an interview published in Michigan Today (1999), Pramoedya singled out Steinbeck and Saroyan as his admired authors, adding that he learnt English by reading Steinbeck.

The first three novels adopt a first-person mode which familiarises the reader to the life and early career of an individual of exceptional qualities, called Minke, whose character is partially based on an historical person who pioneered journalism in the Dutch Indies. He is portrayed as growing — and then outgrowing — the potentially modernising influence of a Dutch colonial education, a process of intellectual maturation initiated by a woman, Nyai Ontosoroh, the mother of his first wife, and an individual whose acumen transcends her own ethnic and gendered subordination in Javanese society, as the mistress of a Dutch businessman. Pramoedya indicates in his interview for Michigan Today that this woman was modelled on his own mother.

The claim confirms what the early part of the quartet dramatises: the heroic role played by the intuitive and alert woman of exceptional quality, who will show the incipient male leader the path that can lead to his political destiny. Ironically, therefore, the colonies give scope for a more untrammelled politicisation of the impulse to freedom from oppression than found, for example, in D.H. Lawrence’s fictional women, or in Virginia Woolf’s wounded call in Three Guineas, which advises the women of England to withhold support for British participation in the impending World War because their real enemy was not Germany but patriarchy.

Pramoedya’s narrative creates characters who articulate a very precise awareness of their own position in relation to colonial history. They also provide a concrete instance of the general claim made in the first part of my argument that modernism came to Asia as part of colonial influence. In Pramoedya’s case,
it shows itself primarily in terms of narrative technique. His narrative focuses on a familiar historical irony: that the incipient leadership from the colonised parts of Asia learned to demand political freedom from the European nations who denied them that freedom but taught them to recognise its worth. It also provides incidental confirmation for the general plausibility of the hypothesis proposed by Fredric Jameson, that colonial writing is characterised by fictions which allegorise the nation. This is an accurate description of a tendency in works like the *Buru Quartet*. Jameson’s argument has been challenged by Aijaz Ahmad (1986), but it finds incidental support from Pramoedya, who affirmed, in an interview given to the *Los Angeles Times* (1999): ‘I believe that my books, such as the *Buru Quartet*, are part of the process of nation-building’.

Minke becomes a focal point for the growth of nationalist opposition to colonial rule. He first learns to modernise his approach to his own society and its outmoded conventions of thought, belief and practice. He then learns to politicise resistance to colonialism, which happens to be the agent of his transformation. The novel treats his will to modernity with a cautious and increasingly post-modern scepticism. The political drive animated through Minke is problematised by virtue of its European derivativeness. In a double irony repeated throughout the colonial world, the modern patriot learns to ask for self-rule from the European nation who denies him access to the freedom it cherishes for itself. To find parallels or antecedents to this phenomenon within European modernism we have to go to a writer like W.B. Yeats, whose commitment to Irish Revivalism — and his later disenchantment with it — remind us that Ireland was England’s first (and remains its last) overseas colony.

The fourth and final part of the quartet, *House of Glass* (1988), refracts and partially subverts the foregoing narrative by shifting the narrative persona from Minke to a self-serving police commissioner, Pangemanann, who plots against Minke at the behest of his Dutch masters, and brings about his downfall. The novel’s self-reflexivity extends to the relation between Minke and Pangemanann, who embody divergent viewpoints on Javanese history, in such a way that the fourth novel sharply undercuts what Minke has come to represent through the first three novels.

Pramoedya may be said to engage in a dialogic meditation on the problems besetting the advent of a modernity mediated to his society by Dutch colonialism. His analysis is rooted to the specific social formations of Javanese history, confirming the plausibility of the claim introduced above through Taylor, that modernity is *cultural* rather than *acultural* in its formations. The *Quartet* begins by foregrounding Minke; by the end it has foregrounded the problems that beset his kind of optimism. As suggested by John David Morley in *The New York Times Book Review*, ‘Manoeuvred into the background by the plot, he [Minke] is not the book’s true subject — nor is it really the historical awakening of Indonesia. Rather, the author’s chief concern here is with the corrupting influence of colonialism, represented by Pangemanann’ (online).
The specific irony around which Pramoedya develops the relation between the hunter and the hunted is that Pangemanann is apparently sincere in his admiration for the man he destroys: ‘I would now have to spy on and take actions against this man whom I respected and honoured so much’ (*House of Glass*, 8). This tortured character sets up a kind of one-sided, Conrad-like, secret-sharer complex with his victim (a regard unreciprocated by Minke). This technical device gives Pramoedya the opportunity to examine the underside of the double-edged modernity inculcated by colonialism in the Javanese. Pangemanann is articulate not only about his admiration for Minke, but also about his disgust at his own commitment to the ruination of this potentially heroic figure. Pangemanann says of himself: ‘They would never know how he had to bow down, with his tortured conscience, becoming, against his will, a man without principles’ (46).

He is endowed with an analytic frame of mind that is merciless in exposing his own inner corruption. He is living proof that modernity is not the only thing learnt from Europe by the Javanese. His introspections provide the novelist with a vehicle for a sustained analysis of the complex relation between colonialism and the tainted or incomplete modernity it engenders. Pangemanann becomes the mouthpiece for the expression of an embittered irony:

The great teachers beautifully taught about the enlightenment of the world that would be brought by the Renaissance, the *Aufklärung*, about the awakening of humanism, about the overthrow of one class by another that was begun with the French Revolution when the feudal class was removed by the bourgeoisie. They called on the people to side with the progressive march of history. And meanwhile, I was sinking into the disgusting colonial mud. (46–47)

On the one hand, colonial modernity stands for the capacity to foster reason, the rule of law, a love of liberty, and a respect for organisation and order in governance; on the other hand, it has the disabling capacity to foster disjunctions between righteous principles and their duplicitous implementation. Pramoedya thus sets up an antithetical relation between modernism as a mode of historically self-conscious narrative and modernisation as the mixed blessing of historical necessity. In the downfall of Minke, he ends the quartet on a note of pessimism that is bleak without being hopeless.

The dual narrative strategy adopted for the *Quartet* as a whole dramatises several types of complicity: between indigenous nationalism and the elite colonial education system; between women as the agents of modernity and as the victims of patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and colonialism; between colonial rule as the enabler and the disabler of social revolution; between the colonised intellectual as enlightened analyst of his society, and its self-serving, self-loathing subverter. The sequence leaves the reader with a deeply ambiguous sense of what modernity has entailed for Javanese society, and by extension, for other colonial societies on the cusp of similar changes.
Pramoedya conveys, in no uncertain terms, the inevitability and desirability of modernity, but he is also insistent on its cost to traditional modes of life in Java. A post-modernist technique is deployed to present a view of peoples before they have learnt to recognise themselves as modern nations. In this proleptic and minatory perspective, the complex relations between agency, power, and victimisation are shown as ominously poised between progress and misrule. A narrative technique derived from modernism is applied with great skill and force to open the anxiety that modernity might be a flawed but necessary blessing. Or, to put it differently, the novelist acknowledges and blesses modernity as a flawed necessity.

III KOLATKAR AND THE UNEASY PLEASURES OF MODERNITY

Kolatkar studied art before taking up a professional career in advertising and the graphic arts in Mumbai (the covers of his books are based on his designs). He began writing poems during the 1950s: first in Marathi, then in English and from Marathi into English, and also the other way round. By the 1960s, his sparse output had acquired a coterie reputation among poets in Marathi. This was transformed into wider local and international recognition when the English-language *Jejuri* (1976) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. *Jejuri* remains the single most striking sequence of poems in English written by an Indian. It was followed in 1977 by a collection of his Marathi poems. A long gap of over thirty years ensued before the Marathi poems of the intervening years were collected in *Cirimiri* (2003). The English poems and adaptations since 1977 remained uncollected for a long time, giving his career a certain throwaway quality that is not without its Dadaesque elements. The publication of *Sarpa Satra* and *Kala Ghoda* in 2004 (in English), concurrent with the publication of another Marathi volume, made 2003 and 2004 the *annis mirabilis* of his career.

The notion of ‘Kolatkar the poet’ begs a question: which Kolatkar? Any attempt at an answer must avoid splitting the English from the Marathi writing. Kolatkar’s subject matter remains Indian, whether in English or Marathi; his two languages handle Indian preoccupations with attitudes influenced by modern Western art and poetry. This remains true of the poems in either language. What differs is the ease with which cultural and social connotations evoked in Marathi have to look — with varying degrees of success — for equivalences in English. Kolatkar’s bilingualism, therefore, provides an opportunity to test the question of how — or how far — modernist practices can be transposed from one language and culture into another.

Poetry in Marathi came into its own in the thirteenth century. The tradition is distinguished by a genealogy of poet-saints from Dnyaneshwar (13th century AD) to Tukaram (17th century AD), who promoted forms of devotion that gave voice to the plight of the underdog, and offered resistance to the caste-system that still dominates Indian society. Kolatkar relates to this tradition in an ambivalent spirit. Like them, he rebels against the inert weight of tradition; but
he also subscribes to a trust in rationality and scepticism that is at least in part a legacy of the introduction of post-Macaulay-1835 models of Western education into India. In that sense, the modernity of outlook that alienates him from aspects of his own society is comparable to that dramatised by Pramoedya in Minke. In Kolatkar’s case, an old and internal Indian enemy — Brahmanism — is resisted with the aid of two unlikely allies: subaltern vernacular poetry, and Western modernist art practice.

what is god
and what is stone
the dividing line
is very thin
at jejuri

(\textit{Jejuri} 28)

\textit{Jejuri} dramatises a mood of alienation from the dereliction of the Hindu modes of worship prevalent in Maharashtra, as exemplified by the worship of a shrine at Jejuri, which is thirty miles from the city of Pune. Modern irony excoriates idol-worship, superstition, corruption and decay. But the poet has no alternative to sardonic melancholy. He has nothing to fill the void left by unbelief. The faith that animated the oral tradition of Marathi poetry is gone, even though the memory of its simplicity, directness, honesty, integrity, and resilience remains as an elective affinity, now turned inside out. Like them, Kolatkar would like to resist the weight of hypocrisy and can’t, but what can he rely on? He turns to irony, irreverence, and a spirit of anarchy borrowed and adapted from a specific corner of the Modernist spectrum. All those who have written on Kolatkar agree on his Western debts. For instance, Philip Engblom, who teaches Marathi at the University of Chicago, and translates Marathi poetry into English, highlights the degree to which Kolatkar’s poetry had its origins in a Marathi rebel fringe which drew its inspiration from a miscellany of influences ranging from ‘the European Dadaists, Futurists, and Surrealists to the contemporary Beats of the United States’ (online).

Kolatkar’s bilingualism refracts facets of the relationship between modernity and modernism not exemplified by Pramoedya. The Javanese novelist applies an analytic and sombre cast of mind to the political dimensions of colonial modernity. The Indian poet is much less overtly political. His art is gnomic and glancing. It takes the risk of appearing facetious in order to avoid the semblance of earnestness. It risks appearing socially uncommitted. It does not hide its alienation. It also wears its post-modernism flamboyantly on its sleeve. Yet the aggressive nonchalance of its style barely conceals a troubled sensibility. Kolatkar may be described as flirting with the kind of predicament dramatised by Stevie Smith in ‘not waving but drowning’. This unsettling quality can be illustrated from a poem which, after evoking the busy passage of a motorcade through an urban setting, ends on a characteristic note of surreal emptiness that is reminiscent of the urban nightscapes of de Chirico:

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\end{quote}
... traffic lights
that seem to have eyes only for each other
and who like ill-starred lovers
fated never to meet
but condemned to live forever and ever
in each other’s sight
continue to send signals to each other
throughout the night
and burn with the cold passion of rubies
separated by an empty street.

(2004b 162)

This is both fanciful and desolate, a far cry from Auden’s ‘September 1, 1939’, in which he hoped that the wise, like ‘ironic points of light’, might send signals to each other and sustain humanity while Europe was darkened by the imago of Hitler. Kolatkar’s modernity is a matter of attitude, or rather, of what is half-concealed beneath a habit of uneasy urbanity. He differs from Pramoedya in a number of ways: temperament, choice of genre, tone, and social context. Yet the significance of their writing converges on a common problem. Each accepts European modernity as the agent for the transformation of local sensibility (in Kolatkar’s case, his own; in Pramoedya’s case, that of the Javanese). Each also tackles culturally specific variations of an ethical question. This question focuses on the fate of values in a society shaped by colonial influence. In what direction are individuals and groups to shape their lives and objectives in light of their specific circumstance in time and place? What is the ‘good’ life or the ‘right’ action in the here and now of their society? In Pramoedya’s case, the source of the influence is the Dutch imperial system. In the case of Kolatkar, colonialism is encountered in two ways: positively, as access to new linguistic and formal techniques; negatively, as an internalised colonisation that turns against an older analogue, the Brahmanical imperialism of Hindu India.

Kolatkar’s assimilation of modernist influence can be illustrated through a brief analysis of the following poem, whose Marathi version, ‘Takta’ (alphabet-chart), ends the collection Arun Kolatkarchya Kavita (1977). I propose to examine the nuances of translation raised by the mimicry of a Shandyean lesson in children’s education through two English adaptations: one by the author, and the other by the US-based academic and poet Vinay Dharwadker. Here is the major part of Kolatkar’s adaptation:

Pictures from a Marathi Alphabet Chart

Mortar. Sugarcane. Ram.
How secure they all look
each ensconced in its own separate square.
Medicine Bottle. Man Touching his Toes.
All very comfortable,  
they all know exactly where they belong  
Each one of them seems to have found  
its own special niche, a sinecure  
....  
The mother will not pound the baby with a pestle.  
The Brahmin will not fry the duck in garlic.  
That ship will not crash against the watermelon.  
If the ostrich won’t eat the child’s frock,  
The archer won’t shoot an arrow in Ganapati’s stomach.  
And as long as the ram resists the impulse  
of butting him from behind  
what possible reason  
could the Man-Touching-his-Toes have  
to smash the cup on the tombstone?  
(Kolatkar 1993 68–69)

And these are the corresponding stanzas from Vinay Dharwadker’s version:

The Alphabet

anvil arrow bow box and brahmin  
cart chariot cloud and compost heap  
are all sitting in their separate squares  
corn cup deer duck and frock  
ganesh garlic hexagon and house  
all have places of their own  
inkpot jackfruit kite lemon and lotus  
mango medicine mother old man and ostrich  
are all holding their proper positions  
....  
the mother won’t put her baby on the compost heap  
the brahmin won’t season the duck with garlic  
the yacht won’t hit the watermelon and sink  
unless the ostrich eats the baby’s frock  
the warrior won’t shoot an arrow into ganesh’s belly  
and if the ram doesn’t knock down the old man  
why would he need to smash the cup on the tombstone  
to smash the cup on the tombstone?  
(Dharwadker 116)

The two adaptations relate to one another through an ‘original’ that is transformed  
for the reader by the translators’ attempt to remain ‘true’ to an idea of the ‘original’  
poem. The differences between the two adaptations sensitise reading to how the  
idea of an ‘original’ holds possibilities of signification in latent form, which the  
act of adaptation can develop in this or that direction. The poem dramatises
several social issues, while pursuing an apparently straightforward whimsy concerning the surreal possibilities latent in a children’s alphabet-chart. This familiar classroom tool introduces to children the basic building blocks of language as sounds and letters by linking them to familiar objects or persons in ordinary life. Each of the first five stanzas from the 22-line poem in Marathi begins with mimicry of a class recitation in which the nouns that correspond to the sounds of the alphabet are enumerated as a list, each sound linked for the child’s benefit to an image. The resulting assortment of nouns also produces a set of random collocations, which provide the poet opportunity for playful fantasy. Nouns are placed in subject-object relations by verbs that have no care for the anarchy that results when the rules of grammar are observed without care for plausibility.

The reader has to work out the logic of the enumeration, which follows the traditional Marathi sequence of vowels and consonants. Dharwadker replaces this ‘ee aa o ou’ sequence with the alphabetical series of English. The logic of ‘a, b, c’ as a sequence gives him license to invent his own nouns: ‘anvil arrow bow box and brahmin’. The words are unrelated except through orthographic and phonological accident. They happen to be nouns that begin with the appropriate letter of the alphabet. Thus ‘b’ might be illustrated plausibly and randomly not just with ‘bow’ or ‘box’ but ‘buffalo’ or ‘brinjal’, and so on.

Interesting things start happening when ‘b’ is illustrated by Dharwadker with ‘brahmin’. In an Indian context, this choice is plausible but unlikely. Its subtle inappropriateness for the dramatic context makes it apt for the poetic context, because it prompts the reader to wonder why this particular illustrative noun has been selected. In contemporary experience, brahmins are more ordinary and ubiquitous than anvils or arrows or even buffalos and brinjals, yet those objects do not create the buzz of ‘brahmin’. The word connotes caste, which is embedded deeper than class in India, and stirs associations that can be powerful and discomfiting. To introduce the basic divisions in Indian society as part of introducing the basic letters of an alphabet would hinder rather than aid teaching. Dharwadker capitalises on the opportunity to drop the word into the verse line, like a pebble into a smooth pond, whereas Kolatkar uses the word much later, in his fourth stanza. In any case, ‘brahmin’ in English is bland and neutral, unlike Kolatkar’s ‘bhatji’, which is comic and derogatory.

This cultural significance might not be readily accessible to readers outside India or Maharashtra. ‘Bhatji’ is both less and more than ‘brahmin’. It refers to a priest who makes his living by performing religious rituals on behalf of other non-priestly brahmins. In other words, his caste has placed him in the indispensable position of mediating between the community and its religion. In Kolatkar’s poetic world, the brahmin is interloper, predator, and parasite. ‘Bhatji’ inhabits a tonal spectrum somewhere between jocular and rude. Ironically, Kolatkar belongs by birth to the brahmin caste. Marathi-speaking readers are unlikely to miss this irony, since Marathi surnames are indicators of caste
affiliations. The irony of an anti-brahmin brahmin might be lost to readers unfamiliar with Marathi.

Dharwadker sharpens the effect of ‘Brahmin’ in English by introducing ‘compost heap’ in the next verse line. The recitation of an alphabet-chart is part of a system of socialisation whose broader function would be compromised if one were to illustrate sound or letters with the most disconcerting nouns from contemporary society, simply because the ugly or the upsetting is as much a part of reality as the banal and the ordinary. Dharwadker pushes the playful aspects of Kolatkar’s juxtapositions into a more threatening posture. Foregrounding ‘brahmin’ and ‘compost heap’ is only marginally milder than asking children to recite ‘C for car-crash’, or ‘R for rapist’, or ‘S for suicide’. It induces a collusion of implications that can leave the reader wondering if Brahmanism belongs in a dumpster, since it has become an outworn and derelict institution.

The poem’s satire is more evenly shared between the Marathi and the two adaptations in another respect: the pictorial convention of separating each letter and corresponding image in a box provides Kolatkar with an opportunity for mild subversion. The squares can be taken to stand for the first subliminal lesson in segregation. It becomes the first intimation, in the child’s world, of the kind of classification system that created the caste-system of India. Difference and deference, uniqueness and separateness thus come together in Kolatkar’s playful twist to the pedagogic exercise that he mimics. The holding of ‘proper positions’ appears an innocent exercise, which keeps disorder at bay while introducing reason through the categories of knowledge.

The issue of holding positions is reiterated in the last line of the first five stanzas, like variations on a refrain. It reiterates the need to keep position as the key to ideological integration and social stability. The phrasing is richer in cultural nuance in Marathi, whereas in English, the connotations are flattened out in the interests of a smoother syntax. When nouns are activated by verbs, and grammar permits random positions for subjects and objects, the semantics that gives society its order can be derailed. The poem recognises that the conjugations that work as grammar are an analogy to the structural or ethical foundations on which society depends for its notion of normalcy and order. The poem opens up such conventions to what we might call additional, poststructuralist conjugations.

These, if actualised, would wrench the orderliness assumed by the chart. In that sense, the poem first arouses, and then allays, fears of which the chart is either ignorant or deceptive. In the poem, the nouns of the chart move out of their secure containers, and once they start interacting, the resulting syntax creates a grammar whose semantics is both possible and inconceivable, or logically realisable but socially undesirable. The result is far more threatening than the linguist Noam Chomsky’s example of an utterance that is grammatically possible even if otherwise implausible: ‘green ideas sleeping furiously’.

A Shandyean child, who starts freeing nouns from their boxes in the classroom, could go out into the world and free people from their caste or station and role in
life, unleashing a huge potential for fun and disorder. The poet indulges both sides of the fantasy. Thus, mothers might throw their babies into dumpsters, bramhins might abandon vegetarianism, ships collide with fruit and capsize, and so on. Of course, all these things do occur, though we might not want to tell children that, or at least not when they are still in alphabet-school. The poem speculates fantastically on what is conceivable once the relations that ensure stability in society are set free of conventional codes of conduct. The poem ends on a rhetorical question that remains ambiguous: if the order the child is taught will hold, then there will be no need to smash the cup (that holds and contains) on the tombstone (that bespeaks the dead). Its open-endedness leaves the door ajar for the other alternative: what if all this will not hold? The scope for anarchy inherent, concealed, or latent in the child’s world is thus given recognition with a technique that balances modernist angst with postmodern insouciance.

In such art, the belated spirit of modernism can be said to prosper in direct proportion to how it is transposed to deal with the agonistic and emancipative possibilities of its own time and place. What Kolatkar shows, in a style and genre that complements Pramoedya, is how the fortunes of modernism outside Europe take on lives of their own, to follow tangents that preoccupy specific parts of a formerly colonial world, where they teach themselves to do two things at once: to live with, and to shed, their sense of the ‘post-’ from the ‘-modern’ as well as the ‘-colonial’.

* The sections on Arun Kolatkar appear in slightly different form in Rajeev S. Patke’s *Postcolonial Poetry in English* (OUP 2005).

WORKS CITED


ALAMGIR HASHMI

BIRDS IN A TREE: AN ELEGY*

Before they took wing
the legend was there.

They sat together (which
seemed like necking to some)
on this branch for a spring.
It was an old tree,
an oak, sans intention,
and free.

Come September, the air
goes nipping through the woods
instinct to the root,
keening.

Of a feather,
they chirped a while

and fell silent.
Up in the blue turning to look

at this vanishing sight,
the sunset gold of leaf-fall,

a tree
that is wood to a fault
yet live from its own convention.

* From an earlier draft manuscript by Alamgir Hashmi, in the archives of the Dickens Memorial Library (U.K.).
Postcolonialism in an Anti-Colonial State: Unity Dow and Modern Botswana

Until Unity Dow began to write, almost no Batswana writers of fiction had produced books which reached the world outside, and the reasons for this were partly cultural and partly material. Botswana has more than a century’s history of defensive resistance to influences from the other states of southern Africa. The lack of investment in infrastructure and education before independence has also played a role in enforcing literary silence. When the Bechuanaland Protectorate became independent in 1966, there were a few miles of tarred road and three high schools in the whole country. Industry was almost non-existent, and commercial enterprises were few, typically small-scale and confined to the informal sector. In these circumstances the only literary voice which reached the outside world was that of a South African exile, Bessie Head, who is not my present subject,1 and whose writings were subject to the objection, justified or not, that they lacked the authenticity of the indigene’s account.

Dow’s novels, *Far and Beyon’* (2000) and *The Screaming of the Innocent* (2001), offer her interpretation of a small national society whose members differ greatly in their lifestyles, and are widely dispersed in geographical placing. Though the persons and events of her novels are fictional, her tone makes it clear that she would claim that the circumstances — the AIDS epidemic, the corruption of the police force, the occurrence of ritual murder, the habit of concealment — are real parts of modern Botswana. So, presumably, are the kinds of positions occupied by her heroines, who with effort and determination make their way to positions where they are entitled to power and influence. In interpreting the society in which she lives, Dow joins a tradition of southern African writing, in which the most famous practitioner is Nadine Gordimer, whose ‘history from the inside’ (Clingman 1986) has offered an understanding of South Africa’s recent past and present to many readers. Clingman acknowledges the problems of such writing:

Gordimer is caught up in the midst of the processes she is attempting to depict. At the same time as she engages with history she is moulded by the patterns and forces she must try to assess. As much as she is an observer of the life around her, she is still a social participant in what she observes. If hers is a ‘history from the inside’, that is to say, it is not only privileged but also confined by its ‘inside’ position. (2)

This must be equally the case for Dow, with the extra condition that she is deeply involved in public life, who has on occasion taken a public and oppositional
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stance as regards national policies. Nevertheless, Clingman’s claim that ‘fiction deals with an area of activity usually inaccessible to the sciences of greater externality: the area in which historical process is registered as the subjective experience of individuals in society’ (1986 1) is significant in Dow’s case. Her subjectivity is of two kinds: the novels as a whole present the vision of a single Batswana woman, ‘confined by [her] “inside” position’; and in the course of the works the perceptions and judgements of particular subjects are offered to the reader. These subjective understandings are essential to the moral-historical purposes of the works, since the imaginative recreations of individual thought processes reveal what their society is at pains to conceal.

My main focus here is on the more ambitious of Dow’s novels to date, The Screaming of the Innocent, which is larger in organisation though only marginally longer than her first novel, and which resembles organisationally a nineteenth-century English novel. It may seem inappropriate to claim a resemblance between Dow’s novel and George Eliot’s fiction, but Felix Holt is a survey and an interpretation of a society which suffers from the estrangement from each of its component members. Because the major subject of The Screaming of the Innocent is the interactions between sections of the Botswana national community, the action moves between a remote village on the fringes of the Okavango; the bush which surrounds the village, its clinic and its kgotla [traditional assembly]; another village in which the heroine grew up and its school, government offices, a firm of lawyers and a restaurant in Gaberone; a police station in a rural centre and the secret meetings of the dipheko [ritual murder] men, as well as the comfortable middle class home of one of them. Different groups, with different degrees of power in the country, are depicted in all these places but, except in the village, where kinship and friendship are important, it is the power over one’s fellows which derives from wealth and office that prevails. The village is not immune from corruption, but people who live there are not powerful.

Botswana society as Dow perceives it is not characterised by unity or mutual support, and the absence of these qualities is disabling to the nation. The breakdown of unity is not a matter of recent political divisions. Not only the republic of Botswana but the political unity of the territory which it occupies and the social bonds between the people who inhabit it are relatively new, despite the fact that the country is not strictly speaking a colonial but an anti-colonial creation. According to Julian Mockford, the unifier, Khama the Great, was born about 1828 and, crucially, baptised a Christian in 1862 (Mockford 1931). As chief of the Bamangwato people, he ruled a land beset by Boers from the Transvaal, Germans from South West Africa, Matabele from Zimbabwe and British from the Cape Colony. He attracted to himself other peoples who needed the protection of a great chief. In 1885 he negotiated with the British, whom he took to be the safest protectors available, that his territories should become the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland. Khama’s Christianity was the central force in his
life: his subjects were obliged to join the London Missionary Society church, his kgotla opened with a prayer; he prohibited polygamy and initiation rituals as well as the sale of alcohol (Mockford 75). Throughout his long life (he died only in 1925) he was able to secure his country against annexation or large-scale white settlement. His nation, which has evolved into modern Botswana, nevertheless did not have the simple unity of a people who believed in their common ancestry.

I am not suggesting that this simple unity was a norm in nineteenth- or twentieth-century southern Africa: Sol Plaatje was probably the first novelist-historian to depict, in Mhudi (1930), the upheavals of peoples in the subcontinent and the new alliances which characterised the period. Terence Ranger has pointed out more recently that the heterogeneity, social and economic, of African peoples in the nineteenth century was general:

...nineteenth-century Africa was not characterised by lack of internal social and economic competition, by the unchallenged authority of the elders, by an acceptance of custom which gave every person — young and old, male and female — a place in society which was defined and protected. Competition, movement, fluidity were as much features of small-scale societies as they were of larger groupings. (248)

These ‘features’, however prevalent, were likely to be more evident in a newly constituted state than elsewhere. Though Khama’s subjects in his lifetime were to a degree held in political and economic stasis and therefore in sameness of condition by his power, by fear of foreign pressures, and by British parsimony, Dow’s thesis is that in the present, when these pressures have been weakened or removed, economic competitiveness, and all the forces which proceed from it, are working disruptively throughout Botswana.

The Act of Union of 1910 ‘provided for the eventual transfer of Bechuanaland … to South Africa,’ but this provision was qualified by the proviso that ‘the transfer was to take place only after consultation with the chiefs and following the approval of the British Parliament’ (Picard 11). The Batswana chiefs consistently and ‘firmly opposed’ the transfer of sovereignty to South Africa (Picard 11), and Botswana resistance to South African interference, and indeed to all outside influence, is now a tradition established in the nineteenth century and reinforced in the twentieth. The natural increase in population and the absence of investment within the Protectorate obliged Batswana people to seek wage labour in South Africa, especially in the mining industry. Migrancy, with all the disruptive social effects which Head and Dow portray, in the case of the latter through her references to the AIDS epidemic, became an important part of the Bechuanaland economy. Underdevelopment at home is a necessary stimulus to migrancy, and the will of South Africa to use Bechuanaland, later Botswana, as a reservoir of labour was an influence on the British government and a factor in preventing investment. Rural areas, especially those remote from Gaberone, and where water supplies were short, remained undeveloped, and an imbalance
between rural poverty and the urban areas, which Dow shows as having worsened in recent times, began to develop.

After the marriage of Seretse Khama to a British woman in 1948, when South Africa’s anger at the heir of a black ruling family’s making a cross-racial marriage appears to have influenced Britain’s decision to exile Seretse Khama, Botswana’s determination to remain separate became stronger. As first president (and representative of the previously ruling house) from 1966 until 1980, Seretse Khama opposed any kind of alliance or even appearance of friendship with South Africa. Zimbabwe in this period was in the throes of its war of independence, and ties to a white government, already evidently to be toppled, would have been undesirable. Under later presidents similar policies have been followed.

Conservatism and a respect for structures perceived as traditional is part of the Botswana ethos. The occasions of dislocation from the past in Botswana, perhaps because there have been several of them — Khama’s accession to the throne as a Christian monarch, his social decrees, the establishment of the Protectorate — have not been as complete as in other countries; the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 in South Africa, for example, produced a more radical disruption in a pre-colonial society, if only because it brought about the confiscation of land.

The term ‘traditional’ is however at least as problematic in Botswana as in all other postcolonial countries; many peoples, with different languages and cultures, sought security under Khama and though Tswana is the official language, it has not supplanted the others. Yet though it would be inaccurate to claim that Bamangwato ethnicity and the national identity of the Batswana are identical, it must not be forgotten that as Leroy Vail has pointed out, ethnicity is a recent construct, to a great extent contemporaneous throughout southern Africa with the construction by Khama the Great of the modern nation which was to become Botswana (Vail 1–19). Recognising this, we must also recognise that any fellow feeling between individuals in tribe or nation is likely to depend on personal generosity or a learnt sense of community, and may be absent from the ambitious and unscrupulous.

Influences from outside Botswana have not so much been imposed (with the exception of Khama’s Christianisation of his people and his social decrees) as found attractive and voluntarily adopted when they reached the country. Amongst these imports has been the value for material riches (cars, luxurious houses) and the Western education which has the potential to improve the lifestyle of the whole community or to place great power in the hands of a few.

No simple model of colonist and colonised nor configuration of white self and black other which might follow from such a model is applicable in Botswana. Its present postcoloniality is a matter of influences imported in the post-independence period as much as those accepted during the days of the Protectorate. White residents in the past have been mainly officials, whose residence was temporary, or settlers in numbers which allowed them to be absorbed readily into Botswana life. In the present there is a small population of foreign business
people and people concerned to offer expertise related to welfare work in the community. In *The Screaming of the Innocent* the only white person is a visitor from Britain who is instructed by a young lawyer on the value of the Botswana way of life, with respect to its difference from Britain (112–13).

Dow represents in her novels a general unwillingness to admit that Botswana society may be defective, and a tendency to prefer the concealment which in *Far and Beyon’* she depicts as allowing cruel sexism to continue, and in *The Screaming of the Innocent* as offering only token condemnation of more extreme practices. The country as she portrays it is a place where individuals, rural and urban, rich and poor, belong simultaneously to the world of their remote ancestors, the pre-Christian peoples whom Khama the Great united, to the Protestant Christian world which he established —and which retained many of the social values derived from its past — and to the sceptical, individualist-materialist world of the present, whose values have been imported after 1966 together with the institutions of the modern world. Her characters choose, or alternatively are chosen by, any one of the systems of animism, Christianity, opportunistic individualism or a combination of some or all of these. The hybridity of these people is an unstable mix which differs between individuals, but is not the less real because the Batswana are less inclined to acknowledge it than other nations.

Dow’s sense is that Botswana patriarchy is strong but not absolute, and that the place allowed to women in the family at least is an important one: *Far and Beyon’* begins with the heroine’s mother’s joy at her birth and her happy sense of the child’s future. Mara, the mother, is a woman held in traditional patterns by her lack of education and economic opportunities. When AIDS strikes down her two elder sons, she can only understand her losses in the traditional way: they must be the result of the malice of a secret enemy. Such an understanding is divisive to her small community and can do nothing to halt the epidemic. Mosa, whose full name given in celebration of her birth is *Mosadi* — woman — is the girl who changes this.

The differences between the compromises in belief made by individuals are shown to be conditioned by many circumstances: whether they live in a rural or urban area, the degree of their access to education, their material success, their gender, and their temperaments and interests. Their multiple loyalties may be innocent: Mara, though she seeks enlightenment concerning the deaths of her sons from a diviner, is also committed to a form of Christianity (13–15; 156–57). Her lack of formal education and generational placing allow her to remain undisturbed by the conflicts between her different belief systems. Her daughter, Mosa, and her son, Stan, indulge their mother by taking part in the funeral and cleansing ceremonies but are aware of questions unanswered and problems unsolved.

Dow shows that more damaging than ideological confusion is a nihilism common amongst the powerful, who are aware of, yet secretly contemptuous of, all the belief systems in their society and the frequently inconsistent compromises
between coexistent values made by its members. Secret transgression and the outraging of all moralities are the markers of strength amongst these depraved individuals, who use power to oblige others to accept what they do. In *Far and Beyon’* a conversation takes place in a staff meeting in a school:

‘Like I said the last time when this topic came up, I do not see what we can do about the problem of girls falling pregnant. Girls will always fall pregnant, that is just the way things are. That is nature. So I say we have heard the figures, let us just pray to God we do not lose any more girls and let us go on to the last item on the agenda.’

…

Mr Merake was invited to make a comment. ‘I have to agree with Mr Kolo. If these girls are loose there is nothing we can do about it. Maybe it is even best that the really bad ones become pregnant and leave early before they corrupt the rest of the school. You know what they say about a rotten apple.’

Those who did not agree had long given up trying to put their views forward.

(140–41)

These men habitually use their power over their pupils to seduce them, but have no difficulty projecting responsibility for the sex they demand on to their victims and implicitly asserting that males have no causative role in extramarital pregnancies. Mr Merake’s comment about loose girls is a piece of double-standard moralising, and the two speakers are inviting the rest of the staff to become complicit, as we are elsewhere told the educational authorities are complicit, in a cruel and exploitative process. Their colleagues do not actively oppose them, and this is a crucial point for Dow, from which much of the subject matter of *The Screaming of the Innocent* proceeds.

She will use such nihilistic figures in her second novel, showing that they are destructive because they acknowledge no obligation to their society which might prevent them from preying on their fellows. They could not, however, act as they do if their society were not profoundly male-favouring. In Chapter Fourteen of *Far and Beyon’*, for example, Mosa and her brother, Stan, discuss the moral precepts given to a man and woman who are to be married traditionally. Husband and wife are instructed separately:

‘Well, Uncle Maruping did advise Tshepo to try to avoid hitting his wife. He said … he said … if he ever had to hit her he should not hit her around the face.’ Stan stopped, his body tense as if he was expecting an explosion. Mosa said nothing but her look made it clear that she expected the whole story.

‘And Rra-Masu added that he was never to use his bare hands to hit his wife. He said a belt or a switch, but never his bare hands. He said that a man who uses bare hands could get into trouble as he could easily kill his wife…He also advised that the first year would be critical in establishing his authority.’ (143)

The series of precepts given to the wife is more formal:

‘A wife holds on to the house pillar for support and comfort before shouting about her problems.’
'A wife does not ask her husband where he has been.'
'A husband may go chopping in a neighbouring field. Only a wife with long ears will hear things she does not need to hear.'
A husband served cold food will go looking for warm food someplace else.'

...'
'There is no house without a leaking roof but you do not see women in the streets telling all and sundry of their problems.' (151)

Stan’s embarrassment suggests that there are forces at work in his society which cause him to feel shame at the way in which gendered roles in marriage are defined, the male being encouraged to see his wife as his destined victim and the wife being pressed to accept this role. The existence of other codes is apparent in the way that both the man and the woman are being taught concealment: Tshepo is being instructed not to hit his wife in a way which will allow people to see the evidence of his violence, and not to kill her because the law will punish him. His wife is being taught to conceal his infidelity or neglect. Society’s indulgence of men who are grossly exploitative of women is apparent in both novels, but in The Screaming of the Innocent Dow has linked it to more dangerous forms of self-indulgence which are tacitly allowed to men.

In The Screaming of the Innocent an important element which symbolises the lingering beliefs of the pre-Christian past, and at the same time present-day class and gender inequalities of an extreme kind, is the cultural practice of dipheko, which involves the ‘harvesting’ of organs from living children for magical purposes. They are believed to bring good luck and material prosperity to the men who obtain them. Men who live in what economists call the modern sector avail themselves of such ‘medicine’, in the knowledge that they can buy the silence of the authorities and prevent the investigation of their victims’ disappearances. Dow’s Botswana is one where the rich can easily exercise such powers, because of the alienation between rural and urban people. This alienation is not ignorance or detachment: the rich and urban prey on the poor and rural, and to that extent they need them.

Some people live outside, or are relatively independent of the structures of power: the young people of Tirelo Sechaba, the national service organisation, belong to this group. Though most of them are indifferent to what is happening, and long to return to modernity and its comforts in Gaberone, the best of these young people are shown as being the hope of their nation. To spend a year in Tirelo Sechaba is a necessary preliminary to tertiary education.

Dow makes it clear that ‘nihilistic’ individuals are to be found in every area of Botswana society where power is exercised, and the first three chapters of The Screaming of the Innocent are devoted to insights into the minds of men who will carry out a dipheko murder. Each chapter, offering the secret thought processes of a man willing to kill a child to serve his purposes, answers questions about how men can be attracted to such a monstrous crime. In the first chapter,
the reader is offered the reflections of Mr Disanka, a successful businessman, who whilst congratulating himself on his achievements watches a little girl skipping with her friends and plans her murder. Dow’s rendering of Disanka’s thoughts shows that his feelings for his intended victim move between the sexual and the predatory.

‘God, she’s perfect’, he whispered to himself. The body was just right. She had no bulbous protrusions yet — he could barely make out the two nodes, just ready for his purposes. And what a tight little butt she had. He was sure that when she was skipping, under her flailing arms was exposed fine fur, not yet hair…. She was just right for harvesting. As he watched and his mind went back to the previous harvesting, memory crushed into anticipation, and a pool of pleasure spread through his body. (5–6)

As he watches the child, Disanka complacently reviews his behaviour as a husband, a lover, a father and a public-spirited member of the community. Interwoven with these thoughts are the suggestions of the narrator that everything in Disanka’s life has the purpose of serving his own pleasure and aggrandisement. The account of his life is prefaced by the sentence, ‘He was, by all accounts, a good man’ (1). Public opinion — which is aware of the fact that he is habitually promiscuous, and though a loving father to his legitimate children, careless of the illegitimate — is willing to pass this verdict on him because he is rich and powerful and on the surface generous. It is made clear that in the making of this monster of self-indulgence, his community must take responsibility — he is ‘a man who lived within the society’s boundaries’ (3). This is not quite true: Mr Disanka wishes to appropriate what even his community would deny him, but it is as a result of the indulgence extended to him by his community that his desires have become so extreme.

The second chapter presents a different case: Bokae, a headman who is permanently dissatisfied because he believes that he ought to have been a chief, and who, as a minor magistrate, ‘hated women, chiefs, lawyers and parliamentarians’ (11), because each group claims or possesses rights which he believes should be his. His anger has estranged him from his society and he is brutal to all over whom he has power.

The third man, Sebaki, is a deputy headmaster who resents the limitations of his position, and who habitually resorts to ‘witchcraft’ (19) to secure the promotion which the narrator shows that he does not deserve. Through ‘the region’s network of witchdoctors’ Disanka learns that he is likely to agree to join them. The exchange between the men when Sebaki is recruited for their project indicates that they share a perverse value system which is secret but known to all those who seek unmerited advancement:

‘We’re looking for a man with a hard heart, a heart of stone, a heart of a real man.’
The selection criterion.
‘You’ve found your man, sir.’ He was a confident applicant.
‘What is this man I’ve found willing to do?’
‘Anything. Everything. The ultimate thing.’ He was firm.

‘The ultimate thing?’

‘Yes, the ultimate thing.’

‘We’re hunting a lamb.’ Mr Disanka paused and watched his captive’s eyes. ‘What kind of lamb are we hunting?’

‘A hairless lamb,’ came the whispered answer. (2003 21)

Sebaki knows the formula; he has contemplated this kind of crime before. Though I have called such men nihilistic, implying that they are contemptuous of all the decencies which people in society acknowledge, Disanka, Bokae and Sebaki are not without beliefs, since they desire the potent magic that can be made from organs cut from a living child, but these beliefs are monstrously beyond what any sincere member of a society, Christian or animist, can hold.

By the fourth chapter the murder of the little girl has taken place in the bush outside the village where she lives, and has been hushed up by the police and people powerful in the state, though the reader learns this later. The ritual dismemberment takes place just off-stage in the novel, because ‘just off-stage’ is its positioning for the entire society.

The protagonist who will empower the villagers against the forces of official inertia has to be a girl who can understand and bridge the gaps in society. Leroy Vail quotes a Tswana proverb, ‘women have no tribe’ (Vail 15) and it appears, both from the protagonist and from the woman head of Tirelo Sechaba, that women are indeed far less integrated into the structures of power than men in Botswana. Vail writes of the propensity of southern African women to seek ‘to act independently, even to the extent of seeking divorces or leaving the rural areas…. This produced acute conflict between the genders’ (Vail 15). It is clear in Dow’s novels that she is deeply interested in women’s wish to act independently, as well as in the conflicts which are produced by their insistence on doing so. Amantle Bokaa in The Screaming of the Innocent resembles Mosa in Far and Beyon’ in that she is empowered by knowing herself the brightest in her humble rural family, chosen by her parents for education. She is for a year a member of Tirelo Sechaba. Sent to work in the rural area which includes Gaphala, she understands what has happened there though she may not be effective in supplying a remedy. She is a relatively sophisticated young woman, with connections in the capital.

In the clinic to which Amantle has been sent there are nurses who in theory supply medical treatment to several rural villages. The delineation of these two women gives Dow the opportunity to explore the corruption of what might be called the lower middle class: they resent being posted to a rural village and punish their patients for their unhappiness. As far as they dare, they neglect their work, and when Amantle arrives, they take the opportunity to punish her for her prospects, for the fact that she will escape from the village in a year’s
time, and simply because her rank for the moment is lower than theirs. They allocate to her, to indicate her low status, the task of cleaning out the storeroom. Though this task is intended only to humiliate her, it sets the plot of the novel’s present going. She discovers on a shelf in the storeroom a box of bloodstained clothes, labelled ‘Neo Katang’, the name of the little girl who disappeared five years previously. The discovery of the clothes, which the villagers understand as proof that there has been concealment of facts around Neo’s disappearance, precipitates general anger, which focuses first on the nurses: ‘They’ve never treated us with respect. They look down on us. How do we know they didn’t hide the clothes?’ (55). They are taken prisoner by the villagers, who decide to use them as bargaining chips in the coming struggle with the authorities. The narrator claims that they are targeted because they are ‘government employees’ (55), a suggestion that people in remote areas feel estranged from and hostile to official power.

Amantle, nominated by the villagers as their spokesperson, refuses to be bullied by the police. She has power — more than she first realises — because she has the confidence afforded her by formal education, and because she has already learnt how to organise herself and others in opposition. A flashback to her childhood shows that her education has been a matter of rapid assimilation of knowledge and a degree of resistance to ideology — both processes which serve her well. Because she is female, men attempt to claim that their gender makes them superior to her; because she is strong and confident, she demonstrates that despite the ‘tradition’ which they assert, the law is on her side.

The structures and behaviour of the police force are designed to make the reporting of crimes and the initiation of investigations difficult for rural people, who realise how little consideration of their testimony they can expect. When the Katang family, soon after Neo’s disappearance, go to the police to inspect and identify the bloodstained clothes, they are told, after suffering a series of insults, that the clothes have disappeared. The detective who visits them at home in the village attempts to bully them into accepting what they know to be nonsense, but Molatsi is not to be bullied:

‘Let me tell you what happened to my niece, mister detective: she was killed for muti; dipheko; ditlhare: traditional medicine. You know it; I know it; we all know it; any fool can see it. The question is ‘Why are you running away from the truth?’ Who are you protecting?’ (68)

The detective, Senai, is in fact unaware when he comes to the village that the bloodstained clothes have been recovered, and angrily reproaches the constables who have concealed this from him. In his turn he is exposed to the anger of the station commander, who reiterates the official line about an attack by wild animals, and says ‘Since when have the police been reporting to ignorant villagers about their investigations? You’ve told them the conclusion reached by this station, and that’s that. You’re not going back there again: am I clear?’ (75).
Dow’s charge against her society is that all classes of people are aware that ritual murders take place, and therefore that all the powerful are complicit in them. The pathetic case of Rra Naso, in the village, shows that the bonds of friendship in a rural community cannot prevail against the power of evil as it is allowed to exist. The structures of government contain enough people who are complicitous to offer protection to such murderers. The police, sharing the murderers’ belief in their magic powers, dare not oppose them. Family members of the murderers, as must be the case, are on some level aware of what they are engaged in. Lesego, elder daughter of Disanka, sees her father and his accomplices bring home something in bloodstained plastic bags. She overhears a conversation which suggests strongly that they contain pieces of a dismembered child. It is implied that the mother of the family ‘knows’; that is to say that she feels compelled consciously to resist the evidence that her husband is engaged in something secret and sinister. Lesego’s horror — her father realises that she has seen something which compromises him and his behaviour becomes almost an admission of guilt — is such that she demands to be sent away to a remote school, and does her best to sever all contact with her family. Her grandmother’s behaviour, equally with her mother’s, shows the mixture of understanding and wilful ignorance which most people use to distance themselves from painful facts, and her would-be reassurance shows that she understands that dipheko is an act of oppression of the poor by the rich. She even knows that without Disanka’s intervention the crime will remain unsolved.

The novel ends with the understanding that justice will never be achieved in this case: Lesego will be silent, Rra Naso is dead, and the bereaved family will soon know that the murderers have powerful protectors and accomplices. But there have been other understandings: when the Health Minister, Gape, asks, ‘Why can’t you just storm the place — just send in the SSGs and surround the village?’ (145), the Safety and Security Minister Mading answers with an account of the other forces which have now been alerted and are at work in the community. Amantle will save the villagers from official violence, they will have learnt that they can defy the authorities; her friends the human rights lawyers will pursue the case, and public opinion will be mobilised on their side. Even Disanka knows that his wife’s and daughter’s suppressed knowledge of his crimes will make domestic happiness impossible for him.

What has been revealed is the nature of the divisive element in the nation, which is at the same time the divisive element in most individuals. Few dare go as far as Disanka, but almost all, at least of the older generation, share his belief that what he has done makes him invulnerable. Almost none dares to offer him and his like real opposition.

In pre-postcolonial days Lionel Trilling wrote memorably about the figure of Kurtz as ‘a hero of the imagination’ who chose to go ‘down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now…’ (32–33). Trilling was admitting
that those ‘beginnings’ survive in everyone, though in most cases they are suppressed. In modern Botswana, Dow claims, concealment is as much the rule as in Europe in the colonial era, but secret resort to atavistic violence is widely known to occur. What Trilling does not envisage — it is not his subject, and the day when Chinua Achebe will rebuke Conrad for his omission is still remote when he writes (Achebe 1–19) — is the human cost, to the community in which he is living, of Kurtz’s self-exploration: ‘those heads on stakes… their faces turned towards the house’ (Conrad 82). Dow wishes to emphasise the cost of ‘those heads on stakes,’ or at least their equivalent in Botswana — the mutilated bodies of children.

Dow’s main subject, despite the opening of the novel, is not the monstrous or the heroic individual, but what she portrays as the whole Botswana community. Though the ending resolves none of the immediate problems of the country, it is more optimistic than for example Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions (1988), which may be compared with both of Dow’s novels in that all three works deal with the development of a young woman into a larger role than tradition would have allowed her. Nervous Conditions is a bildungsroman, in which the impediments and the catalyst to the heroine Tambudzai’s development are the barriers placed in her way by almost the whole of her male-favouring society. And whereas Nervous Conditions states on its first page that it is about its heroine’s ‘escape’, and reveals that her mother and aunt remained trapped and her cousin may have met with disaster, Far and Beyond and The Screaming of the Innocent show the opposite of an escape — an individual who becomes central to the group and works to transform it. In the latter novel, this ‘group’ is the whole of Botswana society, and Amantle is only potentially the leader and reformer which she may one day become. This sense of the exceptional girl who benefits the community and may become a leader within it is part of what distinguishes Dow’s vision from Dangarembga’s, in which the word ‘escape’ signals that only the individual has been changed, and that the group remains fixed in its values. Though Dow is aware of the corruption growing in modern Botswana, she believes that some of its institutions — like the family and the rural community — besides possessing great potential for evil, may also be good and supportive of their members.

NOTES
1 Bessie Head’s texts, especially The Collector of Treasures and Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind, despite their distance in time from Dow’s work, nevertheless show similarities in their presentation of rural life, and, especially in her story ‘The Wind and a Boy’ (1977 69–75), the relationship between the recently urbanised and rural people.
2 ‘Unity Dow is Botswana’s first female high court judge and has been prominent as a human-rights activist’ (The Screaming of the Innocent, blurb).
3 Picard writes ‘On September 28th [1949] … the South African press carried a long account of a speech by the South African Prime Minister, Dr Malan … in which he
strongly condemned the marriage and announced that he had sent a telegram to the British government in which he stated South Africa’s views’ (1985 15 n42). What is interesting here is Malan’s belief that he had a right to express views on a marriage which affected an adjacent sovereign state.

4 Though Head claims white officials under the regency of Tshekedi Khama could be arrogant and dismissive, her description of the situation reveals her belief that these attitudes affected the regent, rather than his subjects:

relationships between Botswana and British were not at all the happy family affair the independence speeches would have us believe. The black man here was as despised by the colonial ruler as he was everywhere else. The peculiar twist matters took in Bamangwato country was that here British colonialism chose to persecute a single black man … almost anything Tshekedi did was opposed by the colonial authority…. (Head 1981 76)

5 See for example in Serowe, Village of the Rain Wind, the testimony of Katherine Pretorius (Head 1981 54–57).

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M.J. DAYMOND AND MARGARET LENTA

‘It was like singing in the wilderness’: An Interview with Unity Dow

(Durban, March 2004)

Unity Dow has published three novels in rapid succession: Far and Beyon’ (2000), The Screaming of the Innocent (2002) and Juggling Truths (2003). She is also the first woman to be appointed a judge of the High Court in Botswana; before her appointment she was an attorney and a prominent human rights activist, and she won some landmark cases in Botswana. For example, she won the right for a Motswana mother to give her nationality to her child — previously only the father could do so. She has said that in her novels she is ‘reclaiming the voice’ to speak out on human rights issues, particularly those of women. She was a guest at an annual writers’ festival, ‘The Time of the Writer’, that was held in Durban in March 2004. On March 22, Margaret Daymond and Margaret Lenta took the opportunity to interview her about her novels and her entry into the literary scene in Botswana.

D&L: How did you begin writing fiction, when did you begin, why did you begin and how did you choose your subject matter?

UD: First, how I chose what I wrote about: the easier part of a very complicated question. My first book is very much about family relationships, and about HIV-AIDS, and I guess when you start writing, you write about yourself — even if it’s not strictly autobiographical, it’s what you know best. What was hitting me at the time was people around me dealing with the HIV-AIDS situation, and how the kids were in tension between new Africa and old Africa. So that’s what kept me writing in Far and Beyon’. My second book, The Screaming of the Innocent, again captures what I hold dear to my heart about children, about the extent to which I believe that we don’t protect children, we fail children. So even though it is focused
primarily on a ritual killing, the bigger picture for me is the extent to which societies don’t protect their young. People often say that children are the future; I don’t disagree, but they are also the present — we must protect them because they are what is now. My third book goes back — I guess, once I had the courage of the two books — to look at my own life and at what I felt children benefited from in our traditions, and where we failed to strengthen children. That’s why I wrote it.

Why did I start to write? I can honestly say that having worked as an activist for many years, having had no control over what I had to do as a lawyer, I found that at last [as a judge] I was in a state of silence; I had time to reflect. Although being a judge is a very busy job, it’s not a chaotic job. I know exactly what I will be doing next May, and June, and July — the chaos happens out there. My work is pre-packaged and each case is put in a different file, blue if it’s a murder, green if there’s an appeal. But before, I was part of the chaos, I was picking up pieces, and I had no time in my life to write. I always thought I would like to write — I always felt that my head was full of stories. I felt that everyone around me is a story, a potential story. I really think that I got the first chance to write when I became a judge.

D&L: You say that Juggling Truths took you back to your own life — are you implying it’s an autobiographical work?

UD: I say to my kids, ‘Of course it’s not an autobiographical work’, and my daughter smiles: ‘Mum, this is exactly what you told us about your life growing up’. So we argue about whether it is an autobiography — it’s got a piece of myself, a piece of my sister, a piece of the people around me in it. I think in many ways it comes from the stories I told my own children when they were growing up. My youngest daughter just loves stories. I used to read from the Ladybird stories and Doctor Seuss, but she would say, ‘Mum, I want you to tell stories about when you were young’. At the time she thought I was just making them up — it’s too fantastic for her that people lived like that, with no running water, with no electricity, because those days were something else. So it’s a bit about myself, but also definitely drawn from others.

D&L: You are interested in the rural-urban divide in all three books. Did you grow up in a village?

UD: Yes, very much so. I grew up in a village — I didn’t see a refrigerator until I was a teenager. I first saw a TV set when I was twenty in Swaziland, which is where I went to study for my law degree.

D&L: Talking about education: in Juggling Truths, the parents choose to send their daughter, Monei, to school to give her a formal, Western education...
'It was like singing in the wilderness'

— was that something like your own experience? Did all your siblings go to school? Do you come from a largish family?

UD: I grew up with a father for whom there was no compromise; we had to go to school. We were a large family of seven children, six of whom have had college education and some of them have postgraduate education. This was unique for my neighbourhood. So for my father there was no compromise; it came out later that he wanted to go to university, and that he won a scholarship to study at Fort Hare (at the time, there was no university in Botswana and so black people came to South Africa to black universities to study), but at the last minute the son of the chief was the one who was sent to university. So my father made a promise to himself that it would not happen to his children, that his children would have the education that he didn’t have.

D&L: And your mother’s attitude to education?

UD: Also totally uncompromising. My mother can read and write in Setswana, but not in English; my father can speak English and can read in English. It was just that we had to stay at school. Sometimes I look back and think that school was so harsh! We had to get up early in the morning; there was insufficient clothing, no shoes — what kid wants to go to school in those conditions?

D&L: Was the discipline as punitive as it appears in Juggling Truths?

UD: It was — sometimes even worse. I look back and think, really what kid could want to stay in school? But when you are inside something, that’s your reality. My father said he heard about UN reports that concerned the starving children in Africa; but he said ‘You know, Unity, I never thought they were talking about us. I never felt like a starving kid in Africa’ — and you don’t, because that’s your reality.

D&L: Were you starving?

UD: In 1967 there was a drought in Botswana and a soup kitchen actually in the village. We must have been starving, but I don’t remember it like that. If you think about what is now called ‘potable’ water and compare it with the kind of water we drank — I am sure it would be considered just totally undrinkable now. My kids would die if they had to drink it. But I survived it. I guess at the time, you are happy with it; you don’t know any other life.

D&L: And your further studies were in Edinburgh. How did that come about?

UD: It was just part of the package: if you did Law, there was no Law school in Botswana at all, so you had to go to Swaziland and then Edinburgh.
D&L: Was there a connection between the universities?

UD: Yes, through British aid to Botswana. It was a contrast going to Edinburgh, but when you are eighteen, you know, snow is nothing. Now I look at New York and I wonder, how did people ever think that this land was habitable? But at eighteen or nineteen, I thought Edinburgh was just a beautiful city. The architecture is amazing.

D&L: Unity, how did you get your name?

UD: I was born in 1959. Those were the days of African nationalism, African self-realisation; and it really came from that. I think I am right that the South African coins used to have the motto ‘Eendrag maak mag’ (Unity gives strength) on them, and my father’s attitude was: if it can give them strength, it can give us strength. It was a hijacking of that idea.

D&L: Could we ask you about the range of fiction that you have written so far: the first novel could be called social realism; the second also investigates a social problem — ritual murder —, but it is one that is not spoken about and so you use a kind of detective plot to bring it out into the open; and the third one, as you said, is childhood memories. You have used three such different genres. How did that range come about?

UD: I don’t see my third book as retrospective, as a standing back — it’s more born out of the courage to look in a mirror. My first two books were … not anger, but the need to knock at a door, the need to kick a door open, to be ‘in your face’ and force somebody else to look in the mirror. My first book was probably influenced by a close cousin’s dying of AIDS in 1997; and I just could not believe that somebody could just waste away and die — she never really had symptoms like sores or diarrhoea — she was more like candy. You know how with candy, you suck it until it’s gone? So I just couldn’t believe that someone who had had so much life in her could just go. One day I could not watch her any more, and the following day she died. So that informed me a lot in writing — her just going away.

Also I like delving into our culture; I just really like thinking about it. Take the position of children: a Motswana child does not have the power to say no to an adult. The uncle says — ‘uncle’ is used broadly, all the men in the community are uncles — ‘Here, go and get me some cigarettes’. A child in England would wonder, and might refuse, but our culture doesn’t allow that. Respect means saying yes to elders, especially male elders, regardless. So she goes off and buys a packet of cigarettes, and he will say, ‘Go and put them on the bed’. This is actually from a case I know — a man said, ‘Go and put the loaf of bread on the bed’. The child knew that bread doesn’t belong on the bed, in the bedroom, but she hadn’t the skills to negotiate herself out of the situation, so she took the loaf of bread and
put it on the bed. A second later, the door opened and the man is on top of her. And to me it’s….

The reason why we train young girls to say yes to adults is because we believe that they are protective of children, but it’s not true any more. Families don’t always protect: sometimes they hurt. We have always had the belief that adults protect, adults will save you, adults will nurture you. That is not true — sometimes they will hurt you, and sometimes they are going to destroy you. So the deal is that we ought to teach a child that respect does not mean blind faith — and that’s our problem. I have been on a school board where the idea was that young girls become pregnant as they go along — and it was assumed that that’s just the fate of girls. They wouldn’t even acknowledge that there is another participant in a pregnancy.

D&L: *In the light of what you have been saying about respect and obedience, is the personality you give Amantle in The Screaming of the Innocent — she’s quite sassy and bossy, even if she’s not always as confident as she might appear — is her personality part of the challenge to convention of your novel?*

UD: Yes, and some people at home have said she’s an impossible character. She’s too strong for a young Motswana girl when she defies the police officers, for example. Others have said, that could never happen. I said, well, we can dream, can’t we? I hope that that will happen.

D&L: *She’s a member of Tirelo Sechaba, [the national service organisation in which young people who are proceeding to tertiary education are compelled to serve]. She has all these important connections, but she agrees to go to a remote village. Do you find that young women readers like her?*

UD: Yes, I think they feel that they could be her — or that they would like to be her. In fact, a few years ago, before I wrote this book, a particular young woman was allegedly involved in burning down a school. She was thrown out of the school because she was supposedly leading a group of students who were so angry with the management that they had burned the school down. So she came to me when I was an attorney because she wanted to write her Standard 10 examination — the public school-leaving exam — and she was eventually allowed to write it. People said Amantle was impossible, but she is possible — it actually happened. Sometimes she is too strong; sometimes she is not particularly wise, and to me those are the pitfalls of youth — you think that you understand everything; you can handle it: but you can’t.
D&L: *When you began writing The Screaming of the Innocent did you have the ending in mind already?*

UD: Not at all. I never have an ending in mind for my books at all.

D&L: *Perhaps the greatest shock of the whole novel is the confession that the gentle old man makes at the end, that he had been forced to help commit the ritual killing of young Neo Kakane, his neighbour’s child. When did that come to you? How did you decide that that’s how the novel should end?*

UD: When I am writing, I get into my characters and I just go with them — wherever they take me. I might take their actions from other people, from other cultures around them, but they end up as themselves. So honestly when I was writing that part I was crying myself because I just couldn’t believe that this man could do it, even as I was creating him. I was asking myself, how could he do it; what would happen? What would be the reaction of everyone around him? His confession — I didn’t plan it out at all. It just came out the way it did.

D&L: *In a way, that was the greatest evil in the whole story, that those men could draw a good man into a deed like that.*

UD: For me it was like investigating the potential for evil in all of us. Naturally that idea would tend to shock each one of us — that it could have been any one of us; that it could be someone we like very much. So who are these people who commit murders? And the motives for a ritual killing — it’s not greed — well, it is greed, but it’s different from somebody blasting their way into a bank; it’s different from someone siphoning off money through accounting procedures; it’s different from a lover who shoots another person. You try to think about it, but you can’t grapple with it, you can’t just understand the motives, or maybe I just can’t understand. It’s the same with paedophilia. Part of me is thinking what the victims must feel when they know they are going to die. Are the killer’s motives really relevant then? I just imagine a child’s eyes when they think ‘I am going to die’.

D&L: *At the beginning of The Screaming of the Innocent, when you introduce Disanka, you depict him as getting almost a sexual kick out of looking at that little girl, Neo.*

UD: And I do that deliberately because I want to say, this is about power over a human being, and it’s about self-gratification. He’s a man who wants wealth; to be admired. I was thinking, what goes through such a man’s head when he actually finds Neo? I saw something in one of the newspapers today about ritual killings in some other country in Africa — this is a problem for the whole of Africa. When you have a problem with diamond-
running in Botswana, you have the vice-squad, there’s quite a set-up to deal with this problem. Or when you have an increase in cattle rustling, someone will stand up and say we must have stiffer penalties for this. But nobody, nobody talks about what to do with killers of children. The reviewers in Botswana talk about how my novel is a wake-up call, but still it’s something that is just not talked about.

D&L: Your accusation in the book is that ritual killing is something that everyone knows about.

UD: Of course everyone knows that it happens, as everyone knows that traffic offenses happen. It happens. Kids disappear all the time — everyone knows it happens. It’s in the papers that a child disappeared, and then when the body is found it’s reported that the genitalia were missing and the tongue was missing, and that the police suspect ritual killing: but that’s the end. It’s not as though it’s kept secret that a child has disappeared — it’s very, very obvious.

D&L: Do you think the silence is because ordinary people feel so helpless about this kind of thing, or is it a more psychological shame?

UD: Sometimes I think that for the local people it’s fear. Let’s be honest: ritual killings, in Botswana at least (I don’t know about other countries), are not committed by poor people. It’s just not a poor man’s offence. It’s about gaining more power, so you have to have some power already. By the nature of the offence, you are already in power; it’s as if you have already got a Masters and want a PhD; you’ve got a PhD, so you want to be a professor, or if you’re a judge you want to be chief justice. You’re an MP, a backbencher, you want to be the Minister. So it is not about some poor person in a village who wants another donkey. For the average villager, the first thing which comes to mind after the body is found in the village and there are parts missing, is ‘Whoever did this must have more power than I do’. There is immediately a restraint on action. They are afraid of the people with the power to be able to do something like that.

D&L: In the novel you also give insight into complicity when you show Neo’s mother, who wanted a child, going to the doctor who offered to help her and then raped her. Even when Neo was born, she could never tell anyone.

UD: That’s another very common offence. I saw that when I was practicing as an attorney, and when I had cases on appeal, where exactly that had happened. It’s the power of the traditional doctor, and now not only the traditional doctor, but also fakes, fake prophets, foaming-at-the-mouth Christians who probably haven’t even read the Bible and just abuse and use people. Now with HIV-AIDS, with people dying so young, if one is
fertile one is afraid. None of the usual medicines are going to help, so one goes to these people, but they are just religious pretenders.

D&L: What about being a writer in Botswana? Your country seems not to have produced a great many writers so far.

UD: Why Botswana has not produced many writers? Some people point to the small population of the country, but it’s not a very good answer to that question. Even proportionately, it doesn’t make sense that I am probably the only indigenous Motswana being published outside the country — the only writer of fiction. I think we were just raised in an educational system that did not encourage it. I just thought, growing up, that books came from England, and I didn’t quite understand where Chinua Achebe, with Things Fall Apart, fitted into the whole system, but clearly, for me as a child, black people did not write books. I couldn’t imagine a neighbour writing a book, or even someone in Gaberone writing a book. I think for kids it’s still the belief that books come from abroad, and because we were so far from South Africa, although we are neighbours, we didn’t receive influences from within the region, not even from Namibia or Zimbabwe.

D&L: Did Botswana deliberately turn its back on South Africa?

UD: Yes. I didn’t know Coetzee existed until after the end of apartheid. André Brink, and all the other writers in Zimbabwe, and the women writers — I didn’t know they existed, and I was just next door. OK, Gordimer, because she publishes abroad, but none of the other South African writers, even the good ones — you wouldn’t see their books. An Afrikaner name — forget it, it wouldn’t even get into the bookstores.

D&L: And writers like Es’kia Mphahlele?

UD: No, not even him. There was a very strange barrier.

D&L: What’s it like knowing that you are probably the only writer in Botswana who is being published abroad?

UD: It’s very strange, actually, first of all being a judge and a writer, because it’s almost like I am doing something wrong. There is a level where people think, should she be writing fiction? Is it compatible with her very serious work as a judge? The good thing is that I am in a young country where almost everything is a first, so it’s OK. You can’t criticise someone for doing something for the first time, because there are no rules about how to do it, or not to do it. People whisper about whether it’s right or not right — but they don’t know whether I am doing it right or not. There’s no history of writing fiction. Now I get more and more letters from young people; the latest one is from a fifteen-year-old boy in Francistown, saying,
'It was like singing in the wilderness'

‘I want to be an author; I want to be a writer; I have five stories; can you please read them for me?’ That’s great: you can see that there is an interest out there. I hope it will be nurtured and strengthened.

D&L: A South African woman writer, Miriam Tlali, said that when she began to write in the 1960s she looked around for role models and she found absolutely no one. Did you have any of that sense of loneliness?

UD: I guess it depends on why you are writing. I was a judge myself, and I was writing. I had retreated into my mind to write about the work I did before. So in a way, I didn’t have to write — it was a pleasure I had. It didn’t matter. I never even thought about how one published a book at all. I knew no publishers, so until I put in what I thought was the last full stop, I did not ask, ‘What shall I do with this manuscript?’ It was like singing in the wilderness and not caring whether or not somebody is listening. Only afterwards did I think, OK, I think I have a manuscript, but even then, I was almost done before I could tell anyone I was writing a book. I didn’t know I could write a book; I didn’t know anyone who could write a book — it was too — I don’t know — presumptuous and arrogant to think that I was writing a book. I remember once when we were camping I said to a friend of mine, ‘You know, I am writing a book’, and they looked at me as though I was crazy. So I said, ‘No, I don’t mean I am really writing a book, I just mean that occasionally I just try to…’. I tried to fix it up so that they wouldn’t think that I am writing a book, and I didn’t give it to my husband until after it was completely done, or any body else, because I didn’t know what a manuscript looks like when you are done. I had never talked to a writer at all.

D&L: How does your husband feel about your writing?

UD: I was divorced last year; but he is now my greatest supporter. We are good friends now — and he has always believed in my writing.

D&L: You said this morning that you found writing reports for investigations you were doing in legal practice rather boring, but you found it enjoyable to use that same material, the same experiences, for your fiction.

UD: Yes, that’s what I think. A friend of mine who lives in Minnesota and now uses such reports as part of her teaching material said she just couldn’t believe that I could write because I was always late with my reports. I just hated the discipline. I think that people who do academic work are amazing people — that you can be disciplined in keeping to the material that you have, and not embellish. I found it very hard to do research and get statistics, and then try to limit my expression to the data that I had. When I’m writing as a judge — and the material is pretty interesting — I have
to ask myself all the time, did I get that from the evidence, or am I interpreting too much from the evidence? Creative writing is totally different, because if I were to write something strange in fiction, then somebody like you may say it’s not in keeping with the character as introduced, but there’s no actual evidence to measure it against. In writing a judgment, you have a set of material that you have to work with. For example: this happened in a certain place between 8.30 and 9.30; three people saw it happen. You have to confine yourself to that; you can’t, just because it may sound great to say it, add that the sun was shining. Unless someone actually said the sun was shining, the sun was not shining. So it’s really a different type of writing. I find that writing fiction is something you can do any time you want to talk — it gives you more freedom.

Also I worked for many years with women, abused women, women who had offended against the law, and I always found that they all had stories but no report could capture them. No report that was, for example, trying to get the Minister to change the legislation could attend to the finer details of their stories. I felt I could never really capture what they had said, but writing fiction allows you to take all this material and write in a way that will reach a wider audience.

D&L: Your first novel was published by Longman in Botswana, but not the second, because, you say, they are really only interested in publishing school text books. How did the publication of your second novel in Australia come about?

UD: Actually it was luck, how I found the publisher. I didn’t know about Spinifex. I knew nothing about Australia, I’d never even been in contact with Australia. It was just e-mail and — just luck. The simple story is that a journalist from Zimbabwe called my office about something else, and I returned her call. She thought I was magnanimous, returning a call to a journalist. She couldn’t believe that anyone would return a journalist’s call; she was so frank — people in government hate journalists, only a fool wastes money on returning a journalist’s calls. So we got talking and we became friends over e-mail although we have never met. One day I said ‘Actually I have a manuscript of a book’, and she said, ‘Have you heard about Spinifex in Australia? They say they do women’s work, so find out about it’. So I didn’t just call them — I sent them the manuscript. Then they wrote back, they called, to say they would take my book. So it was really being in the right place at the right time.

D&L: Are you going to continue with them? Double Storey is now publishing you in South Africa.

UD: Yes, I am. The publishing house is very small in Australia, just two or three people. I feel — I might like to take my books to somebody else, but
I just think it’s not fair — I will give them my fourth book. I really like them — we fight a lot, but I really like them — they are good-hearted. It would be selfish of me to go to somebody else who’s bigger, just because now … you know.

D&L: They gave you a break; but they could have provided you with better editing.

UD: Yes, I quarrel with them about that all the time. I don’t have time to fix up all the commas and full stops. But Far and Beyon’ is going to be translated into Dutch and Screaming is going into German in December.

D&L: Have you an agent?

UD: No, I don’t have an agent.

D&L: Have your books reached the British market at all?

UD: Not really — only through amazon.com and amazon.co.uk. — but very few people will know to go and look for them. They’d need to know my name or a title.

D&L: You mentioned getting a letter from a fifteen-year old boy; what kind of response have you had from readers in Botswana? Have you had lots of response?

UD: ‘Lots’ would be an exaggeration. Unfortunately we are not a reading culture — no: we talk, and we talk, and we talk. We don’t read. I’ve thought about this a lot, about how people criticise others in Botswana for reading. I’ve asked myself why do people read in trains, or in queues. It’s because they don’t want to stand there doing nothing; but people in Botswana don’t do nothing — they talk to the people next to them, whether they know them or not. At a health clinic, there will be a lot of people who know each other, and so there’s a lot of noise; people are talking to each other and asking, why are you here? Do you like this doctor? Or in a queue in a bank, people talk to each other, so they don’t need to read. On the other hand, it’s also that books are seen as expensive. When they see how much a book costs, people think, ‘What could I have bought with that amount of money?’

D&L: The Screaming of the Innocent, for example, what would that cost in Botswana?

UD: About 99 pulas, which is about R130-00. That’s a lot of money. That boy from Francistown actually said, ‘I’d like to read your books, but I don’t have the money to buy them’. In some countries, like New Zealand, where I have been, they have a national mission to support writers, to make
books more affordable. One way to encourage writers is to make books available at reduced prices to the public. I think it crazy that someone cannot read because they cannot afford a book.

D&L: *All your books are about Botswana. Who are they for?*

UD: I was married to an American, and so I am raising kids that are both Batswana and American, and I always have an eye to the outsider. How would they see something? I don’t write only to be understood by the local person; I believe I am writing for Botswana and for outside. I am always aware of nuances that are not going to be picked up by an outsider. At the Festival, the other day at lunchtime, I was sitting with an Egyptian writer — and there were two Zimbabwean people, and a South African — and because of the speed at which they’re talking, he couldn’t hear them. I’m always aware of that — of leaving someone out. He speaks English, but he can’t get our accent, he can’t follow the references of the talk. So I think, ‘Can’t you see you are excluding somebody?’ So I am always aware of the question, who is my audience? If I’m talking or if I’m writing — I’m sure you can’t reach everybody, but I am always aware that there is another person who doesn’t have my perspective.

D&L: *What about other people who have written about Botswana, like Bessie Head in A Bewitched Crossroad — and you mentioned this morning Alexander McCall Smith — what do you think of their representation of Botswana?*

UD: First of all we all have our own perspective. Each one of us will think differently, and each view will be valid — it’s how you see things. The fact that I see things differently doesn’t mean that I am right and you are wrong. I am amazed by Bessie Head — the wide interests that she had at the time and the work she produced. In her early work, there’s a struggling writer. I am just amazed at what she did. I have tons of respect — I have every book that she ever wrote including the latest one that came out, The Cardinals. It doesn’t mean that I have read all of them from cover to cover, but I just feel that I have to buy her books. I admire her greatly for writing when she did; with the education she had; with the resources that she had. In the political climate of the time. I have great admiration for her.

D&L: ‘Authentic’ is a difficult concept to define, but do McCall Smith’s Number One Ladies Detective Agency books seem authentic to you?

UD: Yes. I can look around and see what he’s talking about — like Mma Ramotswe, and her drinking her bush tea — but don’t think that such things happen in every community.
D&L: *His first book and your The Screaming of the Innocent, two very different books, have similar preoccupations — with dipheko [ritual murder], for example.*

UD: Yes, I see; that’s very interesting. I know his books are going to be made into a TV series and I can tell that they will be right for serialization. They are episodic and very visual — Mma Ramotswe going around Gaborone in her little white pick-up. There’s another non-Batswana person who has written about Botswana: Gail Mogwe in *Colour Me Blue*. She is a New Zealander who was married to a Motswana; she’s now divorced, I believe, and living in England. I read her stories, and she’s got a Motswana mind. I am amazed at what she can see. Then there’s another writer, Norman Rush, who wrote a book called *Whites*, and then *Mating*, and now he’s just written a third one. The first book, *Whites*, is short stories. I couldn’t believe that a white person, from another culture, who just came here on contract, could have written it. I found that he really had a good insight; I loved some of those stories. I didn’t like *Mating*; but sometimes you are amazed that other people can see you as you think you see yourself. There’s another author, Caitlin Davis, she’s just written a book, called *El Negro*; before that she wrote one called something — *Town*. Again, she’s British — married to a Motswana, and she wrote that book within two years of being in Botswana. Again, it’s a wonderfully perceptive book.

D&L: *Going back to your representation of Botswana, there’s a moment in Far and Beyon*’*d when a marriage ceremony is taking place, and men warn the husband only to beat his wife where it doesn’t show.*

UD: It makes it very hard for me, to be part of a marriage ceremony, because that still happens today. It’s not just yesterday’s advice. When marriage is being negotiated the man’s family will say they have come to ask for a gourd of water, and they ask ‘What is the nature of your gourd? Is it cracked or not cracked?’ That still happens today, and whenever that comes up, my sister looks at me, and she is saying silently, ‘I know you don’t want this, but you are not going to change it today. Don’t say anything’.

D&L: *Have you ever been one of the elders who instruct the wife?*

UD: Yes, I have. The language is changing over the years. I know my sister will stand up, and her husband will stand up and say, ‘A woman is not a ball; you don’t kick her around’. In jest he’ll say, ‘You want a football — I’ll buy you one. But don’t use your wife’; Then you get older people saying, ‘Marriage is very tough; and sometimes you want to leave; but you must understand: look at me, I’m seventy years old; I’m still married
— you think it was easy? I stayed, so you have got to stay’. This attitude is still part of the instructions today — it is still what happens every day.

**D&L:** *Have you ever managed to introduce a new note into such a ceremony?*

**UD:** Well, you try all the time, but again — if you understand African culture, or the Botswana culture — I am the second-born, so my older sister has got more authority in the family than me. I will say something if she is not there, otherwise I have no power. She is regarded as wiser than I am, because wisdom is age-based, and gender-based. It is also based on other things: are you married? Are you widowed? So I think that there are all kinds of little secrets in Tswana culture that you can only be introduced to once you have passed a particular rite. So maybe you know more now that you are married; but you don’t know everything. My mother does not know what happens when somebody is widowed, because she’s not been widowed. She may be 69, but she’s going to get the shock of her life when she’s widowed, and all these widows gather round her and make her do what is considered necessary. She’s not had time to think about it because she has never been part of it. Information is very much based on rites of passage. Before, five years ago, ten years ago, I wouldn’t have been allowed to be part of the marriage ceremony, because I might give people really bad advice, now that I am divorced…. But it is changing in some ways — because of my education, because I have been married and I have raised children — so surely I must have some wisdom to impart. So I’m included; but still some people will be thinking, ‘I don’t know if she should be here, telling the bride how to behave if she could not behave herself — and look what happened to her’. There are all these nuances that are new, but the general rule for married women is still: ‘Don’t leave — just don’t leave’.
ALAN SHIMA

No Beginning, No End: The Legacy of Absence in Jamaica Kincaid’s
The Autobiography of My Mother

A sea is large. If placed in the middle of it, you will feel the pull and tug of waves, each mounting swell adding volume to what is before and beneath you. Jamaica Kincaid’s writing can be a sea. Her narratives unfurl in the heave and thrust of thought curling back upon itself. Incidental descriptions may have the simple surface of account; but think twice because the emotional undertow of her work will take you elsewhere.1

In narrating the accidental and unavoidable events that shape the consciousness of her characters, Kincaid frequently uses the idiom of poetic imagery. This versification of views estranges the familiar, making experiences indelible and beyond common recognition. This lyrical quality in Kincaid’s writing is not driven by a metaphysical or transcendental impulse. Instead, her narratives are motivated by everyday concerns, ones that have precise locations and specific contexts. Primarily situated in the minds and migrating genealogies of culturally split subjects, Kincaid’s texts recall a disputed and undecided Caribbean history, reformulated in references that loop from the muted past to an open-ended present. Similar to her contemporaries Derek Walcott, Michelle Cliff, and Caryl Phillips, Kincaid places personal and political history in direct contact, recollecting the unrestricted privileges and private abuses that wrought the New World into an extended set of Old World interests.

From her earliest short fiction, collected in At the Bottom of the River (1983), to her most recently published novel, Mr. Potter (2002), Kincaid voices the way a mind, a perceptive mind, understands (or misunderstands) a world that often refuses to acknowledge it. This critical reflection is placed in relation to what might be called the mystery of identity and its withheld anterior. Thematically, this issue is addressed in the form of an immemorial, pre-colonial origin irreversibly altered by the logic of domination. For Kincaid’s female narrators, there are no easy solutions to the problems that evolve under such circumstances. There are, however, choices to be made. If the vanquished cannot re-write a past that has disinherit them, Kincaid’s first-person narratives suggest that a person can invent a present, devise a reckoning that need not be paid in guilt and violence; that individuals can venture beyond the myth of race and nation and the other myths that have made people strange to themselves. It is this dimension of Kincaid’s work that I wish to focus on.
Kincaid’s novel *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) is probably the most compelling example of what I have outlined above. The West Indies island of Dominica, during the first half of the twentieth century, provides the novel’s principal setting. The question of colonial experience is explored at the personal level where the effects of colonialism, during the time of the narrated events, appeared benign and natural to many. This incongruity reflects a historical gap for the oppressed, a primal disruption in the sequence of sense and order. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the legacy of ruin left by colonialism is initially cast as a deep yet single misfortune. Kincaid’s seventy-year old narrator, Xuela Claudette Richardson, begins with a dreadful disclosure: ‘My mother died the moment I was born, and so for my whole life there was nothing standing between myself and eternity; at my back was always a bleak, black wind’ (3). Xuela, however, informs the reader that the wound of a personal disaster, in her case, cannot be isolated from the devastating imprint of colonialism and the inheritance of misery that multiplies in the form of self-denial among the conquered. Xuela’s personal loss is thus articulated against the background of an overdetermined Caribbean past, one that has been hollowed by generations of subjugation and brutality. Under such conditions, the dispossessed are repeatedly left in the depth of their own demise, beyond concern, without history, anonymous even in the light of day. Yet there are those who do succeed in surviving such conditions and who do achieve a kind of grace, though it is grave and without splendour. Xuela is one who survives.

The novel’s exploratory, self-reflecting prose feels uncompromisingly immediate. In Kincaid’s writing there is the inward turn of thought found in writers like Montaigne or Jean Genet. Similar to Montaigne’s sixteenth-century, self-probing essays, the text reaches into the interior of thinking, wedging its way into under-explored crevices of conjecture and doubt. Comparable to the nocturnal voice in Genet’s *A Thief’s Journal*, Xuela interrogates the beautiful, and admires the unsightly; she looks at herself without shame and embraces what is unloved. However, Montaigne and Genet were not women, nor did they bear the inheritance of slavery. Consequently, Kincaid’s writing is unmistakably other. The sea that surrounds Xuela’s story has a different history, one that is inflected by the ‘middle passage’ and the institutionalised cycles of prolonged suffering.²

Embedded in Xuela’s original loss, however, is a fearsome aspiration to overcome disaster, but she is not heroic. She is not sympathetic in the way Celie is in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*, nor is Xuela composed with the fortified compassion of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. Some readers will surely find Xuela unlikable. As a fictional figure she lacks warmth. There is even a streak of hostility in her temperament. On the other hand, Xuela does not read like a realistic character. Kincaid’s text makes a point of Xuela’s affective nature. She is possessed by a bottomless pain and she functions more like a pressure point in the narrative rather than a complex personality. This does not mean...
Xuela is without complex feelings or is not elaborate in her analysis of her social and historical circumstances. Mimetic features of realism are, however, notably missing as Xuela textualises the trauma of her loss and the loss experienced by those around her.

In its form, the ‘autobiography’ of Xuela’s mother can be seen as a type of ghost writing. The lost presence of a mother’s life is authored by a daughter’s recall. In Xuela’s case, however, memory is (has to be) a means of invention, a strategy that conjures an origin that can neither be recovered nor passed on in any ordinary sense. This imaginative aspect of the novel is composed, in part, through Kincaid’s distinctive use of language. On one level, Xuela’s narrative is true to the common conventions of confessional autobiography. Self-reflective statements and observations of what Xuela remembers and laments structure the narrative. Penetrating analysis and associative remarks add density and texture to Xuela’s self-inquiry. There is very little dialogue offered in the text, and on the occasions this occurs it is normally alluded to through indirect speech.

On the stylistic level, Kincaid uses a less conventional mode of reporting past events and of rendering their significance. There is a preponderant use of repetition and the multiple use of negation phrases, a strategy that creates syntactic rhythms as well as measures in thought that initially appear mannered or theatrical. For instance, when recounting the first time she observed a naked man, the one whom she first had sex with, Xuela notes: ‘[W]hen I first saw him, his hands hanging at his side, not yet caressing my hair, not yet inside me, not yet bringing the small risings that were my breasts toward his mouth, not yet opening my mouth wider to place his tongue even deeper in my mouth … I was surprised at how unbeautiful he was all by himself, just standing there…’ (emphases added 71). The repetition of negation phrases used here, with its positive orientation towards a fulfilled and completed future, draws attention to Xuela’s form of expression as well as her mode of pleasure. Arranged in the beat of a chant, the run-on sentence invokes the intensity and expectancy of this encounter. Xuela herself concludes that it was not the male body or the concrete act of sex but ‘the anticipation that was the thrill’ (71). Xuela’s remark moves attention to the textual rather than the mimetic dimension of this ‘memory’. Because her internal sadness is without external reference (her mother is dead), her feelings, regardless of whether they are of pleasure or pain, can only be expressed along irregular routes of yearning and compensation. Thus, in the process of narrating in her mother’s place, Xuela must come to terms with an absolute and terrifying void.

Her grief is large and binding and like the distance between stars it is immense and beyond petition. As an infant, Xuela’s sense of irreversible abandonment is enlarged when her father leaves her in the care of Eunice Paul, the woman who does his wash. Now severed from both parents, Xuela evolves in a world of wrecked relationships. Though she suffers deeply, Xuela is not emotionally paralysed. She feels strongly but her passion is not expressed in conventional utterances or responses. She learns to be suspicious and cautious. She does not speak until she
is four. When her father fails to appear after a fortnight, as he usually does to pick up his clean clothes, Xuela’s first words take the shape of a question: ‘Where is my father?’ (7). This simple query, spoken with candour (and in ‘plain English’)^4 of a not so innocent child, addresses issues of kinship, gender, and history. Xuela knows that her mother is dead, a fact that precludes any chance of reunion. Consequently, the demand to know where her father is holds an added but unexpressed meaning. ‘Where is my father’, for Xuela, is a question that is always supplemented by the other, more basic question, ‘where is my mother’. Xuela’s mother is dead of course, but this is not the answer to the question that is reformulated throughout Xuela’s life. Xuela continuously seeks a primal familiarity, a self-image constituted and reflected in the immanence of her mother. Yet this unequivocal proximity of bodies and spirits, ‘the confusion of who is who’ (199), was eliminated at birth. Xuela’s father is the only link she has to an origin that remains unreal.

This primal absence is overlaid with other absences. Xuela’s mother was of the Carib people, the near extinct indigenous inhabitants of Dominica. As an infant, Xuela’s mother was abandoned by her own mother and left at the gates of a French convent wrapped in a cloth with the name Xuela sewn in it. Claudette Desvarieux, the nun who found the infant, added her name to the child’s original one. The nun’s vain indulgence extends the colonial decimation of subjugated people through a re-inscription of identity, a practice initiated by Columbus’s renaming of Caribbean islands as possessions of a foreign state. Thus Xuela, in the body of her full name, Xuela Claudette Richardson, bears the mark of her mother’s own abandonment and displaced identity.

Xuela’s father, Alfred Richardson, also carries the stamp of a colonial past, but his legacy is rather different from that of her mother’s. A man of humble beginnings, Xuela’s father achieves wealth and status as a local official. He, however, is corrupt — manipulative and canny in his cruelty — but these flaws are progressively contextualised and somewhat mitigated in Xuela’s narrative. If Xuela’s mother is a mystery to her, then her father is a severe reality. Alfred Richardson, the father who left his new born daughter in the care of the woman who washed his dirty clothes, unavoidably takes on a significant role in a text that is ostensibly dedicated to the life of Xuela’s mother. Yet it is not surprising that Xuela dwells deeply on her father’s life. At one point, Xuela expresses a crucial insight about her relationship with her father:

He was an animal of neutrality. He could absorb love; he could absorb hate. He could go on. His passions were his own: they did not obey a law of reason, they did not obey a law of passionate belief, and yet he could be described as reasonable, as someone of passionate beliefs. I was like him. I was not like my mother who was dead. I was like him. He was alive. (108)
The ability to endure is what Xuela and her father have in common, but this fact cannot dismiss questions of ethical conduct and responsibility. How does one survive under the strain of personal grief or institutional forms of oppression? In a manner that resists categorical reasoning or solutions, Kincaid’s novel explores some of the options.

Unable to tell the story of her mother, Xuela strategically takes up the story of her father intermittently throughout the novel. This shift in narrative focus allows for an oblique approach to Xuela’s primal loss and provides a set of alternative references by which to know herself. Alfred Richardson is a conflicted man, yet he is not aware of this. His behaviour and values betray his history, or perhaps they are a perverted extension of his history. Replicating the gestures and desires of colonial authority, Xuela’s father repeats the abuses and crimes committed against his own colonial past. To phrase this suggestion in the terms outlined in Franz Fanon’s analysis of a postcolonial bourgeoisie, Alfred Richardson, in his occupation as a police officer, is part of a new regime, one that specialises in opportunism, promotes private advancement, and is inventive in keeping the mass majority of the population pinned to poverty and servitude. Alfred may be a survivor of colonial oppression, but it seems that his bounty is plunder. However, Kincaid does not give us a reductive view of Alfred’s complicity with colonial transgressions. Alfred Richardson, like the unspeakable absence of Xuela’s mother, is complex; an unutterable pain also plagues him, though he does not acknowledge this fact. It is only in the advanced stages of the novel that the reader learns relevant details that shed light on Alfred’s unspoken grief and his career as a merchant in profit-making transgressions.

Alfred’s father, John Richardson, was a Scotsman. Alfred’s mother, Mary, was a descendent of the African slaves who were brought to Antigua. Contemplating the relationship between her father’s parents, Xuela dwells on “the distinction between ‘man’ and ‘people’” (181). Mary’s people were part of a suffering multitude, damaged in will, broken in spirit, while John, and his kind, was a man who possessed himself, who looked at the sea and heard the call of destiny. She informs the reader that John and Mary were married “in a Methodist church in the village of All Saints in the parish of St. Paul, Antigua, on a Sunday afternoon in the late nineteenth century” (181). These details are then contrasted with a series of uncertainties. Xuela states that there are no pictures of her paternal grandparents, that she does not know whether Mary was beautiful or whether John was handsome. She adds, ‘How these two people met and fell in love then, I do not know; that they fell in love I do not know, but I do not rule it out, nor any other combination of feelings’ (182). In her account of the past, Xuela moves between description and conjecture, and her speculations have a dreamy yet truth-seeking edge to them. The mark of reservation and the insertion of a provisional claim is a recurring trait in Xuela’s narrative, for this conditional mood is necessary when addressing the unalterable consequences of Xuela’s genealogy and personal history.
Xuela’s backward glance at the life of her father’s father bares forth composite meanings. John Richardson, the reader is told, was a rum trader. He lived the life of a rogue, travelling throughout the Caribbean where “he had many children with many different women in these places where he had lived, and they were all boys and they could tell that they were the sons of John Richardson because they all had the same red hair, a red hair of such uniqueness that they were all proud to have it, the hair of John Richardson” (182). Xuela’s commentary here is as much allegation as it is description. The enterprise of empire is shown in its diminutive form. John Richardson’s sexual escapades are implicated with colonial aggression. This charge, however, is made comically. Xuela does not reproach through political rhetoric, though the statement is unmistakeably political. Instead, she appropriates a near nursery rhyme tone. The effect casts a fairy tale frame around the exploits of John Richardson. His promiscuous behaviour, his proliferation of red-haired sons and the circumference of his irresponsibility are all made to look comic and to undermine the mythology of masculine virility.

A replica of his father’s mindset, Alfred Richardson, before he marries Xuela’s mother, is a rogue too. In the midst of Xuela’s speculative contemplation over the moment her father first met her mother, she states, ‘He had by then been from island to island and fathered children with women whose names he did not remember, the children’s names he did not know at all’ (200–201). This knowledge is painful to Xuela, not because her father commits shameless acts with sufferable consequences. What pains her is the fact that her father did not continue his life as a promiscuous scoundrel. Instead, for some inexplicable reason, he felt the need to settle down and marry Xuela’s mother. ‘My poor mother!’ is Xuela’s expletive response while pondering on the sequence of chance events that eventually culminates in her birth.

Xuela insists, however, that chance events are unavoidable. No one is exempt from the careless repetitions and deviations that compose existence. This fact is powerfully exemplified as Xuela recounts the circumstances of an unredeemed tragedy that forever marked her father’s life. As mentioned earlier, Xuela’s father did not start out wealthy; he was without a birthright that automatically insures comfort or respect. Alfred’s father may have been white but his mother was black. Xuela recalls events from the time her father was a boy. One story he told her when she was a young girl is of particular importance. An old woman had given her father an egg. She was a neighbour, who lived alone, and the egg was a token of appreciation for the help Alfred offered even before being asked. Alfred placed the egg under one of his mother’s hens. It hatched and the chick became a hen and produced more eggs. Eventually the sale of Alfred’s eggs and chickens amounted to a tiny and dearly loved treasure. Xuela asserts: ‘He never ate eggs after that (not all the time I knew him); he never ate chickens after that (not all the time I knew him), only collecting the bright red copper of money and polishing it so that it shone and giving it to his mother, who placed it in an old sock and
kept it in her bosom awake and asleep’ (194). A reader may easily presume that embedded in this modest enterprise is the seed of miserly greed that takes on a callous and more glutinous form in Alfred’s adult life. However, there is a more important point to make here.

Diligence and hard work result in a sizeable sum of money for the young Alfred. With a specific wish in mind, Alfred gives all his savings to his father so he can buy ‘material, English material, to make a suit for wearing only on Sundays’ (194-5). The New World myth of industry and profit, culture and respectability, is innocently played out in Alfred’s young mind, but something unexpected, something inevitable happens: Alfred’s father never returns. A squall supposedly sinks John Richardson’s Scotland bound ship. The actual reason for his disappearance, however, is left suspiciously unconfirmed. Alfred’s father and Alfred’s savings, a boy’s lifetime of labour, are lost forever. Xuela’s remarks regarding her father’s reaction to this crucial experience are deeply insightful:

[M]y father never saw his father again, my father never saw his profit again, and he may have spent the rest of his life trying to find and fit into that first suit he had imagined himself in again and again — though he would not have known he was doing that. I believe—and his whole life may have been a succession of rewards he could never enjoy, though he would not have seen that. (195)

If Xuela is right, her father’s adult life, his plots of corruption, his abuse of authority, his complicity with colonial logic is not simply a matter of unreflected mimicry of those mightier than the masses. At a fundamental level, unadmitted to himself, Alfred is trying to (re)cover his childhood losses.

PIERCING TRUTH

At the age of ten, at a time when Xuela admired her father’s looks, his handsome form surrounded by sun or his presence in a parade, she senses for the first time what is concealed beneath the beautiful cut and fit of his idealised figure. Xuela recounts the occasion when Lazarus, a gravedigger, came to her father and asked for nails. Two years earlier, a hurricane had swept through the area and Xuela’s father, ‘the highest government official in Mahaut then’ (188), was in charge of distributing needed material and building supplies to the local population. Lazarus’s home had been damaged by the hurricane and he was making a humble request according to local ordinance. Xuela’s father, however, refuses to give Lazarus nails; he claims he does not have any. Xuela knows the truth differently. She recalls:

I knew he had a large barrel of nails and other things in a shed at the back of the house, so in innocence, believing that he might have completely forgotten about it, I reminded him of it, I told him of the barrel full of nails, I told him just where the barrel was, what the barrel looked like, what the nails looked like, what the nails lying in the barrel one on top of the other — frozen, shiny — looked like. He denied again that he had any nails at all. (189)
This contradiction marks a crucial turning point in Xuela’s mind. No longer
does she understand her father singularly as the person he projects in public.
She observes an otherwise concealed side of him: ‘The sound of his voice was
not new; it was just that I heard him for the first time’ (189). Xuela’s emphasis
on sound, as the embodiment of a deeper reality, stands in stark contrast to her
father’s accent on sight. Alfred’s obsession with appearances, his insatiable need
to possess and fill the garment of admiration and respectability has no sympathy
for a man like Lazarus. Alfred cannot help but despise the failure represented in
the appearance of Lazarus. He might have given Lazarus what he requested had
the gravedigger not been so miserable, so derelict, so utterly without dignity.
This point is underscored by Xuela when she comments about her father’s mixed
heritage and his twofold nature:

Outside, outside my father, outside the island on which he was born, outside the
island on which he now lived his life, the world went on in its way, each event large,
a rehearsal of the future, each event large, a recapitulation of the past; but inside,
iside my father (and also inside the island on which he was born, inside the island
on which he now lived), an event that occurred hundreds of years before, the meeting
of man and people, continued on a course so subtle that it became a true expression
of his personality, it became who he really was; and he came to despise all who
behaved like the African people: not all who looked like them, only all who behaved
like them, all who were defeated, doomed, conquered, poor, diseased, head bowed
down, mind numbed from cruelty. (187)

The distinctions made in this passage are penetrating. Xuela’s commentary moves
beyond the common arguments regarding racial politics. Alfred’s malice towards
Lazarus, according to Xuela, is motivated by an overarching contempt for the
powerless. Xuela’s remarks braid political consequences with the composition
of personality; the scorn Alfred directs towards Lazarus is really a displaced
form of self-hatred. The offspring of a white father and a black mother, Alfred
chooses to duplicate the ‘conduct’ of a Scotsman and to look down on the
‘behaviour’ of the African people, because in the economy of power, in the
patriarchal world that was known to Alfred as a boy and now as a man, there is
always a hierarchy of authority and submission. Xuela’s innocent reminder that
there indeed were nails to be had challenges this hierarchy and she is dealt with
severely when Lazarus leaves empty handed.

Alfred, true to his public role as police officer and jailer, grabs the collar of
Xuela and tows her through the house to the shed where the barrel of nails is
kept. Xuela recalls the event without hyperbole:

[H]e pushed me face down into the barrel of nails, at the same time saying in French
patois, ‘Now you know where the nails are, now you really know where the nails
are.’ He spoke patois, French or English, only with his family or with anyone who
knew him from the time he was a boy, and I associated him speaking patois with
expressions of his real self and so I knew that this pain he was causing me, this
Xuela’s account of this incident is remarkable for several reasons. The punishment suffered by Xuela is heightened by the dispassionate manner in which Alfred’s fury is described. Here, Kincaid’s prose is a model of restraint. The reader has already been given a detailed description of the barrel’s content, ‘the nails lying in the barrel one on top of the other — frozen, shiny’ (189), and this prior image is already lodged in the reader’s mind when Xuela’s face is forced against the density and haphazard piercing of her father’s anger. Whatever terror might have been experienced by the ten-year old Xuela is not an issue in this recollection nor is the excess and disproportion of a parent’s outrage considered as an isolated topic. As a self-reflecting narrator, Xuela has other points to make. Rather than dwelling on the pain of the moment, she speculates associatively about her father’s actions.

She comments that when he left her he ‘went to sit in the room that looked out on the sea, the room that had no real purpose, it was used so infrequently: the sea’s surface was still, and as he looked at it he removed wax from his ear and ate it’ (190). The juxtaposition of the nail barrel scene and the strange serenity of a room overlooking the sea is jolting; reckless wrath is contrasted with a repulsive, unconscious and presumably habitual form of self-consolation. Instead of contemplating on the injustice she has suffered, Xuela asks: ‘what could my father have been thinking about’ (190). It is at this point, after a short lyrical interlude that meditates on the inextricable connection between people and place, that Xuela recounts the events and circumstances that emotionally surrounded her father’s loss of his father. Retrospectively considering Alfred’s refusal to give Lazarus nails and Alfred’s subsequent cruelty towards Xuela in the frame of an original trauma (the loss of Alfred’s father and his little boy fortune); the reader senses a legacy of injury that exceeds Alfred’s individual acts of abuse. In narrative currents that run deeper than chronology, Xuela offers an imaginative reconstruction of fundamental debts, accidents of life that are spliced with colonial and sexual exploitation. Defenceless against the calamities of life, Alfred seems to displace his anger in order to conceal the real source of his pain and outrage. Perhaps these feelings were wordlessly entering Alfred’s mind as he sought sanctuary in a ‘room that had no real purpose’. Xuela’s rhetorical question ‘what could my father have been thinking’ is not directly answered. Instead she suggestively recounts the irredeemable absence of her father’s father and the ordinary and dreadful forces that lead us along one path rather than another.

RESURRECTING MEMORY

The episode connected with Lazarus’s request for nails is replete with symbolism and intertextual resonance. Lazarus’s visit to Xuela’s father’s house was not the first time Xuela had met the gravedigger. In an earlier section of the novel, Xuela asks ‘what makes the world turn against me?’ (140). It is another
one of Xuela’s simple and terrifying questions. In lieu of an answer, Xuela offers the reader an observation. She recalls a chance encounter with Lazarus in the cemetery where her mother was buried: ‘I came upon him face-to-face in the graveyard, carrying a bottle (pint size) of white rum in one hand and holding up the waist of his trousers with the other; an insect kept trying to feed from a small pool of saliva that had settled at the corner of his mouth …’ (140–41). Lazarus attempts to brush the insect away with the hand holding the pint but the insect maintains its ground. He automatically alters his strategy and Xuela’s account of this incident deepens the significance of occurrences we normally judge to be embarrassing or condescendingly consider pathetic. She remembers that ‘instinctively, without calculation, he let go of his pants waist and firmly brushed the insect away. The insect did go away, the insect did not return, but his trousers fell down to his ankles, and again instinctively, without calculation, he reached down to pull them back up and he became as he was before, a poor man driven out of his mind by a set of events that the guilty and the tired and the hopeless call life’ (141). It is not Lazarus’s desperate appearance that is ultimately appalling but the ‘set of events’ that has disfigured this man. Xuela’s question ‘what makes the world turn against me,’ the question that precedes the telling of this episode also addresses the anguish represented in the figure of Lazarus.

Before giving the details of her chance encounter with Lazarus in the graveyard, Xuela comments on the gravedigger’s name: ‘his mother would have thought that such a name, rich and powerful as it was with divine second chance, would somehow protect him from the living death that was his actual life; but it had been of no use, he was born the Dead and he would die the Dead’ (140). The reader is made to believe that this is a reference to the defeated existence of a black man reduced by the conspiracy of racial politics and humiliated by the irony of his name and occupation, but what we learn is more unsettling than this. With his pants sacked around his ankles, ‘[he] looked like a living carcass; the bones in his body were too prominent, they were too close to his skin, he smelled sour, he smelled of stink, he smelled like something rotting, when it’s in that sweet stage that can sometimes pass for a delicacy, just before real decay sets in …’. Xuela concludes this ghastly close-up with an equally striking observation: ‘before his trousers met his waist again, I saw the only alive thing left of him; it was his pubic hair: it covered a large area of his crotch, growing in a wide circle, almost hiding all of his private parts; its color was red, the red of a gift or the red of something burning rapidly’ (141). The colour of Lazarus’s crotch unquestionably marks him other than of pure African descendent. The red imagery employed by Xuela is suggestive. It alludes to the red-haired sons of John Richardson and consequently to Alfred Richardson himself, who claimed, without irony, that when he met a red-haired man ‘that he would know that this man was related to him’ (183).

Beyond this internal textual link, the fiery hue of Lazarus’s pubic hair associatively slides to folkloric African-American tales of deception and capture.
After reviewing documented statements of informants who were the grandchildren or the great-grandchildren of Africans abducted into slavery, historian Michael A. Gomez found a number of accounts that illustrate how West Africans were lured by European slavers. Gomez concludes: ‘the source of attraction [was] some form of cloth, usually red in color’ (200). Though accounts vary, there are many common references in the testimonies examined by Gomez. According to the informants, Europeans who had arrived in ships strewed colourful items, clothes and ornaments, on the shore. The natives collected these objects believing they were gifts. More items were scattered along the beaches and on gangplanks. Once lured on board, Africans met a less generous fate. Gomez underscores that these stories of deception and capture are the product of ‘an intergenerational crafting by those who were actually captured and by those who were born on American soil. The story was not told as it actually happened but recast to convey what the African-based community perceived as the essential truth of the experience’ (199). Similarly, Xuela’s narrative can be understood as a crafting of truth. The details of Lazarus’s red crotch, Alfred’s contempt for the defeated, and the prolongation of Xuela’s suffering are not simply representations of facts but rather a form of communication that points to the everyday concerns and specific emotions that are often repressed and left unacknowledged in official histories of individuals and people.

This legacy of absence is not easily overcome. Placed outside of history, it is difficult to see how one is to become authentic to oneself and in the eyes of others. Xuela remembers how her chance encounter with Lazarus in the graveyard ends in what appears as an act of mutual nullification:

This brief meeting of a gravedigger and myself had no beginning and so it could have no end; there was only a ‘Good day’ from me and an ‘Eh-eh’ from him, and these things were said at exactly the same time, so that he did not really hear what I said and I did not really hear what he said, and that was the point of it, we might have murdered ourselves or put in motion a chain of events that have come to an end only with our hanging from the gallows at midday in a public square. (142)

Xuela’s polite salutation is more routinely delivered than sincere and it helps disarm the shock and embarrassment of seeing Lazarus so intimately revealed. Xuela’s proper English greeting is contrasted with Lazarus’s patois ‘Eh-eh,’ which is as habitually constructed as a ten-year-old’s politeness. At the age of seventy, Xuela now understands this incongruous encounter within the long sequence of irreversible events that shape the lives of individuals like herself and the gravedigger. Though she is a girl and he is a man, they share the distinctiveness of the dispossessed. It is an admission that is impossible to make at the time, which is why the incident ‘had no beginning’. Likewise, ‘it could have no end’, which makes the recollection of that day ironically eternal. Had the two realised the gravity of their condition then, Xuela claims they might have committed suicide or perhaps revolted violently leading to their public
execution. The disposed sometimes take such a course but Xuela makes other choices.

In the end, Xuela assumes a stillness that is vast like the sea that surrounds her emptiness. As a child she learned to fear nothing and refused to be disgraced. In her youth, she took lovers as a way to confirm what was loveable within her but without name. Later, she decides never to bear children and marries a man who she does not love. In her recollections, she wanders through the personal histories and life stories of those who are near and remote and finally, one by one, Xuela speaks of the death of her half-brother, half-sister, step-mother, father and husband. In the broad wake of these losses, Xuela’s voice remains calm and undiminished. The casualness in which Xuela’s speaks of despair levitates like a mythic tale, and like myth it cannot be properly confirmed and it is impossible to wholly deny. Xuela concludes that she has been speaking interminably in place of the mother who she never knew and the children she never bore, identities barred from existence yet overbearingly real in their absence. At a more fundamental level, one that is as perplexing as it is profound, Xuela states: ‘This is an account of the person who was never allowed to be and an account of the person I did not allow myself to become’ (228). Xuela’s final remarks break from the conventional opposition between presence and absence and reinforce the paradox of identity. Figured in the shadow of history and multiplied in the art of fiction, Xuela is a subject apparently without beginning and without end, and it is in her vast reflection that the legacy of absence is placed inescapably before us.

NOTES

1 Jamaica Kincaid’s work is receiving growing critical attention. For example, the summer 2002 issue of Callaloo: Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters, edited by Rhonda Cobham, contained many thought-provoking articles that explore the spectrum of political and cultural issues raised in Kincaid’s fiction and non-fiction. Of particular interest is Kincaid’s idiosyncratic appropriation of the bildungsroman tradition and her coming-of-age narratives set in colonial and postcolonial modes of consciousness. In spite of what appears to be Kincaid’s clearly marked domains of political and cultural inquiry, what fascinates me is the unpredictable drifts and the subterranean forces present in Kincaid’s writing and how her texts continuously reframe the question of who we are. Consequently, it is the unpredictable and subterranean movements in Kincaid’s writing which mark the starting point of this article.

2 In this respect, The Autobiography of My Mother shares literary kinship with Zora Neale Hurston’s Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), where Hurston, informed by her anthropological training, reworked the tenor of autobiographic writing to express the cultural and folkloric myths that constitute a dynamic and perpetually changing sense of self. Defining identity as an imaginative performance rather than a literal fact of reality is ultimately what The Autobiography of My Mother and Dust Tracks on a Road have in common.

3 Similar to Gertrude Stein’s writing, Kincaid’s repetitions evoke experiences based on a textual reality that figures what we see by the way we see it. This emphasis on
compositional performance allows one to veer from the staked paths of memory and into the imaginative making of life. See Stein’s essay ‘Poetry and Grammar’ regarding the compositional aspects of repetition.

Xuela comments that her speaking Standard English, a language she never heard before, ought to have been the deeper surprise, not that she spoke for the first time. Xuela’s inexplicable embodiment of the coloniser’s language clearly has symbolic implications. French or English patois was the vernacular spoken in Xuela’s speech community. The gravity of her question is thus reinforced by the appropriation of the coloniser’s English, but beyond the language politics displayed in this episode, Xuela’s sudden birth into speech has a mythologising function. Irreversibly severed from her mother, she invokes a legend of self-creation.

See Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, in particular the chapter ‘Pitfalls of National Consciousness’, for an examination of the institutional structures and modes of thinking that maintain economic and political inequity after national independence.

In her earlier novel *Lucy* (1991), Kincaid also examines the grave consequences of severed familial relations and their psychic discontinuities. After being told of her father’s death, the novel’s narrator, Lucy, recalls a memory from her childhood that contains fragments from her father’s past: ‘His mother, after asking his father to bring him up, left for England. He last heard from her when he was twelve years old. She had sent him a pair of shoes for Christmas, black with small holes that made a decorative pattern on the front; they were too big for him when he received them, and so he put them away, but when he next tried them on he had outgrown them. He still had them in his safe, where he kept his money and other private things and every once in a while he would show them to me’ (124–45). The tokens of loss expressed in *Lucy* take on a darker guise in Kincaid’s rendering of Alfred Richardson’s unspoken sense of abandonment.

WORKS CITED


KEN KAMOCHE

Black Fishnet Stockings

Otieno loved the car like his own child. He could sit for hours while he waited for Mzee, the old man, just admiring the sleek, shiny bodywork. He knew the car very well. When he heard the engine purr, he understood its language in a way Mzee never could. He heard what it was telling him. It spoke in gentle tones, as only a new Mercedes could.

His wife, Selina, had begged him many times to give her a ride around the streets of Nairobi in his precious Mercedes. That’s what he called it, his Mercedes. But he never let her into the car. He always said the boss would not permit it. He would get into trouble. He couldn’t afford to lose his job if Mzee found out he was using the car to impress his wife, or even to take her shopping.

‘Just one time,’ she begged. ‘How will he find out? After taking him to work, you’re free, just drop by here, one hour, and then go. Please?’

Otieno smiled. ‘Okay, maybe one day.’

‘Promise? I’ll sit quietly, behaving myself. Back left. You won’t even know I’m there!’

He laughed. ‘I can’t promise, but I’ll try.’ She rubbed his back lovingly and lay back on their single bed, dreaming about the day she would sit in the Merc, back left, while her husband took her on a joy ride, as if it was their own car.

Selina spent a great deal of time dreaming of the good times. On the way to work, she often sat quietly on the bus watching how other women dressed. She watched their hairstyles and wondered where they had their hair done. She herself worked for a hair salon in the city centre. Charlotte’s Beauty Salon was in an upmarket plaza on Kimathi Street. Her job was to wash, shampoo and plait hair. She loved the job. She loved the wonderful things she could do with hair.

But more than anything else in the world, she wanted to run her own beauty salon. She dreamed about the glamorous pictures of famous actresses she would place on the walls. She did whatever she could to get to know the well-heeled women who visited Charlotte’s. She knew they were the wives or mistresses of the city bigwigs.

‘You never know when you might need these people,’ she whispered to her friend Amina. Amina didn’t need to be told. She knew a lot of important and famous people in the city. She told Selina she was close to quitting her job and setting up her own salon. She had cultivated contacts with clients who had introduced her to what she called VIPs, very important people. She smiled mysteriously when Selina asked what these VIPs did for her.
For several weeks, Selina begged Amina to let her in on her secret. All Amina could say was that there were many men out there who were only too happy to help a girl in need.

‘How do I meet them?’

‘You might not have time, Selina.’ Amina was single, and unattached. She considered herself free and independent.

‘I may be married,’ replied Selina, with a naughty pout, ‘but I’m not a slave.’ She imagined herself making enough money to buy her own car, something chic like a BMW.

‘If you’re sure, I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Good girl, I’ll buy you lunch today,’ offered Selina. They giggled conspiratorially as they walked into the street to their favorite sausage and chips café.

Otieno started the day by cleaning the car, a task that lasted the better part of two hours. He was like a man possessed, to the point of wiping off imaginary specks of dust, and then leaning back to see if any marks were discernible on the bodywork. He was ready to drive Mzee away to the office by eight. He and his wife lived in Kawangware village, only a few miles away from Mzee’s mansion on Ngong Road. It took him ten minutes to cycle there.

The guard smiled and greeted him, calling him the magician, for pulling off the incredible trick of coming into the expansive compound in a battered Black Mamba bicycle and driving off minutes later in a brand new Merc.

As Mzee walked out of the door of his palatial home and into the waiting car, Otieno glanced up at the bedroom window and saw the little wave with the index finger beckoning. Mama’s coded message. *Hurry back!* Sometimes Mzee needed him all day. So, after dropping him off at the office in Westlands, he would wait in the car park, clean the car and wait to be summoned. If he wasn’t needed, he would drive the eight kilometres back to the residence and wait there. He used to while the hours away chatting with the other servants, waiting for the call from Mzee’s office.

He liked showing off the new Motorola cell phone Mzee had recently provided him. Gone were the days when Mzee could only reach him by giving instructions in advance. In those days gone by, appointments were sacrosanct. Now, you never knew when you were needed where. Plans could change at a moment’s notice.

As he drove Mzee in the early morning traffic, he tried not to glance into the rear-view mirror. He couldn’t face Mzee. The traffic was a little heavy going down to the city on Ngong Road, but it got lighter heading out of town up Waiyaki Way. Mzee preferred to take that route because it gave him the impression he was going into the city although they actually just skirted round it on Uhuru Highway. The alternative was to drive through the posh residential areas like Kileleshwa. That was the way Otieno drove when he went back to the house to meet Mama.
It had been going on for two months. His affair with Mama. When it first started, it was so unreal he thought he was dreaming. Whenever he took the Merc back, he would ask her if she needed to be driven anywhere. She would inform him if she had errands to run, or wanted to go shopping. So, he would clean the car again while he waited for her to get ready. John, the domestic driver, was responsible for the Range Rover, which was used for taking the children to school. Madam did not like the Range Rover, so she never asked John to drive her, unless Otieno was held up somewhere looking after Mzee. Otieno couldn’t blame her. The Merc was in a class of its own.

One day when he brought the car back after dropping Mzee off at the office, he was informed by one of the servants that he was needed in the house. He had never been invited into the house before. He had, over the years, come to enjoy its opulence second-hand, by listening to the two servants and the cook. He had never in his wildest dreams imagined he would ever step through the imposing mahogany door.

‘I am wanted?’ He repeated, thinking he had heard wrong.

‘Yes,’ Auma assured him, ‘you had better come into the visitors’ chambers.’ She led him into a large, airy parlour, with curtains stretching from the ceiling to the floor. ‘Leave your shoes here.’ Auma opened a wall cabinet, reached out for a pair of sandals which she handed to him and then left him standing there.

He didn’t know whether to remain standing or take a seat. The leather sofas looked inviting, but he couldn’t bring himself to sit down, in case he damaged something. He looked around the room, aware that it was only a waiting room, though it was bigger than his entire house where he lived with his wife, Selina and four children. He did not dare imagine what the rest of the house must have looked like, or just how big it was.

As he was contemplating the carvings and paintings on the walls, Mama arrived suddenly. He stood to attention almost like a soldier and clasped his hands behind his back. Mama was wearing a translucent gown which did a poor job of obscuring her voluptuous curves. Struggling hard not to stare, Otieno averted his eyes and muttered a greeting.

When she walked up close to shake his hand, he took in her fragrance, which was a mixture of a perfume he would never even have heard of and the natural smell of a woman which seeped through her skin as she slept, and then stayed on her skin, as if to remind anyone who needed reminding that she was a woman. It was raw, natural and infused with the suggestion of closeness which made him want to turn around and run away, back to the more familiar ambience of the Merc. He felt guilty about being aware of something as intimate as the woman’s body smell so soon after driving her husband off to work.

‘You are here.’ She motioned him to a seat.

‘Yes, Mama. I have arrived.’

‘Have you had breakfast?’ Before he could answer, she added: ‘Have some tea, anyway, while we talk.’ She pressed a buzzer on the table. Presently, Auma
popped her head round the door. Mama instructed her to serve tea for two. Auma suppressed a sardonic smile as she noticed Otieno’s wide-open eyes.

‘Listen, Otieno. We are changing our travel arrangements from now on.’

He listened attentively, while keeping his gaze on the beige carpet, and nodding occasionally. Auma brought a tray in and poured for Mama and was about to walk away when Mama passed the cup on to Otieno and asked her to pour another one for her. Otieno saw Auma’s facial muscles tighten as she said: ‘Yes, Mama. Sorry.’ As she was leaving, she stepped on his toes. Otieno winced and bit his lower lip. He sensed she could just as easily have poured the hot tea ‘accidentally’ on his lap, or worse.

‘Here’s the new arrangement, Otieno,’ Mama continued, as soon as Auma was out of earshot. ‘After you drop Daddy off, come back and take me to Adam’s Arcade. I’m opening a shop there. I’ll need to move around a lot, so you may have to stay with me, and pick Daddy up in the evening later, or maybe John can deal with that.’ She had been looking him straight in the eye, but then she started to gaze out of the window to the jacaranda trees outside.

‘That is alright,’ he said. ‘That is good.’ He felt some sort of response was expected.

‘Mmhh. I’ll call for you when I’m ready.’ She got up to leave, and tightened the robe around her. He too got up, ignoring her entreaty to remain seated.

‘Finish your tea, and wait for me here.’

Otieno didn’t dare look into her eyes. He stole a quick glance at her retreating figure after breathing in deep to take in her smell as she brushed past him. He was completely flustered and was left feeling foolish, like a naughty schoolboy. He was still standing there, not knowing what to think when Auma waltzed in, with a sneer on her face.

‘So now you’re the VIP around here?’

Otieno shook his head, waved her away and walked to the window. But Auma sneaked up behind him and asked: ‘So, do you want me to fix you breakfast, mister big shot visitor, eh?’ Otieno could only laugh. When she realised he was intent on ignoring her completely, Auma walked away, but not before snapping: ‘Let us know if your highness is staying for lunch! Just press that thing!’

When Mama returned an hour later, resplendent in a light blue suit and matching headscarf, Otieno felt less threatened by her business-like demeanour and more able to relate to her. He drove her to the premises that were going to serve as her new business. After staying idle for two years following the birth of her third child, she had finally prevailed upon Daddy to allow her to return to work. And this time she wasn’t intent on taking any old job. She wanted to run her own business, selling ladies’ clothes.

As far as Otieno could tell, the business was doing well. There were always customers to take care of, and Mama talked excitedly about new designs, styles and fashions. Most of these things meant little to him, but he learned to make appreciative noises as he drove her to her numerous appointments. She insisted
on asking for his opinion even when it was clear to her, or so Otieno thought, that he was clueless.

He always tried to sound cheerful and never dared contradict her. He gradually became aware she liked him, and little by little, he discarded his shyness in front of her. She told him things he didn’t believe he needed to know, about her husband. She tried every trick in the book to discover what he, Otieno, knew about Daddy’s trysts with other women.

Otieno denied everything. How can she possibly expect me to disclose such matters! He merely shook his head and remained mute. It was impossible for him to tell her how Mzee often called him on the cell phone to tell him where to pick up some girl, and where to deliver her. Mzee preferred the quiet motels conveniently located around Westlands, and sometimes Parklands, which was only a five minute drive from his office.

Sometimes, Otieno was simply told where to wait. The girl would have been instructed what car to look out for. To kill the time, Otieno played a guessing game, trying to figure out which approaching woman was heading for his Mercedes. He scanned the neighbourhood on his mirrors and watched as girls walked past. Out of the corner of his eye, he took note of the women who stood by the side of the road, pretending to talk on their cell phone while searching for the appropriate license plate.

Sometimes he was caught quite unaware. He would be watching the front or side and the rear door would open without warning and a smiling face would loom in his rear view mirror. The women invariably wore dark glasses. He never got to see their eyes. Sometimes he saw their high heels, boots, or slit skirts as they wandered up and down the road trying to pick up Mzee’s Merc.

‘Jambo,’ he would offer a polite greeting.

‘Twende.’ Let’s go. A soft reply. And a gentle smile.

The central locking activated, and the engine purring almost inaudibly, Otieno delivered to the designated motel. While the girl made herself at home, Otieno drove rapidly to pick up the boss. It was a well-rehearsed routine. They had done it for years.

There was no way Mama was ever going to find out, certainly not from him. If she wanted to know anything, she could ask her husband herself. Otieno shrugged and kept his eye on the road.

But even this did not prepare him for what she did next.

‘Take me to Ongata Rongai,’ she told him. ‘I have an appointment there but I’m not sure what time exactly. So we can aim on being there all afternoon. I’ve told Daddy to call John.’

They drove through Kibera and got to Ongata Rongai half an hour later. Mama had taken care of everything. She instructed him to drive to a motel hidden away behind a thicket of acacia and oak trees.

‘This is it.’ She declared.
He helped her pick up a bag full of samples. She led the way into the motel, and as soon as they got into the lobby, she sent him back to the car to fetch another bag. While he was gone, she paid for the room she had reserved in advance on the phone that morning.

‘We’ll wait here.’

Otieno sat in the armchair, and observed as Mama emptied the two bags on the bed, talking to herself the whole time. The idea of getting a motel room to show a prospective customer samples seemed rather strange. Why couldn’t they meet in the lobby, or at the customer’s place of work?

‘Do you want a drink?’

‘A soda. Thank you, Mama.’

She reached into her handbag and extracted a two hundred shilling note.

‘Go to the bar and get two beers, Otieno.’ It was an order.

Mama spoke for the next half hour, mostly about Daddy. Otieno listened patiently. Then she sent him to the bar to get a bottle of wine. He had never tasted wine before. He got drunk quickly. Meanwhile Mama was talking about her business. She asked him if he wanted anything for his wife. He didn’t know what to think, and he was certain he couldn’t afford anything she sold. So he lied that his wife didn’t care too much about clothes.

‘Oh, come on,’ she cajoled. ‘Every woman loves beautiful clothes.’ She laughed joyously, and, picking up a bra, asked him what her size was.

He laughed to hide his embarrassment. He had no idea. He told her that as an African man he didn’t involve himself in such women’s things. His wife would think him strange if he took an interest in her underwear.

She laughed again and tossed the bra at him.

‘You’re so traditional, Otieno. Men know about such things nowadays, you know? Times have changed!’

‘For us ordinary people, nothing changes,’ he informed her.

He glanced at his watch. It was 3pm. He reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

‘There’s no signal here,’ she said. ‘You can forget about the phone.’

He felt a shudder of unease go down his spine when he realised his boss wouldn’t be able to reach him. What would Mzee think?

‘How about stockings?’ Mama asked, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Stockings?’

‘For your wife.’

‘Oh, I see. I don’t … I don’t know, Mama.’ He shook his head and looked away.

Then he remembered his wife talking about fishnet stockings. Her father was a fisherman back in Homa Bay.

‘I saw stockings that look like fishnets,’ she had informed him one evening.

‘Why are you interested?’ He demanded. ‘You don’t even like stockings.’
‘You’re so foolish,’ she had teased him. ‘You don’t even know what I like!’
He smiled to himself when he remembered that conversation.
‘Ah, I see you’re smiling,’ said Mama. ‘I bet your wife likes stockings. Select a pair. I’ll give it to her.’
Shyly, he searched through her samples and selected a pair of black fishnet stockings.
‘I’ll try them on for you,’ said Mama.
Otieno stared at her, open-mouthed, as she got up from the bed, peeled off the brown pair she was wearing and proceeded to wear the pair he had selected for Selina.
God, she’s shameless! Otieno gripped his glass of wine tightly and watched horrified as Mama lifted her skirt and showed off her long, slender legs. Then she danced, languidly, and seductively, with her eyes closed, like someone lost in a fantasy. Otieno felt an inexplicable force take over his being. The force, which he was powerless to resist, gave his previously immobile frame the energy to rise and walk over to the dancing woman. He took her in his arms and together they danced, she with her eyes shut, and he, with his eyes tightly focused on her face.
They danced for ten minutes, without music.
Later as he drove her back home, he replayed the events of the afternoon in his mind. But try as he might, he could not recall the precise moment when the slow dance turned into a romp in bed. All he could remember was that suddenly they were both naked, and although there was no music in the single room, an incomprehensible sense of musicality appeared to have consumed their two bodies. He vividly remembered the moment when she stopped kissing him, reached for her handbag and extracted a packet of condoms.
He had never seen a woman do that before. The embarrassment he thought he had set aside overwhelmed him once more. This time totally. He struggled hard to overcome the sense of guilt that prevented him from rising to the occasion. Mama was well aware of his sense of unease and less than passionate response to the fire that burned in her. But she knew how to light up his fire.
He wondered what Mzee was doing at that very moment. Would he have sent John to pick up a girl for him? Was John ever privy to this quiet arrangement or was he, Otieno, the chosen one? He had always envied Mzee, the boss, he of the unlimited amounts of money and the capacity to obtain any woman he desired. Mzee usually gave him a generous tip on those occasions, as though to buy his silence and loyalty.
Yet here he was taking that which belonged to his benevolent boss. The image of Mzee would not leave him even as he succumbed to Mama’s wild passion. She was like a lioness on the savannah, anxious to devour a helpless gazelle. Otieno cursed himself for likening himself to a humble, innocent gazelle. Deep in his heart he knew he was more like a hyena, betraying his boss the lion.
He wanted to ask Mama whether her customer was coming at all. But Mama seemed to have completely forgotten about it. Perhaps there was no customer at all. Otieno shivered involuntarily as he realised he was probably the unwitting customer. He couldn’t bear to look at Mama. He heard her snore softly as she sat beside him in the luxurious Merc.

The pair of black fishnet stockings in his jacket pocket felt like an oily smudge on the gleaming surface of his beloved Merc. He had put it back neatly in its tiny plastic wrapper, hoping Mama’s smell no longer lingered on it. Selina would love it. She had spoken longingly about fishnet stockings but hadn’t found any she liked and could afford.

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Selina prevailed upon her friend Amina to allow her to meet some of her friends in high places who could help her on her way to her own beauty parlour. They made a few phone calls and a friend of a friend agreed to help.

For Otieno, the call from Mzee was just a regular call. *Wait outside that new cybercafe on Banda Street, between the bank and that curio shop. 3pm on the dot.* He was there at 2.50, ever the reliable, punctual driver. The man who always delivered, and asked no questions.

He gave up searching around him on the mirrors. There were too many people walking by. He couldn’t keep track of them. He saw the low skirt first. The shape of a woman turned away from the crowds on the pavement and reached for the door. Instinctively, he released the central locking and she eased herself in. Back left.

He tried not to peer into the rear-view mirror. There was never any need. He always felt like an intruder. He only murmured a laconic greeting. *Jambo.* As he reached across the glove compartment to pick up a CD, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, what looked like a lattice on the legs that stretched out just behind him. Before he could turn his head to see her face, he heard a gasp of horror escape her lips.

And then he saw the lattice more clearly. It was black fishnet stockings. He felt a plaintive voice tear through his troubled mind: *you won’t even know I’m there!*
JOHN O’LEARY

‘Out here to be pleasant’: *Mister Johnson* and the Rhetoric of Niceness

Early in the twentieth century, a Governor of the Gold Coast colony in West Africa circulated a minute to his staff. Such minutes were not unusual, and could cover any subject. This one, however, is memorable, for it dealt not with the minutiae of imperial administration but with a more difficult question: namely, how the agent of empire was to behave towards the subjects he ruled:

> I wish all officers to remember that a very high standard of work and conduct is expected from members of the service. We must always remember that we are Civil Servants — servants of the public. We are in this country to help the African and to serve him. We derive our salaries from the Colony and it is our duty to give full value for what it pays us. I attach considerable importance to good manners, especially towards the African. Those people who consider themselves so superior to the Africans that they feel justified in despising them and insulting them are quite unfitted for responsible positions in the colony. They are, in my opinion, inferior to those whom they affect to despise, and often betray, by their arrogance and bad manners, the inferiority of which they are secretly ashamed. (Morris 1978 253)

It is a fascinating text. Analysing it can lead us to an understanding of the complex, often contradictory late imperial culture that produced it — a culture that much post-colonial theory has represented as simple, homogenous and monolithic — as well as to a deeper appreciation of the co-texts, such as Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* (1939), that this culture created.

On the surface, the Governor’s minute is a liberal document, one that appeals explicitly to notions of dignity and respect for one’s fellow man (or woman). Beneath the humane sentiment, however, notions of racial superiority are evident — Africans have to be ‘helped’, the Governor notes, which necessarily implies that they stand lower on the scale of civilisation than the imperial agent who rules them. What is significant, however, is that this sense of racial superiority cannot be voiced. To do so — to speak openly of one’s superiority — is regarded as arrogant and bad-mannered. To ram home this point, the Governor ends with a subtle observation: those who despise Africans labour under a secret sense of inferiority. The inferiority here relates to socio-economic rank; Europeans who openly voice their superiority are, the Governor intimates, lower-class. This class discourse, which intersects so interestingly here with the discourse of race, is a subject I shall return to.

The Governor’s minute might seem trivial, barely worth attention, were it not for the fact that the question of how the imperial agent should behave towards
the imperial subject at the day-to-day level of social interaction is a significant
tHEME of late imperial fiction. It surfaces, for example, in *A Passage to India*
(1924). In that novel, Mrs. Moore, though a liberal, humane character, does not
question the right of the British to rule India, or even assert the equality of
Europeans and Indians. What does worry her, however, is the rudeness that
many of her fellow Britons show towards the people they rule. When, early in
the book, her son Ronny dismisses the matter as a ‘side issue’, she reacts with
dismay:

She forgot about Adela in her surprise. ‘A side-issue, a side-issue?’ she repeated.
‘How can it be that?’
‘We’re not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!’
‘What do you mean?’
‘What I say. We’re out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them’s my sentiments.
India isn’t a drawing room.’ (Forster 69)

Ronny goes on to describe the civilising mission he believes he is part of, and his
mother listens with a degree of respect. Even so, she remains troubled by the
‘unpleasantness’ (as she calls it) of British rule. When Ronny has finished she
gives voice to her conviction:

‘I’m going to argue, and indeed dictate,’ she said, clinking her rings. ‘The English
are out here to be pleasant.’
‘How do you make that out, Mother?’ he asked, speaking gently again, for he was
ashamed of his irritability.
‘Because India is part of the earth. And God has put us on earth in order to be
pleasant to each other. God … is … love.’ She hesitated, seeing how much he disliked
the argument, but something made her go on. ‘God has put us on earth to love our
neighbours and to show it, and He is omnipresent, even in India, to see how we are
succeeding.’ (70)

Viewed historically, Mrs. Moore’s idea that the English are in India to be pleasant
is a curious one. Empires are not by nature pleasant; imperial peoples, whether
Roman, Aztec or Russian, have seldom bothered to be nice to those they
conquered. The fact that Mrs. Moore (and through her, Forster) makes a plea for
niceness in imperial relations suggests a curious quirk, or psychological fault
line, in late imperial British culture, that is worthy of investigation.

As the dialogue between Ronnie and Mrs. Moore shows, the notion of niceness
in imperial relations was by no means uncontested. Forster himself does not
view it unproblematically. In *A Passage to India*, Adela’s attempt to be ‘nice’ to
Aziz leads to disaster, while at the end of the novel, horses, earth, temples, tank,
jail, palace, birds, carrion and Guest House — the whole of India — conspire to
force Aziz and Fielding (who wish only to be friends) apart.

Being nice to imperial subjects, it seems, may not be wise, or even possible.
Yet the notion that one should behave pleasantly towards subject peoples —
whatever one’s private feelings of superiority — persisted. In Joyce Cary’s
‘African’ novels, the question of how to act towards Africans in the day-to-day social context is examined in a variety of different ways. In *Aissa Saved* (1932), the first of these novels, the analysis is implicit rather than explicit. The rudeness of the missionary Carrs towards a venerable old man, Musa, who is trying to protect them, is carefully noted. Though Cary does not labour the point, it is clear that the Carrs, while generally well meaning, have behaved inappropriately:

> ‘Musa, astonished, unable to believe his ears, stared at him and then hastily salaamed … conscious as he was of his energy, courage, and devotion to duty at great risk to himself, [he] still could not believe that he was suffering a public humiliation before all the guttersnipes of the town’ (Cary 1952 44–45).

In *The African Witch* (1936), the way the white residents of Rimi behave towards Aladai, the Oxford-educated black prince, is a central theme of the novel, one that receives a great deal of discussion. Aladai’s attempts to assert his social equality are met with hostility by some, acceptance by others; one character, Rackham, is confused in his reactions:

> Rackham had meant to be polite to Aladai on general principles. His exclamation had exploded out of him without any premeditation. He did not know what he had said until he had said it, and, as he darted up the road as if shot there by the same explosion, he still did not know where he was going or what he was going to say. Meeting Mrs. Pratt and Rubin on their way to the Residency, he said, ‘Why not the club?’ You’ll have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Aladai there.’

> ‘What!’ cried Mrs. Pratt.

> ‘He’s just arrived. He’s been giving us a lecture on the stars, with quotations from the poets. It was a touching scene.’

> ‘But can’t we do anything?’ Mrs. Pratt screamed.

> ‘I’m afraid not. You see, Mr. Aladai happens to be black, and so he can do what he likes.

> ‘Yes, with a Resident like Mr. You-know-who. But really — this is too much!’

Mrs. Pratt began to exclaim and cry out for help in her usual manner, but Rackham was already disgusted and bored with her. How silly she was in her violence and fear. She depressed him; or rather, she increased his anger and depression by adding to it material of exactly the same sympathetic quality from her own silliness and violence. She made him savage. He would have been rude had not Rubin, seeing that there was something wrong with his temper, reminded the lady that they wanted to catch the Resident about the next chapel service before he came to the club.

(Cary 1951 119)

This confusion or instability of attitude on the part of Rackham is symptomatic, I believe, of a larger uncertainty in Cary himself, and in late imperial British culture generally. Being rude to subject peoples — openly asserting ones superiority — was no longer acceptable, yet feelings of racial superiority persisted, making social contact at the day-to-day level problematic.

In *A Passage to India* and *The African Witch*, the question of how the imperial agent should behave toward the imperial subject is debated openly, with characters...
taking sides on the issue. In *Mister Johnson* (1939), the question is not explicitly discussed the way it is in *The African Witch*, but is, nevertheless, an important theme in the novel. Some of the British characters treat the Africans they meet — especially Johnson — with contempt, and voice their supposed superiority either covertly or overtly. An example is Blore, the District Officer, who ‘really hates Johnson’ (Cary 1995, 20) and whose manner toward him, though superficially polite, is patronisingly dismissive, a fact Johnson is aware of. Another British character, Gollup, the ex-army sergeant and trader who briefly employs Johnson, is more openly racist — he regularly assaults Johnson and his fellow shop assistant, and tries each week to kill his African mistress. Gollup has no time for the rhetoric of niceness: for him, Africans are simply ‘nigs’ whom it is the white man’s burden to rule:

Half an hour later Gollup is in a melancholy mood. ‘It’s the hexile — you chaps don’t know what the Empire costs us — ’

‘Oh, sah, dem millions and millions of gold — ’

‘I ain’t complaining — it’s a duty laid on us by God — but the Pax Britannia takes a bit of keeping up — with ‘arf the world full of savages and ‘arf the other ‘arf just getting in the way.’

Ten minutes later, he is astonished at his own sufferings. ‘You don’t know what it is to leave your children — talk of hagony — ’

‘Oh, sah, I too sad for you.’

Gollup screws up his face like a child with some bitter medicine in his mouth and makes a peculiar noise at the back of his nose, like a sheep coughing. This is his form of a sob.

‘Heugh — hew — worse than ‘ell.’

‘Oh, sah, I too — when I go away from my little baby — I feel my heart all burst — I say I fit to die soon. Only if I die, what happens to my poor Bamu and my little son?’

‘It isn’t a life, it’s a bloody sacrifice. I ain’t complaining. But you don’t know what it costs us, you nigs, to tidy things up for you — you ain’t got the same feelings.’ (130)

Gollup, in other words, speaks openly of his superiority (as he conceives it) in a way the other British characters in *Mister Johnson* do not. This openness — one might say, honesty — marks him as deficient; he is one of those inferior beings, alluded to by the Governor in his minute, who despise and insult the people they are meant to be helping. The fact that Gollup clearly comes from a lower socio-economic level than the other British characters in the book (who are all middle class) is significant; the British working class or lower middle class is here viewed as the repository of overtly racist attitudes, an unpalatable ‘other’ within colonial white society from whom the right-thinking imperial agent will distance himself. Gollup, indeed, is not merely inferior; he is an anachronism, for the language he speaks, with its references to ‘nigs’ and the white man’s burden, was out-of-date and discredited by the time Cary wrote his novel, a throwback to
an earlier, cruder, more jingoistic phase of empire. Cary himself was quite
conservative in his views on Africans — he appears to have had little regard for
their capacity for self rule, for example, observing that an ‘overcrowded raft
manned by children who had never seen the sea’ would have a better chance in
a typhoon than Africans would have in organising their independence (Cary
1951 12). By the time he wrote Mister Johnson, he clearly felt uncomfortable,
however, with overtly racist or imperialist attitudes of the kind expressed by
Gollup. In Mister Johnson, he assigned them, accordingly, to a working-class or
lower-middle-class character who is both comic and repellent.

If Blore and Gollup, in their different ways, refuse the rhetoric of niceness,
other British characters in Mister Johnson embrace it, behaving in a way that
would have pleased the Governor of the Gold Coast colony. Celia, the wife of
Rudbeck, for example, is consciously pleasant towards the Africans in her
neighbourhood, which in her case means visiting the local populace:

Every day there is a new excursion, to see women making water pots without a
wheel, to see a house being built, mats being plaited, cotton woven on the native
loom…. Everywhere Celia is curious, attentive and charmed by the African people,
and tells Rudbeck in the evening how much she has enjoyed herself, how marvellous
Africa is. (Cary 1995 90)

Celia, of course, understands very little of what she sees; as Cary says, Africa for
her is simply ‘a number of disconnected events which have no meaning at all’
(91). What is significant, however, is that Celia makes an effort to effect some
kind of social rapprochement; she even visits Bamu, Johnson’s wife, and invites
her to tea. It is a trivial enough act, viewed from a modern, post-colonial
perspective, but socially and historically it is significant. The English in Nigeria,
it seems, to paraphrase Mrs. Moore, are in Africa to be pleasant. If they feel
superior, they are careful not to show it in any overt or insulting way.

Rudbeck himself has a more straightforward attitude towards the Africans
he deals with, but he too displays a degree of consideration towards them that
suggests — if we believe Cary’s writing here — that relations between the imperial
agent and the imperial subject were not always marked by neurosis and struggle,
as theorists such as Fanon and JanMohamed have suggested. Unlike his superior,
Blore, Rudbeck does not scorn Johnson merely because he is black; when he
growls at the clerk, his speech is not, Cary assures the reader, the speech of a
white official ‘speaking to a Negro whom he despises,’ but simply an ‘angry
exclamation’ (48). Rudbeck, in fact, has a certain affection for Johnson — ‘he’s
a good chap’, he tells the mercilessly upright Tring (102) and he goes to the
trouble of re-employing him as a foreman on his road after Johnson has been
fired from Government service. During Johnson’s trial, Rudbeck is careful to
offer the clerk a way-out: if Johnson confirms the killing of Gollup was an
accident, he will be convicted of the lesser charge of manslaughter and so escape
the death penalty. When Johnson does not confirm this, thereby laying himself
open to the charge of murder, Rudbeck recommends a reprieve. He even accedes to Johnson’s request to be shot rather than hung, shooting the clerk himself—an act which can be interpreted as one of mercy and consideration, for hanging was viewed as a shameful death, incompatible with the gentlemanly status that Johnson has been keen to assert throughout the novel. Rudbeck’s execution of Johnson, in fact, is shocking precisely because his relations with the clerk have been, by and large, relatively pleasant. It is less an imperial subject being disposed of, one feels, than a friend being snuffed out.

Rudbeck, of course, is not really Johnson’s friend, and the fact that Johnson believes he is, is a source of much of Johnson’s trouble. Yet Rudbeck’s comparative politeness toward Johnson, and Celia’s attempts at rapprochement with the Africans around her, suggest that relations at the personal, day-to-day level between the imperial agent and imperial subject, while still complex and problematic, had grown more humane in the last phase of empire. The reason for this humanisation is to be found, surely, in changes in the social environment in Britain during this period. In the early years of the twentieth century a succession of Acts of Parliament had extended education, healthcare and welfare provisions to the poorer section of the population (Seaman 483; Ashley 161; Cecil 134). Above all, the trauma of the Great War had united the nation and started to dissolve traditional class barriers. A century before, the British working class had been regarded by the bourgeois almost as another species—a frightening, turbulent domestic ‘other’ to be kept in order, if necessary, by troops. By the 1930s, when Cary was writing *Mister Johnson*, class relations had become gentler—at least on the surface—and life for ordinary people more humane (Seaman 470). Such a change in the social relations of the mother country inevitably made itself felt in the Empire, for if the domestic ‘other’ of the working class was being accorded a new level of consideration, it was difficult to argue that the imperial ‘other’ of the subject races should not also be accorded a similar degree of respect. Hence the Governor’s minute, quoted above; hence Mrs. Moore’s curious outburst in *A Passage to India*. Cary’s ‘African’ novels, often viewed as conservative and reactionary, debate this awkward question, and in so doing position themselves very much as products of their troubled, uncertain period. They also position themselves very much as ‘colonial’ novels, an identity which some critics of Cary’s ‘African’ novels have disputed.

It can be objected, of course, that the rhetoric of niceness, as I have termed it, was no more than a ploy to ensure a degree of collaboration on the part of the imperial subject: the imperial agent treated him/her with a modicum of respect in their day-to-day relations, and thereby persuaded the latter to accept and even endorse imperial domination. It can even be argued that the rhetoric of niceness represented a final, devastating assertion of superiority on the part of the imperial agent: he was so superior (supposedly) that he could eschew any overt expression of superiority, establishing once and for all his moral dominance over the imperial subject, who cannot even reproach him for bad manners. Viewed from this
perspective the rhetoric of niceness as it appears in the texts and co-texts of the late imperial period can be seen as a discourse of the kind frequently identified by New Historicist critics, in which the power of the state (or empire) is endlessly and subtly re-affirmed.  

It would be wrong, however, I believe, to judge this rhetoric so cynically. Rather, I suggest, it should be viewed as a genuine — if to modern eyes rather patronising — attempt to inject a degree of respect into imperial social relations, relations which too often had been marked by condescension and rudeness on one side and fear and resentment on the other. Such a desire, of course, was symptomatic of a loss of certainty about the whole imperial project; convinced imperialists do not need to make friends with their subjects. This loss of certainty is to be found in many late-imperial novels; it runs unspoken through *A Passage to India*, and surfaces very explicitly in at least two of Cary’s ‘African’ novels. In *An American Visitor* (1933), for example, Cottee, a cynical young official, challenges Bewsher and Gore, the local District Officer and judge, about the lack of conviction he detects in his colleagues:

‘We haven’t got a system at all — no sort of principles. None of the people we send out have the faintest idea of what they’re for.’

‘I suppose not,’ said Bewsher.

But Gore could not allow his District Officer to pass over such violent exaggeration as this. ‘Isn’t it one of the chief principles to leave people to run their own affairs as much as possible. That’s actually laid down in plenty of instructions and memoranda.’

‘That’s not a principle at all — it’s just lack of intelligence. We don’t even know what to do with an empire. We can’t even guess what it’s for.’ (Cary 1952 98)

In *Mister Johnson*, these doubts are voiced more obliquely, but still powerfully. In a revealing conversation toward the end of the book between Rudbeck and his superior, Bulteel, Cary illustrates the uncertainty that informed the late imperial period:

[Rudbeck] has said to Bulteel, ‘But, sir, if native civilization does break down, there’ll be a proper mess one day.’

Bulteel takes off his hat, lifts it in the air in a line with the sun, and then at once puts it on again. They are taking their evening walk along the river road at Dorua.

‘Ah! That’s a big question.’ Bulteel hates talking shop out of office hours.

‘We’re obviously breaking up the old native tribal organization or it’s breaking by itself. The people are bored with it.’

‘Yes, yes, and I’m not surprised,’ Bulteel says.

Rudbeck is greatly surprised. ‘Don’t you believe in the native civilization?’

‘Well, how would you like it yourself?’ Bulteel smiles sideways at him with a kind of twinkle.

‘Then you think it will go to pieces?’

‘Yes, I think so, if it hasn’t gone already.’
‘But what’s going to happen then? Are we going to give them any new civilization, or simply let them slide downhill?’

‘No idea,’ Bulteel says cheerfully. He takes his hat off again and replaces it at once because he finds it a nuisance to hold at arm’s length above his bald head.

‘I suppose one mustn’t talk about a plan,’ Rudbeck says.

‘Oh, no, no, no. They’ll take you for a Bolsby.’

‘Well, sir, an idea. I suppose some people do have an idea of what life ought to be like — the Catholics and the missionaries do, or ought to — and I suppose Arnold did.’

‘Oh, Arnold, the Rugby man — yesss.’

‘I don’t mean their ideas would do now, but only that a general idea might be possible — something to work to.’

‘Well, what idea?’

‘That’s the question.’

‘Yes, that’s the question.’ (Cary 1995 168–69)

‘What idea?’ — Rudbeck’s question functions as a kind of puzzled epitaph for an empire moving rapidly towards its own dissolution. Such a lack of self-belief could be dangerous, as Morris has observed (Morris 1978 254), but it created a space in which — briefly — the rhetoric of niceness could be articulated, and through this rhetoric a gentler, more humane form of relationship established between the imperial agent and the imperial subject, at least at the day-to-day, social level. The existence of this rhetoric belies the stereotype of imperial relations as simply and uniformly negative, as much postcolonial theory has proposed. While not excusing the fundamental immorality of empire, it asks us to look more closely, I believe, at the texture of late imperial life and the fictions it produced, noting their revealing psychological nuances and fault lines.

NOTES

1 It would be wrong to charge Cary with simple class snobbery, however. There is plenty of evidence that at this period concern for the sensibilities of subject races — where it existed at all — was largely a middle-class phenomenon (see Morris 1973 448).
2 See Fanon: ‘The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority, alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation’ (60). JanMohamed, following Fanon and disputing Bhabha’s notion of the unity of the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised) finds a ‘profound conflict’ in the relation of conqueror and native (1).
3 See Mister Johnson, where Johnson chides a soldier for not treating him like a gentleman (202). Rudbeck’s shooting of the clerk has always been a controversial aspect of the novel. JanMohamed sees it as an example of the desire, common to writers of what he terms ‘imaginary texts’ produced by imperial/colonial writers, ‘to exterminate the brutes [natives]’ (JanMohamed 9). It is possible, however, to interpret Rudbeck’s act in a more positive light.
4 The Nigerian critic Michael Echeruo argues that Cary was very typical of his time when it came to his cultural attitudes. ‘The African experience which Cary recorded in his letters and drafts was shaped by the cultural assumptions which, at that point in history, were as public as they were personal. The voice is that of the representative
Englishman and the incidents recorded belong to the life of the white-man-in-Africa.’ (Echeruo 144–45). Certainly Cary’s depiction of Rudbeck as a kind of school captain rather than imperial master (Cary 1995 81) can be seen as a typical expression of late imperial ideology, when the white man was envisioned as an adviser or trustee, whose duty it was to prepare subject peoples for self-rule.

For example, Andrew Wright thinks that Cary’s interest was ‘not in Africa as such’ (57–62).

The complex, important question of collaboration during the colonial period has received insufficient attention. Ania Loomba, discussing Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and quoting Arnold, notes that ‘in colonial societies, harsh coercion worked in tandem with a consent that was part voluntary, part contrived … even the most repressive rule involved some give-and-take’ (31). The rhetoric of niceness, in this light, can been seen as an example of imperial give-and-take.

See Kiernan Ryan: ‘New historicists are prone to regard cultures as regimes of constraint, designed to absorb resistance or ultimately turn it to their own account. In this scenario, not surprisingly, works of literature tend to be cast as conspirators in the plots hatched by power to secure our subjection’ (xx).

See Fanon, for example, in *Black Skin, White Masks*: ‘Face to face with the white man, the Negro has a past to legitimate, a vengeance to exact; face to face with the Negro, the contemptuous white man feels the need to recall the times of cannibalism’ (225).

WORKS CITED
Art and Advocacy: Mary Alice Evatt in the 1930s and ’40s

On her return to Australia from Europe in 1939, Mary Alice Evatt remarked in an interview for the *Australian Women’s Weekly* that paintings devoted to gum trees, sheep, koalas and misty seascapes were the only Australian works selected to hang in World Fair Art Exhibitions. In addition she derided the decision makers who overlooked Australia’s modernist, experimental artists, many of whom were women: ‘if only those in authority were to select the paintings of Australian artists who prefer creation to photography, and were less overawed by official selection bodies, Australia might find a worthy place on the art map of the world’ (Evatt 1939 32).

Although born in America, Mary Alice lived all her life in Australia. In 1920 she married Herbert Vere Evatt (Bert) whom she met in two years earlier while they were both students at the University of Sydney. The Evatts were passionate about the need for social change, Mary Alice being described as ‘a William Morris socialist’ (Cantwell qtd in Fry). They were also ‘fanatics about modern art’ (Fry), both welcoming contemporary art’s movement away from techniques of representational illusionism to abstractionism. Mary Alice played an active role as an advocate of contemporary art in Australia during a period in which the dominant climate was conservative. Censorship meant that thousands of books were banned and in the art world there was division between supporters of traditional and contemporary art. The most famous instance was the controversy that surrounded the awarding of the 1943 Art Gallery of New South Wales’ Archibald Prize for a non-traditional portrait. The tensions implicit in this controversy between conservatism and modernity were exemplified in the opposed views of Bert and the conservative Prime Minister Robert Menzies: Menzies felt that modern art was ‘ill-drawn’ and ‘unintelligible to the unilluminated mind’, finding ‘nothing but absurdity in much so-called “modern art”’ (Martin 195), while Evatt, on the other hand, was recognised as a connoisseur of modern art, opening the controversial first exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1939.

From 1930 Mary Alice divided her time between Sydney and Melbourne as a result of Bert’s appointment as Justice of the High Court of Australia. The alternate locations enabled her to become an art student at both the Crowley Fizelle Art school in George Street, Sydney and at George Bell’s school in Bourke Street, Melbourne during 1936–37. Her artwork was initially, and indeed primarily,
influenced by the teaching methods and theories of design, pure colour and significant line presented by the modernist painters Grace Crowley and Rah Fizelle. In fact, their influence never really left her work; looking back on that period Mary Alice writes that through their school Crowley and Fizelle,

influenced a whole generation of painters in Sydney with their aims of balanced dynamic symmetry and harmonious arrangement of colour which held too a note of urgency and passion for beauty that must never make terms with custom or prejudice. (Evatt 1966 314–16)

What sets Mary Alice’s work apart is a clear curiosity about all forms of contemporary art. Her inquisitiveness is seen in the combination of many of the prevailing attitudes to abstraction in her painting. Crowley and Fizelle had both attended the André Lhote studio school in Paris during the 1920s. Lhote promoted a measured, cubist-inspired abstraction combined with an appreciation for the effects of colour. According to Lhote, the subject of the work — whether landscape, the human figure or still life — should remain recognisable. These qualities can be seen in Mary Alice’s painting, Woman in Red (1930s) [fig 1] which shows effective use of strong contrasting colour and an abstract approach to portraiture.

The George Bell School, which opened in 1932, was in its heyday when Mary Alice studied there. Bell focused on the importance of both the imagination and technical ability, and his teaching was directed at encouraging artists to find their own ways to express their ideas concretely. Consequently, his approach meant that ‘depending on the temper of the times it led as readily to surrealism and expressionism as to abstraction’ (Eagle and Minchin 9). It was here that Mary Alice painted Footballers (1936) [fig 2], a work which shows the influence of both Crowley’s theories of rhythmic vitalism and Bell’s interest in cubism at that time. Bell emphasised a more intuitive approach to subject matter and finish. In Footballers, the heritage of the ordered forms of cubist composition promoted by Crowley and Fizelle is evident but tempered by the choice of subject matter: a brief moment in an Australian Rules match. The painting also shows influences from avant-garde photography in its apparently random composition and from reproductions of European artworks then available to Australian audiences, in particular Robert Delaunay’s footballer paintings.

Although her painting from this period shows considerable talent and application Mary Alice never exhibited during her life, always describing herself as a student. Undoubtedly, the public roles she took on and her involvement in her husband’s work and international travel impacted on the time she could devote to her own artistic practice. The first public exhibition of her work, thirty years after her death, was in 2002 at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.3

As well as the classes she attended in Australia, Mary Alice also studied internationally. In 1938, following in the footsteps of other Australian artists, she spent two months in the Lhote studio in Paris where she ‘worked hard from nine till five every day and enjoyed it thoroughly’ (Evatt 1939 32). Despite the
threat of war that pervaded outside, she recounts how inside the studio an atmosphere of camaraderie and happiness prevailed amongst the thirty students who came from almost every European nation. Later that year Mary Alice took classes with Hans Hofmann, a leading exponent of Expressionism, at his studio school in New York. In every spare moment during their travels she went to contemporary art exhibitions, and sent publications difficult to obtain in Australia to Crowley and others — catalogues and books about European artists including Georges Braque, Nanun Gabo and Llohte and American artists such as Sidney Janus and Stuart Davis.

In 1943 Mary Alice was appointed a trustee of the National Art Gallery of New South Wales (now the Art Gallery of New South Wales — AGNSW). She was the first woman to hold this position and remained the only female trustee from 1943 until her retirement in 1970. Shortly after her appointment she voted to award the 1943 Archibald Prize to William Dobell for his portrait of Joshua Smith. The decision was controversial and the award was legally contested by a group of artists on the grounds that it was caricature rather than portraiture. The media coverage generated public interest and huge crowds flocked to the exhibition to see the painting. The trustees and Dobell became the defendants in a case heard in the Supreme Court. On November 8th 1944 Justice Roper found in favour of the defendants.

In the same year Mary Alice, with a committee of fellow trustees — Sydney Ure Smith, William Dobell, Charles Lloyd Jones and Professor E.G. Waterhouse — started to develop travelling art exhibitions in response to a 1940 report by the War Art Council and the Encouragement of Art Movement. Bernard Smith, who was later to become a leading art historian and commentator on modernism, was seconded from the Department of Education to implement the initiative. In 1944–45 the first seven of these exhibitions, containing approximately 350 paintings, were sent by rail to forty regional towns throughout New South Wales. Works by contemporary Australian artists such as Roland Wakelin, Frank Hinder and Grace Cossington Smith were not only exhibited but also offered for sale because Mary Alice and several of the other organisers ‘believed the sale of original works in country centres an important part of the scheme itself’ (‘In New South Wales’ 583). The committee also purchased some of the paintings from the Travelling Art Exhibition scheme for the AGNSW, including Lloyd Rees’ Landscape at Orange, Margaret Preston’s Banksia and Sidney Nolan’s Central Australia. Nolan’s landscape, utterly devoid of koalas, gum trees or humans, is evidence that a shift in perspective had taken place in representations of Australia. Only recently has the AGNSW purchased the larger and more significant Nolan work of the same name painted two years earlier, in 1950 (Sykes 29). During these years Mary Alice also travelled to America, and while there she represent the AGNSW in discussions about post-war exhibitions with the Carnegie Trust.
Fig 1. Mary Alice Evatt, *Woman in Red*, from the collection of Rosalind Carrodus
(Photo: Graham Lupp)
Fig 2. Mary Alice Evatt, *Footballers*, from the collection of Rosalind Carrodus
(Photo: Graham Lupp)
At every opportunity Mary Alice and Bert bought and gave works by contemporary Australian artists. The then Director of the AGNSW, Hal Missingham, emphasises the Evatts’ advocacy of contemporary art, adding that, they were very knowledgeable, especially Mary Alice … if you said to Mary Alice, have you seen any work by Paul Tchelitchew lately she’d know what you were talking about, but if you mentioned it to any of the other Trustees they wouldn’t know what the hell you were at at all. (qtd in Dutton 69)

As well as their support for Australian artists they collected the work of European modernist painters and in 1939 purchased an Amedeo Modigliani painting, Portrait of Morgan Russell for £1,000 and a work by Maurice de Vlaminck for £95 from the Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art touring show. The National Gallery of Victoria short-listed nine works for purchase from this exhibition but the conservative director of the gallery, James S. MacDonald, referred to them as ‘exceedingly wretched paintings … the product of degenerates and perverts’ (Eagle and Minchin 15). Thus the opportunity to buy works by Pablo Picasso, Maurice Utrillo, Braque and others was missed. Mary Alice, for her part, donated to the AGNSW a number of the significant modernist artworks she had collected from this period. These included a lithograph by Henri Matisse, Torso of a Woman (1913), an oil, The Bicycle (1930), by Fernand Léger and a marble sculpture, Head of a Woman (1923–24), by Ossip Zadkine.

Mary Alice’s status as the sole female trustee of the AGNSW, her commitment to contemporary art and the division between traditionalists and modernists are highlighted in an incident recounted by Missingham. The trustees were considering whether or not to purchase any of the works from the 1953 exhibition French Painting Today. Missingham’s suggestion that he favoured André Marchand’s painting, Spring, a vibrantly coloured painting of a goddess with two nude black handmaidens, was rejected by the president of the trustees, with the comment, ‘surely, we shouldn’t think of acquiring such a lewd and indecent work, gentlemen’ (Missingham 65–66). Not a gentleman, but nevertheless a trustee, Mary Alice voted for the purchase of Spring saying, ‘I can’t see anything indecent about it, I think it is magnificent. Perhaps, Mr President, you would point out just where its indecency lies?’ (66).

In 1948, Bert’s presidency of the United Nations General Assembly took the Evatts to Paris where they rented an apartment near the Parc Monceau. Paris, one of the major centres of Modernism, was a city they both loved and Mary Alice was struck by the marks the war had left there. She and Bert often walked through the park where they would watch the children playing, the Punch and Judy shows, and the youth there who were growing up in the post-war environment. Mary Alice recounts how ‘you’d see the shadows behind them of bitterness and sadness and desolation. You can’t fight a war like that and think that it doesn’t leave behind it these bitter shadows, it does do so’ (Pratt).

During this time Mary Alice acted as an ambassador for Australian art, developing associations with key art world figures and organisations. France’s
Mary Alice Evatt, from the Evatt family archive
98 Melissa Boyde

art treasures, stored during the war for safekeeping, were gradually brought out and Mary Alice was invited to help assemble them in the Grand Palais and Petit Palais. She was also asked to assist in the hanging of pictures from the Musée d’Art Moderne in the Palais Chaillot — the venue for the 1948 session of the United Nations (Evatt 1971). It was also while in Paris when they were ‘trying to work out how we would have peace and how peace should last’ that she met Picasso, who had been painting about ‘the feelings of peace and war’ (Pratt). Mary Alice was a great admirer of Picasso’s abstract painting — his influence can be seen in Woman in Red which has stylistic and compositional similarities to Picasso’s portrait Gertrude Stein (1906). When asked by UN officials what she would most like to do in Paris, Mary Alice requested to see some of the works painted by Picasso during the war and soon after she was introduced to him at his studio in the Grande Rue de St. Augustine (Pratt). Picasso invited her back to his studio, where she spent a day while he encouraged her to open any drawer and look at any of his work. In an interview 1973, shortly before her death, she recalls:

This was a wonderful experience, which influenced all my life ... I don’t think the world will be the same without him because he didn’t allow himself to be influenced by the thought of what things would bring in the way of money. And I feel that that’s one of the most important things in life. (Pratt)

For Mary Alice art was not set apart from social and political contexts. Recognising Picasso’s work during the war, both as an artist and supporter of the French Resistance, she and Bert invited him to attend the United Nations General Assembly where the entire Assembly ‘rose in tribute to him’ (Pratt).
Mary Alice’s passionate commitment to modern art went hand in hand with her commitment to the cause of social justice advocated by her husband throughout his life. She believed that the wives of political leaders ‘should always speak out if they had something to say’ (Wilson 13) and during and after the war she took an active role helping to deepen alliances and form friendships with leading political figures. The Evatts and Roosevelts became good friends: she describes Franklin as ‘a gay, vital man’ and Eleanor as ‘one of the best raconteurs I’ve ever known’; she also had discussions with Winston Churchill who ‘loved to argue the point [and] liked you to disagree with him’ and spent evenings in Paris with the de Gaulles where the discussion, always in French, was on international law (Curnow 29).

Mary Alice and her husband were international in outlook at a time when Australia tended towards parochialism. They spent their life together ‘always trying to get people to take a fresh point of view’ (Fry). Through her public roles Mary Alice made important connections internationally and at home played an influential role in the art world. In an interview shortly before her death she reveals the tremendous importance she placed upon art:

I find that a great many people who are very wise and very hard-working and a great success in whatever line they’re pursuing, don’t seem to have enough extra thoughts and enough extra time to be interested in art, and I do think that art helps to clarify one’s thinking, one’s way of life and to make it fundamentally sounder. (Pratt)

NOTES
1 Dr Evatt later became a High Court Judge, Attorney General, Minister for External Affairs in the Curtin wartime government, leader of the Opposition and President of the General Assembly of the United Nations.
2 From 1929 over 5,000 books were banned by the Commonwealth Customs Department, starting with James Joyce’s Ulysses and followed by works including Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, Ernest Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms and Radclyffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness (Coleman 13).
3 Mary Alice Evatt ‘Mas’ curated by Melissa Boyde.

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SYD HARREX

THE PRECIOUS THING

I heard him say ‘I’ve lost it’ and being but a small child — for I was affectionately attached to him — I wondered anxiously what it was he lost. His cigarette lighter perhaps, his wallet thin with poverty but fat with black and white photographs. Or his smile which was of the trickster gentle kind. So being an innocent I went looking in the garden, down the street, by the river, across the foot bridge, searching for the precious thing he had lost because of a bad-luck accident. But all I found was a rabbit palpitating in a trap, its leg askew and leaking dark blood. With all my puny strength, I freed it, cradled it, avoiding its stare so hypnotising and so like my ancient uncle’s who had lost something I had gone looking for. ‘Look,’ I said, giving him my tender precious burden of pain to hold and make better with his healing hands. ‘Ah, you found it,’ he whispered, stroking its fur, ‘my lucky charm, my rabbit’s foot I always keep in my pocket, But lost somewhere yesterday long ago’.
FRUITS INSTEAD OF FLOWERS
(in memory of Lauris Edmond)

‘Fruits instead of flowers,’ you said when last we spoke.

You were an expert at tucking into bed the demanding villanelle’s rhymes and stanzas, its courteous and wicked refrains, like a dinner host pouring each glass at the right taste-bud moment.

Always the children of your heart anticipated the pure trance of art, yet your muse was never weary. Two lines of yours chandelier the candlelight as we raise crystal goblets to your flame:

On sinful days and nights red wine is right
The wine of absolution is always white.
BURIAL

How the things that seem to touch you least can hurt the most, how the elegy lingers. Like our cat’s fur between my fingers, as I prepare to carry her in a sling of a blanket, sunset-faded pink, perforated by mice, to the grave I have just been digging. I know this is a truly family event, and heart-juggling, when body contradicts the soul, and maggot eaten-out the mouth and crow-plundered the eyes, the jugular wounds, are belied by dreaming tortoiseshell beauty sleeping in the sheltering grass under an olive tree.

And so it is we’re reminded that every death-drifting phrase must rest somewhere, a hillside perhaps, where the grief cannot quantify either the pleasure or the pain and the mind is a trap-door to an undefined elsewhere, or otherwise, or distant nebula. Neither letting in nor out the very word that is unsaid by being said summoning the living, comforting the dead.
LATE AFTERNOON, GRANITE ISLAND

I hadn’t realised before how grey greyness is, that most boring, uninspiring of colours in the rainbow spectrum; much maligned and totally neglected as a source of beauty. Here, now, grey infuses everything: the light that wants to be milky, the sea that wants to be a coat of many colours, the sky that wants the credit for everything (beautiful moon, mystical sun, enchanting star ascendant), the hills that want to be green, the rocks ochre, the ripples crystal-glinting. Yet I take heart from the majestic endorsement of the jetty whose wood has greyed to total greyness, while generations have sulked and cried spilt milk, and does its job as it always has, supporting departures and arrivals greyly in a black and white movie as time goes by.
ANNE COLLETT and DOROTHY JONES

Two Dreamtimes: Representation of Indigeneity in the Work of Australian Poet Judith Wright and Canadian Artist Emily Carr

A child of the nineteenth century, Emily Carr was born on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in 1871 and painted her last works in the early 1940s, dying in 1945. Judith Wright was born on the New England tableland, New South Wales, in 1915, became a published poet in the early 1940s, and continued to publish poetry, essays, fiction and biography until her death in the first year of the twenty-first century. Why bring together an Australian poet and a Canadian painter whose published working lives overlap by little more than one or two years — artists separated not only by choice of form, but by thousands of miles of the Pacific ocean? The separation of time and place would appear to be vast, but appearances can be deceptive, for (to quote from Wright’s first published volume of poetry) — ‘blood’s red thread still binds us fast in history’ (‘Trains’ 13). What these two artists share is in many ways greater than what separates them — that common ground being provided by the historical trajectory of British invasion and colonisation of the Pacific rim. Wright and Carr are daughters ‘born of the conqueror’1 whose art and life work is haunted by an aboriginal presence. Both struggle to articulate self (and nation) in relation to that presence — a presence that most of their generation chose either to ignore or repudiate. A comparison of their representation of indigeneity is necessarily complex, and here, on the site of their shared ground, there are as many differences as similarities; but contrast is an effective tool by which to bring aspects of both artists’ work into sharper relief than previously.

According to most sources, Emily Carr’s interest in Canadian aboriginal art began (in 1899) with her first trip to the Nootka Indian mission at Ucluelet on the west coast of Vancouver Island. This trip is recorded in one of a collection of stories written and published some forty years later2 in which she writes of that initial ‘aboriginal experience’ as one of sensitively negotiated relationship. She sketches everything in sight — ‘boats, trees, houses’ — except the Indians themselves. For this she asks and is granted permission, but the sketching of an old woman is interrupted by the anger of the woman’s husband who believes, like other ‘old Indians’, that the reproduction of the human image traps the
spirit of the subject. The missionary responds with a deprecatory dismissal, ‘They have such silly notions’, but Carr represents her own response as one of cultural and personal sensitivity: ‘“Tell her that I will not make any more pictures of the old people,” I said.’ (‘Ucluelet’ 9) This is followed by a curious statement of affiliation that links the Indians, Carr herself, and the natural world:

It must have hurt the Indians dreadfully to have the things they had always believed trampled on and torn from their hugging. Down deep we all hug something. The great forest hugs its silence. The sea and the air hug the spilled cries of sea-birds. The forest hugs only silence; its birds and even its beasts are mute. (9)

Humanity and nature are joined in the shared action of ‘hugging’ — the need to hold on to something that is sacred to us. This precious thing — ‘spirit’ perhaps — is something that Carr sought throughout her life, and something that she ultimately seeks to represent, even capture, in her painting; but it would be eight years before Carr could undertake another trip into Indian territory. During this intervening period she suffered bouts of mental and emotional instability — what might be diagnosed in her own words, as a debilitating detachment from that ‘hugging’ thing. She did however recover, and after re-establishing a life for herself in Vancouver, travelled with her sister to Alaska in 1907, visiting many of the old, often deserted Indian villages. Here she is struck by the strength of spirit and the skilled craftsmanship of the carved village and house poles that are rapidly deteriorating, and vows to record them for posterity:

We passed many Indian villages on our way down the coast. The Indian people and their Art touched me deeply…. By the time I reached home my mind was made up. I was going to picture totem poles in their own village settings, as complete a collection of them as I could. (Growing Pains 211)

Emily Carr’s artistic engagement with Indian life and culture begins then with spiritual and emotional sympathy, and a commitment to what might be called the museum ethos of embalment and categorisation — a desire to record and preserve that which is either extinct or threatened with extinction. The image of a vanishing art and culture would be captured in sketchbook and on canvas.

Over the next five years Carr made a number of subsequent trips in pursuit of new material, meticulously recording carved poles throughout the west coast native villages. ‘Big Raven’ [featured on the cover of this issue] is first recorded in word and paint in 1912 [Fig.1 ‘Cumshewa’] when she visited an abandoned Haida village in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Her impressions of the village of Cumshewa are recorded in the story of the same name (and also published in Klee Wyck). Here Carr describes the very paper upon which she sketches and the paints with which she formulates the image of Raven as literally soaked in the spirit of the village: ‘Cumshewa seems always to drip, always to be blurred with mist, its foliage always to hang wet-heavy. Cumshewa rain soaked my paper, Cumshewa rain trickled among my paints’ (23). The village is deserted of people,
Fig. 1. Emily Carr, Cumshewa, c. 1912, watercolour over graphite on woven paper, mounted on cardboard, National Gallery of Canada, 6103 (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)
Fig 2. Emily Carr, *Big Raven*, 1931, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 42.3.11
(Photo: Trevor Mills)
culture is returned to nature: the Raven grave-post is Cumshewa — guardian spirit of a disappeared people whose material form is also vanishing:

Not far from the house sat a great wooden raven mounted on a rather low pole; his wings were flattened to his sides. A few feet from him stuck up an empty pole. His mate had sat there but she had rotted away long ago, leaving him moss-grown, dilapidated and alone to watch dead Indian bones, for these two great birds had been set, one on either side of the doorway of a big house that had been full of dead Indians who had died during a small-pox epidemic. (‘Cumshewa’ 24)

Carr’s commentary on Cumshewa is fascinating both for what it says and for what it does not say. The raven is deserted even of his life companion — for she has rotted away — and he himself, the sole and last vestige of a life and culture, is rapidly deteriorating. The carved wooden pole is in a process of return to natural origins — moss-grown and rotting, as the bodies of the Indians over which he watches are also returned to bone and then to dust. It would seem that the disappearance of Indian culture is represented as part of a natural cycle — dust to dust, ashes to ashes. A culture born out of the natural world returns to the natural world: the reference to the death of an Indian community ravaged by small-pox is not linked to European invasion or associated with any judgement or guilt that might be associated with Emily Carr herself, a daughter of the coloniser.

Carr’s watercolour rendition of the wooden raven tends toward the naturalistic: the raven itself is static — a carved wooden post — greyed by weather; the vegetation at the base is picturesque in its flourish of detailed colour and movement. Art critic Doris Shadbolt describes it in terms of its compositional facility — a picture carefully composed of ‘elegant foreground arabesques and touches of intense colour’ (1979 38). It is a skilful replication whose picturesque quality aligns it with the Romantic but does not associate it with the emotive politics that underscored the Romantic movement; but in 1931 Carr returned to the subject matter of ‘Cumshewa’ and again painted Big Raven [Fig.2 ‘Big Raven’]. The years between 1912 and 1931 had wrought a change in her artistic and personal vision, largely precipitated by contact with the painting and philosophy of the Canadian ‘Group of Seven’, but also by the Modernist art movement. In her autobiography, Growing Pains, Carr records the initial impact of Indian art on her English schooling: ‘Indian Art broadened my seeing, loosened the formal tightness I had learned in England’s schools. Its bigness and stark reality baffled my white man’s understanding … I had been schooled to see outsides only, not struggle to pierce.’ (211) Some twenty years later, in a journal that recorded the period spent in the company of the ‘Group of Seven’ on the east coast of Canada, she writes of a significant change in her own artistic vision and response to Indian art: a shift from the anthropological or archaeological to the visionary or symbolic. On seeing some ‘Indian pictures’ by A.Y. Jackson, she writes:
I feel a little as if beaten at my own game. His Indian pictures have something mine lack — rhythm, poetry. Mine are so downright. But perhaps his haven’t quite the love in them of the people and the country that mine have. How could they? He is not a Westerner and I took no liberties. I worked for history and cold fact. Next time I paint Indians I’m going off on a tangent tear. There is something bigger than fact: the underlying spirit, all it stands for, the mood, the vastness, the wildness.

(Hundreds and Thousands 5)

‘Big Raven’ is the representation of a powerful spirit: the boldness of colour and line, the swirling undergrowth, the contrast of horizontal lowering cloud and slanting vertical sheets of brilliant light and rain, heighten the drama and power of the carved pole. This is no longer the record of a vanishing, but the reincarnation of a vibrant energy. The Raven lives through Emily Carr’s visionary art: Indian spirit is a living, growing, vibrant force that unites earth and sky.

In her journal entry of 5th February 1931, Carr remarks upon her achievement and her aims, at first prosaically, but increasingly poetically:

Got the Cumshewa big bird well disposed on canvas. The great bird is on a post in tangled growth, a distant mountain below and a lowering, heavy sky and one pine tree. I want to bring great loneliness to this canvas and a haunting broodiness, quiet and powerful. (Hundreds and Thousands 27)

The words are an uncanny pre-echo of Judith Wright’s poem, ‘At Cooloolah’ (published in the Australian Bulletin in 1954):

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah’s twilight has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening, and he will wear their colour till he dies,
But I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake, being unloved by all my eyes delight in, and made uneasy, for an old murder’s sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah knew no land is lost or won by wars, for earth is spirit: the invader’s feet will tangle in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.
Riding at noon and ninety years ago, my grandfather was beckoned by a ghost — a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting, who sank into bare plain, as now into time past.
White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark, clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan — I know that we are justified only by love, but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.
And walking on clean sand among the prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

(Collected Poems 140–41)

Here too is an image of bird and aboriginal presence — an image of quiet,
solitude, power, and haunting broodiness. Like Carr’s image of the raven, the
blue crane is ‘the certain heir’ of the world into which he is born, but unlike the
raven, the crane is given no aboriginal association — if he is totemic of ‘those
dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah’, there is no indication of this
in the poem. The first peoples are represented only by the ghost of ‘a black
accoutred warrior’ who rises to confront the white settler (Wright’s grandfather)
with the guilt of violent invasion and dispossession, only to sink again ‘into bare
plain, as now into time past’. Aboriginal presence dissolves into land and into
‘time past’ — subsumed by the natural world, and the poetic scene is restored to
the tranquil peace of ‘White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark, / clear
heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan’. Wright suggests that this edenic
world is defiled by human presence. It is unclear whether ‘our centuries’ is a
reference to the centuries of white presence in Australia or indicative of human
presence on the earth, inclusive of aboriginal peoples; but the pristine beauty of
the landscape is defiled once more by violence, guilt and fear as Wright’s own
prints join those of ‘bird and animal’ on ‘the clean sand’, and again the ghost of
aboriginality rises to challenge this new intruder with a ‘driftwood spear/thrust
from the water’. Thus aboriginality is signified as guardian and protector of the
natural world — unquiet spirit of the land, but not of the land in the same way
the crane is ‘certain heir’. It is an unsettling representation that simultaneously
accords and refuses aboriginal peoples humanity, grants and denies them presence
in this world — the world of ‘culture’ in the twentieth century.

The totemic Raven that guards the house of the dead Indians is the signifier
of spectral aboriginal presence, but Carr’s painting of ‘Big Raven’ celebrates
aboriginal spirit through dynamic representation — totem is rendered living
spirit. The trees that ‘grew up round the dilapidated old raven, sheltering him
from the tearing winds’ and ‘the moss that grew upon his back and in the hollows
of his eye-sockets’ (‘Cumshewa’ 24) gave the totem a ‘hugging place’, sheltering
the spirit of aboriginality, as represented in Carr’s painting of ‘Cumshewa’. But
in its final form, the comforting moss that paradoxically threatens the sight and
the strength of wing in the ‘Cumshewa’ figure, is transformed to a faint sheen of
dark green on a gleaming black body that bears relationship but is not engulfed
by the vital force of green origins. Emily’s totemic Raven has defied disintegration
and decay. Time and art have worked together to create ‘living spirit’, whereas
time has rendered the ghost of aboriginal presence in the last stanza of Wright’s
poem even less than it was in the fourth: only the signification of the black
Anne Collett and Dorothy Jones

warrior — his spear — remains, and it has become driftwood, weathered by the
waters of time like the carved post of the raven Carr paints in her first rendition
of ‘Cumshewa’.

Although published in 1954, Wright’s ‘Cooloolah’ poem has more in common
with Carr’s early phase of aboriginal representation, than it does with the later,
visionary, ‘Big Raven’. This is further underscored by the close thematic
relationship between Carr’s commentary on ‘Cumshewa’ and Wright’s many
other ‘Aboriginal poems’ written both earlier and later than ‘At Cooloolah’.
Carr writes of a ‘Bursting growth [that] had hidden the house and bones long
ago. Rain turned their dust into mud; these strong young trees were richer perhaps
for that Indian dust’ (‘Cumshewa’ 24). The lines are reminiscent of ‘Nigger’s
Leap, New England’ in which Wright asks, ‘Did we not know their blood
channelled our rivers, and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?’ (16–17).

In both ‘Cumshewa’ and ‘Nigger’s Leap’, aboriginal people are ‘one’ with the
land — their life force channelled into natural growth: ‘tribes become trees’. The
spectral nation of shadow trees is a recurring motif in Wright’s poetry —
the ‘thin black children dancing like the shadows / Of saplings in the wind’ (23–
24) of ‘Nigger’s Leap’, the ‘apple-gums’ of ‘Bora Ring’ that ‘posture and mime
a past corroboree’ (7), or the much later reference in ‘Two Dreamtimes’ to ‘a
once-loved land / Peopled by tribes and trees’ (69–70). If aboriginal peoples are
as one with nature, it would appear to be a vanishing — oneness achieved not in
life, but in death. This is a curious twist to the idea of aboriginal relationship to
land that is central to Wright’s environment and aboriginal concerns. In a 1982
interview with Jim Davidson she claimed to feel ‘very deeply this gulf between
us and the Aborigines; the Aborigines are the land, we merely think we own it,’
(332). Taken in conjunction with a claim made in 1975 that,

the problem of how to stay human in our times, and the problem of how to regain a
respect for the living world, may be very closely related. We can rejoin ourselves in
creative responsibility and participation with what we call ‘Nature’ — which is also
ourselves — or we can die with it. Perhaps we have enough time to choose the first
alternative (Foreword, Invited ix),

it would seem that the aboriginal peoples have no choice and no alternative.
They are the land, not by virtue of aboriginal representation, than it does with the later,
visionary, ‘Big Raven’. This is further underscored by the close thematic
relationship between Carr’s commentary on ‘Cumshewa’ and Wright’s many
other ‘Aboriginal poems’ written both earlier and later than ‘At Cooloolah’.
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In both ‘Cumshewa’ and ‘Nigger’s Leap’, aboriginal people are ‘one’ with the
land — their life force channelled into natural growth: ‘tribes become trees’. The
spectral nation of shadow trees is a recurring motif in Wright’s poetry —
the ‘thin black children dancing like the shadows / Of saplings in the wind’ (23–
24) of ‘Nigger’s Leap’, the ‘apple-gums’ of ‘Bora Ring’ that ‘posture and mime
a past corroboree’ (7), or the much later reference in ‘Two Dreamtimes’ to ‘a
once-loved land / Peopled by tribes and trees’ (69–70). If aboriginal peoples are
as one with nature, it would appear to be a vanishing — oneness achieved not in
life, but in death. This is a curious twist to the idea of aboriginal relationship to
land that is central to Wright’s environment and aboriginal concerns. In a 1982
interview with Jim Davidson she claimed to feel ‘very deeply this gulf between
us and the Aborigines; the Aborigines are the land, we merely think we own it,’
(332). Taken in conjunction with a claim made in 1975 that,
was their dust?’ (16–17). ‘Other’ is ‘Self’ for they ‘were ourselves writ strange’ (21), thus their loss is our loss, and ‘all men are one man at last’ (18):

Never from earth again the coolamon
Or thin black children dancing like the shadows
Of saplings in the wind. Night lips the harsh
Carp of the tableland and cools its granite.
Night floods us suddenly as history
That has sunk many islands in its good time.

(‘Nigger’s Leap’ 22–27)

There is an awareness of historical and personal culpability here that is absent from Carr’s work; but although Judith Wright’s aboriginal spear that thrusts from out of the peaceful waters of Cooloolah is accusatory (reminiscent of the sword rising from the lake of Arthurian legend and the inevitable fall of Camelot) where Carr’s raven is not, this lack of articulated political awareness of the violence and damage of entangled settler/indigenous relationship does not confer a political lack as such. Emily Carr’s ‘Big Raven’ is a powerful and positive representation of indigenous spirit that breaks free from the entanglement of undergrowth, where Wright’s poem is focussed upon the wrathful spirit of earth that will extract payment for aboriginal loss that cannot be made good: ‘the invader’s feet will tangle / in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears’ (11–12) but the clear waters of the lake close over the aboriginal spear — perhaps to wash up as driftwood: the potent vertical is converted to the passive horizontal. This is an image that has much in common with Margaret Preston’s painting, titled ‘Aboriginal Landscape’, of 1941 [see Fig. 3]. Preston, a leading exponent of modernist painting in Australia, was much pre-occupied with aboriginal themes and subject matter as a means of expressing a specific national identity.

The early 1940s date of Margaret Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ is significant because it is a period that brings the work of Carr and Wright into synchronology and it is a date synonymous with public awareness of the impact of European modernism on Australian art (Margaret Preston in particular, but also [by 1943] the Joshua Smith/William Dobell, Archibald prize debacle) and Australian poetry (Jindyworabaks, Angry Penguins, Max Harris and the Ern Malley hoax). The appropriative relationship between modernist art practice and ‘primitive’ cultures is well documented; but what might be termed the benefit of that often one-sided cultural engagement has not been discussed as thoroughly as it might. The practice saw European re-evaluation of other cultures accompanied by a resurgence and re-activation of ‘dying’ or ‘buried’ indigenous arts, that often had spiritual and economic benefit to indigenous communities in Australia and Canada; but the attitude of those communities toward the colonisation of their arts is at the centre of sometimes vitriolic debate. Opinion is divided on the ethical and artistic merit of Margaret Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Art’, in part because it is suggested she makes use of a cultural heritage not her
own — one that she neither understands, nor perhaps has the right to understand — and deploys it to further a ‘nationalist’ agenda that acts to homogenise rather than accord value to significant differences within the imaginary of Australian nation. These questions aside, ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ makes clear the problematic nature of its representation of indigeneity.

The title of Margaret Preston’s painting is itself equivocal: is this a landscape as the Aboriginal people might have painted it? (the use of ‘Aboriginal’ obliterates the possibility of national and cultural difference within Aboriginal nations); or is this a landscape that belongs to the Aboriginal people? Is it a landscape that signifies ‘Aboriginality’? Is it a transference of Aboriginal colour and design to a rendition of ‘typical’ Australian-Aboriginal landscape? or is it a landscape that subsumes Aboriginal humanity — thus ‘Aboriginal’ is equated with ‘Landscape’. Whichever her intent, the last two possibilities inform this current discussion, for the transference of what might be read as Aboriginal body-design to trees and land suggests a transference of culture to nature: does this have similar implication to Wright’s inference that Aboriginal life-force has been subsumed by nature? Or that an aboriginal people has become a spectral nation — embodied in the skeleton ghost gums and the tree shadows that bear uncanny resemblance to recumbent (even corpse-like) human form?

Interestingly, this spectral theme is the focus of ‘Vanquished’, a work completed by Carr in 1931 [Fig.4]. The subject is a ruined Indian graveyard. As with Preston’s painting there is a play of verticals and horizontals, and interestingly, the title of the work is similarly ambiguous. Does the word ‘vanquished’ suggest that all human beings are vanquished by death, or is it the Indians specifically who are or have been vanquished by death, or indeed by an invading and conquering civilisation? Alternatively, does ‘vanquished’ imply that all attempt to establish a lasting human presence in material form is ultimately overwhelmed by nature? The structure and dynamic of the painting itself is however less equivocal than the title would suggest, and more energised and life-affirming than the flattened patterning of Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’.

The upward thrust of the grave posts in ‘Vanquished’, reinforced on the left of the painting by the rays of light that link earth and sky and on the right by the alignment of the posts with the upward lines of the mountains, is very different in effect from Preston’s weak verticals. Carr’s painting would appear to represent an energised cyclical vision: the horizontal of uprooted trees and driftwood in the foreground — suggestive of death and decay — are balanced by the man-made poles in the middle-ground that, although in a state of ruin, have been created by the living and reach towards the sky. Similarly, sombre, overhanging clouds parallel the dead wood in the foreground, but the lower part of the sky is illuminated, thereby again suggesting a cyclical movement of darkness into light, life born out of death. Even the ragged roots of the dead tree in the foreground are echoed in the shape of the mountain in the centre background — both reach up towards the sky and the light. Although its subject is a graveyard, Carr’s
Fig 3. Margaret Preston, Australia, 1875-1963, *Aboriginal Landscape*, 1941, Sydney, oil on canvas, 40.0 x 52.0 cm. D. & J.T. Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.
Fig. 4. Emily Carr, *Vanquished*, 1930, oil on canvas, Vancouver Art Gallery Collection, Emily Carr Trust, VAG 423.6 (Photo: Trevor Mills)
‘Vanquished’ emphasises cyclical patterns of growth and a dynamic relationship between darkness and light, death and life. Unlike the life-affirming balance established between horizontal and vertical in ‘Vanquished’, or the strong vertical up-thrust of Carr’s ‘Big Raven’, the bodies of trees/trees of bodies in Preston’s ‘Aboriginal Landscape’ lean into the background of the painting, suggesting a lack of dynamism that is reinforced in the horizontals formed by the shadows.

The general effect of Preston’s painting evokes a passivity that in some ways corresponds to Wright’s poetic motif of a shadow (tree) people. Despite Wright’s forward-looking pro-active engagement in the negotiation of Aboriginal land rights and ‘call for a treaty’, her poetic representation of aboriginality (of which there is surprisingly little) is backward-looking and dominated by a sense of loss. It is a poetry that collapses ‘culture’ into ‘nature’ such that the politics of aboriginal land rights becomes the poetics (and the polemics) of land’s rights: ‘aboriginal’ is lost, or at least subsumed — granted agency only as a ghostly reminder of a lost Eden. In a poem written to her ‘shadow sister’, Kath Walker, (published in 1973) Wright declares that

If we are sisters, it’s in this —
our grief for a lost country,
the place we dreamed in long ago,
poisoned now and crumbling. (‘Two Dreamtimes’ 41–44)

Whilst acknowledging the particular suffering of Kath’s communal and cultural loss as a child of the stolen generation — ‘your eyes were full of the dying children,/ the blank-eyed women’ (15–16) — that loss becomes a general human loss, equated with environmental concerns: ‘I mourn as you mourn/ the ripped length of the island beaches,/ the drained paperbarks swamps’ (50–52). Cultural worlds of black and white sisters that are perhaps incommensurable become One — thus ‘two dreamtimes’ are One for ‘both of us die as our dreamtime dies’ (89). Judith recalls Kath to that far time of deceptively innocent childhood:

Let us go back to that far time,
I riding the cleared hills,
plucking blue leaves for their eucalypt scent,
hearing the call of the plover,
in a land I thought was mine for life.

The easy Eden-dreamtime then
in a country of birds and trees (45–54)

‘I riding the cleared hills’ makes plain the power relationship between the two ‘sisters’, a power in the hands of a sister whose ‘father’s father’ (‘Eroded Hills’) cleared the hills of ‘tribes and trees’. The image recalls the motif of ‘horse and rider’ accosted by the aboriginal presence in both ‘At Cooloolah’ and ‘Bora Ring’. It is also an image that figures in the geological and moral scape of ‘Nigger’s Leap’ in which the description of ‘eastwood spurs’ that ‘tip backwood
from the sun' might be read as the image of a horseman leaning back in his saddle. The act of driving aboriginal peoples over the edge of the cliff to their deaths is imaged as an act that must seek the cover of darkness — an act by which the ‘civilising’ mission of the enlightenment must be judged. The image of horse and rider has been associated with the dominance of reason over man’s baser, sensual, animal nature at least since the middle ages. Throughout the period of European invasion of the ‘new world’, and in the resultant colonial context, the white man on horseback is an image of the coloniser’s dominance over indigenous peoples, and by association, the dominance of reason and culture over feeling (or sensuality) and nature. This is a hierarchy that Wright adamantly rejects. In 1972 she observes that:

We are beginning to see that ‘nature’ and ‘man’ are not separate, that each needs the other; it is a small beginning, but a beginning. And it is a reassertion of the values of feeling against the economic and technological Gradgrinds of our time.

… There is no stronger force than emotion, if it is well based and well directed. For it is feeling that establishes values, and if we are ever to move from economic values to a reassertion of ecological values our feelings and sympathies must be engaged first. (‘Individual’ 254)

Wright unequivocally and unswervingly aligns herself with the philosophy of romanticism — only by love can we be saved (see ‘Nigger’s Leap’). Romantic thought privileges feeling over reason and allies that capacity for feeling with a return to the natural world and our Edenic selves (pre-industrial revolution); but romanticism is also aligned with the spirit of democracy: a Wordsworthian romanticism associates capacity for empathy with the common man, particularly, with the shepherd — the noble savage ‘at home’. Relationship is also established between ‘natural’ man and ‘natural’ god; in his natural state man has a spiritual affinity with the natural world. The modernists, however, turned away from the common man of the industrialised world (the defiled shepherd) to the imagined ‘purity’ of the noble savage ‘away from home’. The ‘primitive’ other is looked to as a source of spiritual rejuvenation of our (better) lost selves, and the rejuvenation of European art.

As daughters of the conqueror and daughters of the modern world, both Wright and Carr (on different levels of consciousness and through different modes of articulation) are aware of the violence done to indigenous peoples by the civilising force of reason, of missionary Christianity, of industrialisation, and of greed (Wordsworthian ‘getting and spending’ become capitalism); aboriginal peoples are equated with the spiritual, emotional realm of the natural — thus they represent a lost world — the Edenic world — in which culture and nature were indivisible. Both Wright and Carr turn to the ‘primitive’ (who is now both ‘at home’ and ‘away from home’) as solution to the ills of the industrial world.

The difference between Carr and Wright in terms of their representation of that lost primitive self is that Wight’s poetry would suggest that ‘they’ and ‘we’
are irrevocably lost — perhaps we can learn from them but we cannot undo the wrong done and we cannot return the dead to the living. Carr’s art shifts from the desire to preserve what is left of that (almost) lost world to the celebration (and thence renewal) of its spirit. This would appear to locate her more centrally in the modernist project — the ‘primitive’ being the locus of spiritual rejuvenation of both life and art. Carr’s ‘Big Raven’ is not so much a portrait of a great brooding loneliness (as she had hoped) but a powerful assertion of natural (aboriginal) life force. Interestingly however, Carr’s art successfully generates that spirit where many of the modernists’ attempts to harness and deploy it was unsuccessful. Much modernist art feels bereft of ‘spirit’ or of the emotion of joy — so much of it is about loss and violence that threatens to overwhelm (think of Lawrence, Woolf, Eliot). From this point of view then, Wright is closer to the modernists.

Wherever Wright and Carr are situated on that trajectory between the romantic and the modern, it is their relationship to ‘other’ that differentiates them. Curiously, although politically engaged, Wright is more removed than Carr from the aboriginality they both desire. It is significant that Carr was named ‘Klee Wyck’ or ‘laughing one’, on her first engagement with aboriginal community. She was identified by the Indians as ‘one of us’ — and named for her joyous spirit. Hers is an emotional and spiritual engagement with a people and their culture. It is equally significant that Wright (unlike Preston, whose position is different again) does not engage with aboriginal art or form an easy relationship. Rational and philosophic by nature she is unable to enter freely into aboriginal relationship as perhaps the more naïve Carr is able to do, and is ultimately othered by the dominant emotion of that colonial relationship — guilt. It is surely significant that central to Wright’s tortured and complex relationship to the Aboriginal people is the recognition of the ‘arrogance’ of guilt and that it should nevertheless soak her poetry as the spirit of Cumshewa soaks Carr’s paper and paint. Put most simply, Wright’s poetry focuses upon the wrongs ‘we’ have done, where Carr’s painting focuses upon what ‘they’ got right. The ethics of ‘we and they’ is entangled in a complex net of politics and poetics.

NOTES
1 In ‘Two Dreamtimes’ Judith Wright refers to herself as ‘born of the conquerors’.
2 In her lifetime Emily Carr was better known, and indeed feted, by the Canadian public as a writer than a painter. Her volume of ‘autobiographical’ short stories was published under the title Klee Wyck in 1941, and won her the prestigious Canadian Governor General’s award.
3 Officially formed in 1920, The Group of Seven was comprised of east-coast Canadian artists J.E.H. MacDonald, Lawren Harris, A.Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, Franklin Carmichael, F.H. Varley and Frank Johnston. The painters were inspired by the Canadian landscape of the North, and were committed to the artistic representation of Canadian subject matter in a form and style that was particular to Canadian experience and experimentation.
4 Reference is made here to a line from Judith Wright’s poem, ‘Two Dreamtimes’.
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KEN GOODWIN

Dymphna Cusack as a Precursor of Commonwealth Literature

Although imperial and colonial discourse has existed in English since at least the sixteenth century, reaching extensive proportions in the United States both before and after Independence and in India during the nineteenth century, the forms of twentieth-century debate, often called postcolonialism (or, less plausibly, postcolonial theory) have altered in the direction of trying to displace the imperial power, perfidious Albion, from the centre of the discussion and to treat it contumeliously while concentrating on supposed similarities of culture among the colonies and former colonies. An early text for the first of these twentieth-century trends might be found in the half-hoping, half-despairing lines of W.B. Yeats in ‘Easter, 1916’:

For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said (Finneran182).

Novels and poems from and about the colonies tend to deal with the questions of imperialism. Rudyard Kipling’s _Kim_ is one example (see Cronin and Moore-Gilbert). Another, covering a wider set of colonies, is Herman Melville, in _Typee, Omoo_, and _Mardi_ (see Rowe). But one Australian novelist and playwright, Dymphna Cusack, goes far beyond the sometimes off-hand comments found in these works to deal with the general question of colonialism, wherever found, and to anticipate much of the discourse to be found in postcolonial writing during the post-Second World War decolonisation process and later.

Shelley said that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind (_Defence of Poetry_). Al Alvarez, in his Introduction to _The New Poetry_ says that they provide humanity with an ‘early-warning system’. Certainly, Dymphna Cusack’s _The Sun in Exile_, published in 1955, amply demonstrates Alvarez’s agenda. She raises, decades before most other Commonwealth novelists, virtually all the key issues in the decolonisation debate. In the fading light of the assertiveness, even menace, of high theory, it is sometimes difficult through the static to know whether the few persisting, unreconstructed theorists are saying that theory purports to explain existing texts or to generate new texts of a certain character. In either possibility, a persuasive case can be made that one writer, the Australian novelist and playwright, Dymphna Cusack, was a prophet, precursor, early-warning system, even unacknowledged legislator of many of the concerns of what later called itself postcolonial theory.
In literary history Cusack is generally assimilated to the substantial group of left-leaning social realist writers of the 1930s, a group that in Australia encompasses Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Miles Franklin, Jean Devanny, Judah Waten, and D’Arcy Niland; in India Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and K S Venkataramani; in New Zealand John A Lee, Robin Hyde, John Mulgan, and Frank Sargeson; in southern Africa Herman Charles Bosman, Pauline Smith, and, somewhat later, Stanlake Samkange, Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, and J M Coetzee; in the Caribbean Alfred Mendes, V S Reid, and, later, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, and Andrew Salkey. All of them draw attention to social and political injustices arising from such prejudicial factors as class, gender, and race.

Generally considered, like John Steinbeck, Graham Greene, or Morris West, as a novelist engaged with social problems, though in a quieter mode than these exemplars, Dymphna Cusack has a so-far unacknowledged place in the history of Commonwealth studies. It is true that many of her novels and plays deal with Australian social history of the immediate past — education bureaucracies, the 1939–45 war, the treatment of Aborigines, and so on — but in one novel, *The Sun in Exile*, she brings together a cast of characters from many parts of the then-recently renamed British Commonwealth of Nations and has them engage with social issues of common interest.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Dymphna Cusack started off Commonwealth literature. There had already been many novels and personal accounts about the return ‘home’ from a dominion or colony to the European imperial power, the best-known till then being Alan Mulgan’s *Home: A New Zealander’s Adventure* (1927), Robin Hyde’s *The Godwits Fly* (1936), and Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* (1945). Later examples, in some of which the journey is imaginary, include Samuel Selvon’s *The Adventures of Catullus Kelly* (1969) and *Come Home, Malcolm Heartland* (1976), George Lamming’s *The Emigrants* (1954), V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* (1967), Nadine Gordimer’s *The Lying Days* (1953), Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant Noir* (1953), and Ferdinand Oyono’s *Chemin d’Europe* (1960). But these were all about a colonial or dominion national returning to what, at least from afar, seemed like cultural roots. *The Sun in Exile* is quite different. It brings together Australians, New Zealanders, a few English people, Indians, Nigerians, Jamaicans and other Caribbeans, and a single Canadian almost in a proleptic fictional scenario for that kind of postcolonial theory that emphasises the shared experience of the colonised and their hostility, born of the experience of British imperial dispossession, oppression, snobbery, or disdain, to the ‘Motherland’.

As in most of Cusack’s novels and plays, a small number of characters are brought together in a confined space with the opportunity to talk about common concerns, and, as is also common with Cusack’s work, there are many flashbacks
from the narrative present to comparable situations in the earlier fictive life of the narrator. The novel is mostly set on board the old Swedish cargo boat, *Boadicea*, which is sailing from Australia to England via the Panama Canal, but the story of Pen and the other passengers on *Boadicea* is not written contemporaneously with the action; it is written while Pen is on a modern Swedish cargo-boat, *Eknaren*, travelling along the west coast of Africa en route to South America. Additionally there are many reminiscences of an earlier voyage, undertaken by Pen and her twin sister, Virginia at the age of nineteen when their father was taking them on a world tour. While it is true that in some of her novels the issues raised seem not to penetrate below the surface dialogue into the theme or plot, the postcolonial issues in *The Sun in Exile* are organic to the plot and situation. The narrator, an Australian travel-writer, Miss Alexandra Pendlebury, is part of a group of shipboard friends which includes her cabin-mate, Vicky, a painter, and Vicky’s Australian admirer, Hal — a man who has been a soldier in New Guinea. Just as Vicky is contrasted with Myfanwy, who is described as ‘Born in New Caledonia of a French mother and a Welsh father, she had been educated partly in Noumea and partly in Australia’ (31), and as with many of the minor characters in this twinning novel, Hal has a parallel, a rival, Bernard — an Englishman who ‘had been caught in Malaya when the Japanese shot down his rattle-trap Hawker’ (31). At times Vicky also seems interested in Ashram, who boards at Trinidad, for ‘the new-arrivals were a cross-section of the Southern Caribbean. All the types that conquest, slavery, indentured labour had contributed to the original stock to make a West Indian, converge on the *Boadicea* from Trinidad, British Guiana, Tobago, Barbados, St. Vincent, St. Lucia’ (104). Ashram is a barrister of the Middle Temple, of whom Pen observes, ‘born in British Guiana, descendant of Indians from Bengal, handsome in an essentially Indian way, the counterpart physically and mentally of the Parsees we had known and liked during our long stay in India thirty years before. With this difference: his life-blood was politics, where theirs had been poetry and philosophy. I prefer the latter’ (104). Pen as narrator finds Ashram’s obsession with politics — ‘his fiery nationalism which so often degenerated into propaganda’ (118) — infuriating. As reference point and combatant for the colonials there is an English Parson, besotted with the virtues of the Empire and terrified of the dangers of Communism. Like many of the Caribbean social-realist writers mentioned and like many black South African writers, Cusack sees Communism as allied with the struggle for freedom from colonialism; the Parson is accordingly treated satirically.

When the ship docks at Port of Spain a number of locals board, mainly professionals, all intending to seek work in London. One is Doctor Sargent, a Jamaican, accompanied by an English wife; he had studied in New York. Previously, at Kingston, Jamaica, another new passenger, Lance Olumide, had come on board. He is a Yoruba, who speaks knowledgably of Nnamdi Azikiwe⁴
and his ideas. During a shipboard dance, he dances with Vicky, which causes much white disapproval and some downright rudeness. Thus white praise of the Empire and its generosity in granting self-government to the colonies is exposed as a sham. Even the sympathetic characters are somewhat taken aback by the cultural spread of passengers on board after the West Indies. Hal says to Pen:

‘I never struck anything like this before, you know, Pen. Up till now the only coloured people I’ve known well were the natives in New Guinea. Great blokes, but —’

‘But the New Guinea natives weren’t your competitors.’ With a serious face I quoted a remark of Ashram’s that I suddenly fished out of the unconscious.

He looked at me sharply, recognised the quotation and gave a short, hurt laugh.

‘Sometimes I feel a complete dim-wit beside the Doctor and Ashram.’

‘And Olumide?’

‘No, I feel Lance is rather like me.’ (111–12)

While the ship is still in the Caribbean, Ashram buys an airmail copy of The Times and passes round the news that Peking had fallen. This leads to a protracted discussion of colonialism:

The Captain murmured non-committally; the Professor humphed; the Squatter muttered something about the Yellow Peril; the Planter [from Malaya] declared that to encourage revolution in China was to set the whole Coloured world at our throats.

‘Look at Malaya, look at India, look at Africa—all at our throats.’

‘We must agree to differ, sir. They are not all at our throats and, where they are, so often it has been due to our lack of foresight. They would prefer to be at our sides.’

The Professor frowned.

‘If by that you mean to give them self-government, I think your policy is wrong, definitely wrong. They are not ready for it.’

‘And never will be.’ The Planter was final.

As the Parson made to speak I rose (I hope my face did not reflect my impatience), made some confused mention of a headache, excused myself and fled.

Then — I groaned to myself as I walked straight into it at morning tea. For Doctor Sargent, his wife and Ashram, the fall of Peking excluded all other topics. For the rest of the group it was a new topic of conversation. I remember smiling through Myfanwy’s sole contribution: ‘How can one talk of a Chinese city falling when it fell to the Chinese?’

Ashram was more animated than ever. He behaved as though it was his personal victory.

‘For us West Indians the irresistible progress of the Chinese Peoples Army is the most important thing that has happened since India won her independence,’ he declaimed didactically. ‘What India has won and China is winning we must win.’

He raised the chipped cup Vicky had passed to him. ‘Let us drink to a free Caribbean.’

I think most of us would have raised our chipped and cracked cups to any casual toast so long as it sounded innocuous. But not so the Parson. He was a man who insisted on having his terms of reference clear.
‘Free from what?’ he demanded of Ashram, who was too exalted even to sit down; he stood poised (I almost wrote posed) cup in hand.

‘Free from poverty, ignorance, disease and all the vestiges of slavery that still oppress so many of our people.’

The Parson’s short-sighted eyes were fixed on him. He demanded even more specific clarity: ‘Within the British Commonwealth?’

Ashram leaned forward, the expression on his face suddenly changed to sternness.

‘Surely, sir, that depends on you?’

Olumide moved, looked from one to the other. ‘Where else would they seek it?’

There was such finality in his words that we all raised our cups.

It was the first time that Olumide had voluntarily contributed to any of the debates.

Publishing in 1955, Cusack relies on the memory of her readers to provide the significance of the fall of Peking. Her own memory seems a little askew because she allows Myfanwy, unchallenged, to say that Peking was a Chinese city that fell to the Chinese. In fact it was Japan in the second Sino-Japanese War that entered Peking on 29th July 1937. By that stage, Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang government, had agreed to join with his civil-war enemies, the Communists, led by Mao Zedong, to form a united nationalist front against the Japanese. Cusack perhaps for some unstated political reason, chooses to avoid any discussion of the Japanese imperialist incursions into Manchuria and northern China, including the setting up of a puppet state (the North China Executive Committee); she is thus neutral about the relationship between Communism and freedom-fighting against imperialism and about the existence, in Japan, of an Asian imperialist and colonialist power. Many of her readers would almost certainly have recalled the flight of the Kuomintang to their wartime capital of Chunking in western central China and the triumph in 1949 of the Communists in the formation of the People’s Republic and the flight of Chiang (a hero in most of the American press) to Taiwan. Rather oddly, her subsequent dialogue raises the question of alternative colonial masters, a matter that she had suppressed with the excision of Japan from the previous discussion.

Later in the discussion, Olumide asks Ashram:

‘I’ll admit from what you’ve all said that conditions are pretty bad everywhere in the Caribbean, but would you be better off under, say America or Russia?’

Ashram made an impatient gesture.

‘Don’t you ever remember that there are independent countries like Sweden, Switzerland and India? Everything in this world doesn’t resolve itself into two alternatives! We don’t want American or Russian control. We want to govern ourselves.’

Hal asks whether they are capable of self-government and the Doctor accuses him of race prejudice. (124). Ashram says to Hal, putting in a word for the possible benignity of an imperial power but also drawing attention to the typical supercilious assumption of racial superiority by such a power:
‘But there are two Englands, Hal, as you’ll find when you get there. I was accepted at the University, as you say, yet four years later, when I went back to play cricket with the West Indian team, a London hotel refused accommodation to me and others of the team.’

‘Still, you must admit that you fellows are exceptional. Most of the — er — primitive races need to be looked after until they are ready to look after themselves.’ He was obviously regretting his words.

‘You might explain how we’ve looked after our primitive race,’ Vicky broke in. Oh God, how like Virginia, always to come in fighting; always to throw a gallon of petrol on an argumentative fire that looked like going out.

‘But, Vicky, you’re off the track altogether. Dr Sargent, Olumide, Ashram and an Australian Abo! After all, the Abos are Stone Age people.’

‘While I have the inestimable benefit of three centuries of slavery to the white man as well as an infusion of his blood?’ (124–25)

The discussion passes on to elected parliamentary government, Dominionhood, foreign investment, and the opportunities for education and health in former colonies. Ashram makes the point that even the uneducated Australians on board ship have the right to vote, and then says,

‘And the Parliament you elect governs you without interference from any outside power?’

‘Of course,’ Hal repeated. ‘We’ve been a Dominion for half a century.’

‘But you would not agree to our governing ourselves?’

‘I can only say that primitive people have to learn to govern.’ (123–26)

Doctor Sargent asks Olumide in what generation he thinks his country will be ready for self-government ‘eventually’. Olumide, slightly goaded, replies that he wants it in his lifetime, to which the Doctor replies:

‘Forty years ago, my son, that eventually was for me. And what will you find in my country to-day?’

‘You have a Legislative Council, haven’t you, with your own representatives on it?’

‘They have no real power.’

‘What more would you have?’ This time Olumide challenged him.

‘Freedom. Without that, Lance, your “eventually” is without meaning.

A discussion ensues about the nature of ‘freedom’ and its relationship to independence:

‘Is that what you want, Lance?’

He shook his heads slowly.

‘If by freedom you mean independence, No. We don’t want to break with England. She’s helping us.’

The Doctor’s hand rose and fell.

‘I am back forty years hearing the old promises.’

‘We’re simple people Doctor. When we’re promised things we believe the promise is the step to its fulfilment.’

‘And the promises made to you have been fulfilled?’
Olumide hesitated. ‘In part only. But my father says that’s because of a lack of money due to post-war circumstances. they’ll be fulfilled in entirety when the time is suitable.’

Ashram goes on to talk of the importance of politics and economics to the solution of colonial problems. Hal accuses him of ‘trying to ram a lot of Communist slogans down our throats’ (128) to which Ashram replies:

‘So you think all this ferment in Asia and Africa and the West Indies is Communism?’

‘Of course it is.’ (127–28)

The Parson enters the discussion, saying,

‘I’m afraid it can’t be dismissed so easily, Hal. In Asia it has been and is nationalism from within far more than Communism from without. In Africa, where so few are literate, it seems to be social and economic protest rather than political. The West Indies are more politically advanced, but, as Ashram says, the basis of the trouble throughout is the same.’

The Parson lit his pipe and puffed reflectively, with his shortsighted eyes looking away to the horizon he probably could not see. Then he added: ‘But whether it be Asia, the West Indies, the Middle East or Africa I feel strongly that only our practical application of the Christian principles will prevent it from becoming communist.’

To my surprise, Olumide once more broke in:

‘My father is a minister, a deeply religious man, who believes that Communism is anti-Christ. He says that if the extremists and agitators are successful, they will destroy all we’ve built with the help of Britain.’

‘You are satisfied with what you have built?’

‘No. Far from it.’ He paused and then added with conviction: ‘But with English help we shall gradually advance.’ The Doctor sighed. ‘Such faith deserves to be rewarded, Lance. So you are prepared to wait?’

‘If waiting is not standing still.’

Ashram moved with one of his caged-leopard actions I found disconcerting.

‘We are not prepared to wait. Gradual advance suits us no more than it suited the Gold Coast. I think Lance will find it does not suit his people either. The world moves too fast to-day.’ (128–29)

In accordance with the conventions of the conversation novel, Cusack here presents an impartial balance of ideas about how Communism is linked to the freedom movement, whether it is essentially anti-Christian, and to what extent England, as an imperial power, can be trusted to advance the agenda as fast as the colonised peoples desire.

The racial hatred of the anti-’nigger-lovers’ on the ship is gradually overcome by a spirit of multi-racial bonhomie. Pen learns that among the West Indians going to seek work in England are musicians, a mechanic trained by the RAAF, etc. Even she, then, has been guilty of class superiority, assuming that black West Indians would be unskilled workers, whereas the truth is that many of them are headed for England as professionals. Class, then, comes into a matrix
with anti-colonialism, Communism, and the possibility of England’s benignity in granting independence as part of the discussion.

A good deal later, there is a reunion of some of the principal characters in London. Pen meets Vicky, Hal, Lance Olumide. Pen asks Lance:

‘Of course, this city is strange to you,’ I began, feeling more beyond his words than they actually expressed.

‘I’ve been a stranger in many other strange cities — Rio, Buenos Aires, New York, Cairo — but never before in one that had its face turned away from me.’

‘London is the most impersonal city in the world.’ I found myself wanting to give some explanation that would take me away from that first week in the Caribbean. I wanted to smother the spectre I, more than the others, knew of old. I wanted to believe the war really had changed things in that regard, as in so many others.

‘We all feel that at first, even people from the Dominions,’ I went on to explain Olumide nodded without taking his eyes from my face.

‘You’re probably right.’

‘Of course she’s right.’ Hal blundered in with his well-meant kindliness that so often was as bad as deliberate offence. ‘They say London’s the most tolerant city in the world, and England’s always been an asylum for all kinds of people, whatever their race or religion.’

I saw Vicky flush and bite back a retort. I saw the flicker of a smile on Olumide’s lips. He knew Hal too well to be hurt by his unfortunate choice of phrase. He smiled at him as he leant forward to offer him a cigarette and light it.

‘Mind you, I think it’s a bad principle to coop coloured people up in hostels,’ Hal added. ‘You’d be better apart, mixing with white people and learning about each other.’

‘Hostels!’ Vicky was vehement. ‘If it was a hostel he was in he’d be a lot happier.’

‘Where are you then?’ I asked.

‘I found it difficult to get accommodation when I got to London, like a lot of other Africans and West Indians, so the Colonial Office sent us to what is called a common lodging-house in the East End.’

‘I say,’ Hal protested. ‘That sounds pretty tough. What’s the place like?’

Olumide hesitated, obviously choosing his words carefully. ‘The living quarters are adequate and we cook for ourselves in a communal kitchen.’

‘Is it for coloured men only?’

‘No. There are forty to fifty of us, and over seven hundred white men. So, you see, we are learning about each other.’(145–46)

Later, Olumide says to Hal: ‘Many of us come from good homes. We did not think we would ever have to live in such a place as we are living in now’ (148).

Out of this piece of reportage (for Pen is a journalist specialising in travel-writing), re-emerges the romantic strand of the plot. Vicky decides to marry Lance Olumide. Pen is surprised to find that his table manners are impeccable. She goes on to write:

His father became a personality. I had met his like before in other parts of Africa: men who joined the Ministry during the first world War, beginning their career as elementary teachers, and progressing to Catechists of the Church. I saw him older,
wiser, graver than Olumide and yet essentially like him. He showed me a photograph of him at a council of the district, incongruous in his conventional parsonical garb among the magnificently attired chiefs to whom he apparently acted as adviser. He spoke an English as pure as his son’s, yet found his greatest pleasure in writing in the African language the folk-lore of the warriors of the Yoruba. (162)

Pen is curious about Olumide’s schooling and its relationship to his home culture. He replies that his schooling was in English:

‘Yes, though we rarely saw Europeans, except occasionally the resident officer. We studied our own language only as a subject.’ He gave his rich laugh. ‘I remember learning “this precious jewel set in a silver sea”, and wondering what it was all about. It’s only since I’ve been over here that I’ve begun to realise that we have a culture of our own.’ (164)

He says that he went to the Church Missionary Society Grammar School in Lagos, served in the Forces, then became a clerk in the Treasury getting money to go to university.

Pen also sees Olumide exposed to racial prejudice, as, for instance, one day in St James’s Park, when a mother threatens her small boy with ‘If you do that again I’ll give yer to the black man, see, and he’ll eat yer!’ (173). Olumide, in his mildest and politest mode, remonstrates with the woman: ‘it is a very wicked thing to use another human being to frighten a little child’ (174).

At Christmas there is to be a party at Vicky’s hostel. She tells Pen:

‘Well, the Secretary asked us to hand in the name of the guest we are inviting. We can each ask a man…. Naturally I put in Lance’s name.’

‘What happened?’

‘The Secretary sent for me to-night after dinner. I went into her office. It’s a horrible, stuffy hole stinking of her dog. When you come out you find his hairs all over you…. She didn’t ask me to sit down; the dog was on the second chair, anyway. She sat looking at the list in front of her, tapping her teeth. She’s got one of those rather rabbity faces. You know.’

I nodded.

‘She calls herself a gentlewoman. Grades everybody in classes — lower, middle, upper; and sub-grades — lower, lower, lower middle, lower upper.’

I nodded again.

She gave me a toothy smile and asked in the nicest voice: Miss Latrobe — ah — this, ah — Mr Olumide; he is a foreigner?

‘No,’ I said, ‘he’s British.’

‘Ah!’ she tapped her teeth again. She knew as well as I. She’s seen Lance bring me home and call for me dozens of times.

‘The name sounds — a little — ah, Greek.’

‘Oh, no,’ I said, ‘it’s African. Nigerian to be exact.’ I had a feeling of what was coming, . . You know? Then she bleated: ‘Then he is—a—coloured?’

‘Naturally! He’s African. Didn’t you know before Africans are black?’ I suppose I oughtn’t to have spoken like that, but she forced me, she’s such a snooty sort of bitch. It gave her the chance she wanted.
‘We [it’s always we] are not accustomed to our students speaking like that, Miss Latrobe. It only makes more unpleasant what we have to say! Namely, that we cannot possibly allow you to invite a — a black man to a party here.’
‘Not even if he’s British, like the rest of us?’
‘You must recognise, Miss Latrobe, there are British and British.’
I gave her a long look and said: ‘One can hardly avoid noticing it.’ She went an ugly mottled puce, but evidently felt she’d gone too far and began to wheedle a bit:
‘What about that nice young man you asked to our first party [she is referring to Hal]—a Colonial, wasn’t he?’
‘He’s an Australian.’
‘That’s what I thought.’
You know, darling, I went off the deep end at that and bunged straight at her with: ‘He isn’t a colonial. He wasn’t born a Colonial. I wasn’t born a Colonial. We haven’t been a Colony for more than half a century.’
She purred in a saintly sort of way. I’ll swear my blood-pressure hit two hundred as she said: ‘Don’t let us quarrel about a word; and as you are naturally in rather an emotional state at the moment, I’ll overlook your manner.’ She laughed coyly and went on: ‘I find you Colonials are apt to be ultra-sensitive. Now, if you’d care to substitute another name for the guest list?’
‘I don’t wish to substitute another name,’ I flung at her. ‘And since that’s your attitude to my fiancé, I give notice that I shall leave the Hostel at the end of the month.’ Then I stamped out. (177–79)

Vicky is nevertheless worried about finding somewhere as cheap to live, though she refuses Pen’s suggestion of an apology. Instead she suggests that ‘an awfully nice Canadian girl [who is] also sick of having her accent criticised’ (180) might share digs with her. Pen invites her to share her flat and she accepts.

Pen organises a Christmas party. There is a very heavy pea-souper fog, but the guests come. The narrative is designed to show that some English go even further than the hostel secretary by finding all colonials, even the whites, not only strange but also convenient objects of patronage.

Together we studied my guests. What a varied assembly! Natul [an Indian girl from Kenya], lovely as a butterfly; her Pakistani fiancé, whose hawk-like face was constantly broken with laughter one did not expect to find there; West Indians; West Africans; Sylvia, the Canadian ash-blonde, vivid in a scarlet skating costume she excused as the only anti-fog garment she possessed; the Australians; the New Zealanders.
‘Their vitality strikes you like a strong wind when you see them in an old-world setting,’ Bernard commented. ‘They’re alive as we’ve forgotten how to be.’ (191)

When a young Englishman comments that it must be ‘odd’ living in Australia or New Zealand, with ‘everything upside down. Christmas at the wrong time of the year and all that’ (194) he is greeted with a burst of laughter, and Hal says ‘Don’t you realise that down there, Europe is now the Antipodes?’(194) They burn some gum leaves as an act of assertion of the legitimacy of their own civilisation compared with that of the Mother Country. Here Cusack moves
farthest away from the cosiness of the British-led Commonwealth notion and asserts the value of her Australian heritage. Yet that pride is about to be undercut by mention of Australia’s immigration policy.

The next morning, when Vicky has announced her impending marriage, Hal raises the question of the White Australia Policy and how that will affect Lance.

‘[T]he laws say permanent migrants to Australia must be 75 per cent. or more of European descent, fully European in outlook and education—’

‘So Hitler would be welcome but not Lance?’ Bernard made the statement factually. (199)

Olumide suggests that in Nigeria they would not experience such a level of prejudice, though there would be difficulties. Bernard suggests, ‘England is finished. The future lies somewhere else’ (202). Pen disagrees. Natul talks about the attempts of neighbouring white farmers in Kenya to drive her sister and her English husband from their farm.

Because Olumide has poor facilities for study [he is a law student, Vicky an art student] at his hostel, Pen makes a study for him in her flat. When there is racial rioting around the Hostel, and the police try to move all non-whites from the streets, Lance is arrested on charges of obstructing the police and resisting arrest. The magistrate finds Lance technically guilty, but, because of the circumstances, gives him an absolute discharge. A friend finds a flat for them, but then the solicitor discovers that there is a clause in their lease forbidding letting to Jews or coloured people. Pen finds when she hunts for them that there is a high prevalence of ‘No Foreigners’, ‘British only’, or ‘No Coloured People’ (221).

When a place is found the landlord comments on the fact that West Indians and West Africans used not to get on with each other. George, a West Indian rather disliked by Pen, is turned to for confirmation. ‘Sure.’ George’s lips twisted in his usual smile. ‘We’ve learned that all dark skins are the same before the Labour Exchange’ (230).

Vicky’s father is not amenable to the marriage and writes her a wounding letter. By contrast:

The letter from Olumide’s father comforted her with its warm welcome expressed in rather old-fashioned phrases that had a hint of dignity in them.

She was pleased, too, with his gifts, although secretly a little embarrassed at the Bible. ‘You know, Pen, I’ve never had a Bible,’ she confessed; ‘Lance thinks I’m a real heathen.’

She took out the garments of native woven cloth and fingered its heavy texture. The design in strong primary colours on a biscuit background pleased her as it pleased me.

Then she picked up the Bible again. She read the inscription written in a strong, distinctive handwriting: “To my beloved son and daughter.” Sweet, isn’t it?’ she said. (237)
At the wedding, there is ‘A mixed group in the church, white and black.’ (239)

Cusack is writing a serious social novel, not a romance, so marriage must not lead to living happily ever after. In dire contrast, after an afternoon experiencing racial hatred at Hyde Park Corner, Olumide is attacked from a lorry with a cosh but Vicky’s hand takes the blow and is shattered, so that she is unable to hold a painting brush.

In these long extracts can be seen many Commonwealth and postcolonial literature concerns: the racism, colour prejudice, and entrenched class structure of the imperial power; the colonial sense of being on the periphery rather than at the centre; the common desire of the colonies for self-government; the sense that flag independence may not mean the end of cultural imperialism; the preference given to white settler colonies over black administrative colonies; and the actual (and not always planned or applauded) hybridisation among the colonies and between the colonies and Britain.

Cusack made a living as a writer in Sydney by writing for the women’s sections of newspapers and magazines. Her novels made some concession to popular and publishers’ taste by having a romantic strand, but she was concerned to be considered a writer in at least the English-speaking world and to gain the best deal from publishers. She wrote before academics had invented the category of Commonwealth or postcolonial writer, and she would probably, like most later writers, have repudiated the classification. In fact, I have lost track of the number of times at academic conferences I have heard an invited imaginative writer, feeling perhaps like Exhibit A or like a literary lion pacing around a theme park of academic jackals, growl, ‘I am not a Commonwealth (or postcolonial) writer; I am not a Nigerian (Jamaican, Malaysian, Maltese, Fijian, Sri Lankan, Canadian, etc.) writer. I am a writer.’ Yet, whatever Cusack’s placement of herself in the categories of writers, The Sun in Exile undoubtedly is proleptic about the concerns of later theorists.

NOTES
1 My thanks are due to Suzanne Mallon of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, for help in using the Florence James Papers and other manuscripts. I have quoted extensively from Sun in Exile in this essay because access is limited, the text being currently out of print.
2 See, for instance, Goodwin, ‘Postmodernism under the Raj’.
3 The Sun in Exile was published some years before the great flourishing of the Caribbean novel about growing up or travelling to Europe for work or education, as manifested in the work of V.S Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, and Andrew Salkey, or in slightly later burst of west African novels by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Chinua Achebe, and Camara Laye, and the later still output from Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and elsewhere in the Pacific.
4 Benjamin Nnamdi Azikiwe (‘Zik’) was a Nigerian Igbo who, after study in the US returned to Ghana and practised as a journalist. As editor of the Africa Morning Post (1934–37) and later, in Nigeria, the West African Pilot, he was highly respected as a spokesman for independence and for left-wing ideas. When Nigeria became a republic in 1963 he was unanimously elected President.
Inez Baranay lines up a number of contemporary Australian writers as accepting the obligation to be prophetic about their country, to have ‘a political purpose in their writing’ (10). Using Nadine Gordimer as an exemplar, she places in this group Jessica Adams, Nick Earls, Les Murray, Rosie Scott, Tom Keneally, Nicholas Jose, Judith Rodriguez, Eva Salis, Susan Varga, Anne Coombs, Arnold Zable, Geoff Goodfellow, Anita Heiss, Lionel Fogarty, and Kerry Reed-Gilbert. Rather than list an alternative group, opposing any such obligation and using Margaret Atwood as an exemplar (V.S. Naipaul would have done equally well), she simply quotes Frank Moorhouse’s cautionary note, ‘If we have things to say about politics it should be complex and said in our work. We writers are if anything disqualified from public statement because we are often falsely (but seductively) seen to have special insights by the general public and media which we do not necessarily have’ (11).
Dymphna Cusack

PAUL SHARRAD

Trees, Rainbows and Stars: The Recent Work of Albert Wendt

Albert Wendt is the leading literary figure of the Pacific — that is, Oceania (not the Asian and American rim that the media usually mean by ‘Pacific’). Born in Samoa in 1939, Wendt has worked as a student, teacher and writer in Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand, and currently holds the chair of New Zealand literature at the University of Auckland. He has written stories, novels, poetry and essays over the last thirty years, all to do with the effects of colonial incursions on Island cultures and the possibilities of imagining a new complex future that will accord respect to tradition and claim a place in global modernity. As part of this project, he has drawn on the Samoan oral literature of his birthplace, on writers like Camus, Borges, Naipaul, Faulkner and Yeats, on Hollywood movies, science fiction, New Zealand society and elements of Tao and Zen. His work has been an exciting exploration of different forms and voices, and a continuous wrestling with the role of the artist at the edge of community but speaking to it (and in the postcolonial context, for it) and against the abuses of economic, political and culturally dominating power structures.

Roughly, the work as a whole falls into three groups. It is only roughly because Wendt can work on a novel for an awfully long time while chopping out fragments for publication as stories, writing separate stories, starting bits of a projected novel and building up a collection of poems. Firstly, in the seventies he produced an anti-colonial analysis of the corruptions of modern life in Samoa around the same time as a lot of decolonising protest writing was appearing across the Pacific. (Some of it came out with assistance from Wendt, who has encouraged young writers and produced many anthologies of Pacific poems and stories, culminating in his landmark collection, Lali.) This period of Wendt’s output includes the first novel to be published by a Pacific Islander, Sons for the Return Home (1973), a collection of short stories about the semi-schooled roguish fringe of Apia, Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree (1974), a book of poems, Inside us the Dead (1976), a novella, Pouliuli (1977), and a saga of one family’s move from traditional village community to modern city capitalism, Leaves of the Banyan Tree (1979). In this period, Wendt also wrote his definitive essay on emergent Pacific writing, ‘Towards a New Oceania’ (1976), in which he sets out his project of correcting colonialist images of the Pacific and critiquing the ‘mimic men’ (he mentions his reading of Naipaul) who sell out traditional ways for private gain, leaving a culturally bankrupt society and neo-colonial dependency in their
wake. The artist, though he or she as a dissident individual could be cut off from communal values, has a prophetic duty and positive recreative role to play in imagining a complexly connected, culturally confident and self-determining contemporary Pacific world. The figure representing this stage of work is the banyan tree: it is a community of branches rooted still in tradition but sending out new aerial roots as part of modern and increasingly mobile Pacific life.

The second period is less overtly anti-colonial but continues to explore possibilities of reconnection with pre-contact traditions while acknowledging the existential crisis facing any Islander who chooses to reject the orthodox mix of opportunistic consumerism and Christianity. It includes the book of poems, _Shaman of Visions_ (1984), the story collection, _Birth and Death of the Miracle Man_ (1986), and the novel, _Ola_ (1991). This last work is a significant shift in Wendt’s outlook, since it attempts a view of the world through the eyes of a contemporary globe-trotting Samoan woman. It not only incorporates stories of Maori cultural revival, reflecting Wendt’s move to a professorship in Auckland and reconnection with the politics of bi (multi) culturalism, but it takes a Samoan pastor on a trip through the ‘Holy Land’, echoing the attempt of _Pouliluli_ to understand modern life in the light of the Holocaust. This work is full of playful self-reference and builds on ideas from quantum physics and the postmodern blurring of history, autobiography and fiction. Indeed, all these texts and others that follow work with ideas expounded in the essay ‘The Writer as Fiction’ (1983).

The personal reflections in his inaugural lecture at Auckland University (‘Pacific Maps and Fictions’ 1991) can also be seen woven into _Ola_ and subsequent writing.

Mystery, if not also the mystical, is the basis for Wendt’s next book, the novel _Black Rainbow_ (1992). This is a fascinating if at times obscure melange of thriller, literary joke, science fiction dystopia, and social satire. The book is however clearly set in New Zealand and represents a break with Wendt’s mainly Samoan focus. It also takes the experiment with mixed genres that began in _Ola_ to a new level of metafictional engagement. I have written about this complex work at greater length elsewhere, so will not dwell on it here, save to point to the new concern with blackness. This is present in the darkness signified in _Pouliluli_, but here it assumes a new meaning, by taking previous Camusian uses of the Polynesian hero Maui, combining them with the work of Maori printmaker, painter and installation artist, Ralph Hotere — notably his protests against nuclear testing in the Pacific — and coming up with a modern conceptualisation of the Polynesian creation concept of the Void as a positive though fearsome source of energy related to the Va (the gap between things that allows relationships and life).

After _Black Rainbow_ another collection of poetry appears, _Photographs_ (1995). This contains some personal lyrics recording Wendt’s change of partners, his travels and his becoming a grandfather. There are elements of Pound’s _Cantos_, Robert Bly, the Black Mountain poets, and some verse narratives that mix traditional Samoan chant with strange allegorical fantasy, hinting at the writer’s
continued mystical bent otherwise seen in his shaman figures. This period is again bounded by an anthology, a 1995 follow-up to Lali containing Pacific writing after 1980. Called Nuanua, this anthology brings together sixty-five writers from 8 regions. The title is a Polynesian word meaning ‘rainbow’, only this time it is the colourful mix that is emphasised. A pan-Pacific minority/indigenous cultural politics is still signalled as a unifying factor, but the book is fundamentally aimed at cataloguing all kinds of Islander literary expression. The variety of themes is expanding in direct proportion with the global reach of the Pacific diaspora on the one hand, and internal social reassessment of post-independent nations on the other. In the mix is a new kind of Oceanic expression from people living multiple ethnicities while resisting hyphenated co-option (Samoan-American, Cook Island-Kiwi, Tongan-Australian) into ‘mainstream’ metropolitan literatures.

While concerns in this collection shift from anti-colonialist protest to critiques of neo-colonialist capitalist dependency, criticism of patriarchal traditions and the Fiji coup, other issues (life in cities, migration, nostalgia for village simplicity, the quest to retain traditional culture) continue to echo the themes of Wendt’s early writing. The interest in simple love lyrics and concern over the effects of Western schooling remain points of continuity with the previous generation of writers. The latter theme is evident in Wendt’s later work such as ‘Crocodile’ and ‘The Talent’ (in Birth and Death of the Miracle Man [1986]).

Continuities notwithstanding, Wendt has always been a champion of change, criticising those who would fossilise tradition in order to police social conformity, and asserting the ongoing capacity of indigenous cultures for creative reformation. In this context, it is important that Nuanua includes samples from the popular Island traditions of songs (Jon Jonassen’s work) and dance drama (John Kasaipwalova), since they show how print and oral cultures are being constantly renewed in relation to each other. In books taking Pacific culture to the world beyond, this is something of a risk, given that performance material on the page can seem clumsy or jejune. For readers unfamiliar with Oceanian modes of expression and used to print, there is a need for historical and social contexting against which to assess the wider range of Pacific art practice appropriately. Wendt has been a leader in providing such a critical framework with his many essays and his creative exploration of indigenous concepts and their potential for shaping an aesthetic of Pacific writing. An example can be found in his essay on the tattoo, ‘Afterword: Tatauing the Postcolonial Body’ (1994).

In 1999 another collection of short stories appeared (labelled ‘The Best of’, though it is almost ‘all of’ plus a body of new work in progress). ‘A Genealogy of Women’ reflects the experiment with a female side in Ola that was a corrective response to criticism of his work as too closely aligned with the macho culture of fa’a Samoa. In it we find a hint of his later novel, The Mango’s Kiss. The fictionalised genealogy includes a supplementary list to the early poem, ‘Inside Us the Dead’: grandmother Mele, his storytelling muse; Mele’s sister, a traditional
healer; his mother Luisa Patu, who died when he was young; his Aunt Ita; his ex-wife. His ‘family album’ is set in counterpoint with mention of the Gulf War. The text works with Wendt’s characteristic ‘you’ narration where the reader is edgily conflated with a narrating alter-ego addressee. Here the device is used to find an objective distance from which confession and self-analysis can occur — an essay more than a story, but autobiography made over into story as a therapeutic depersonalising of pain.

The collection also includes two ‘out-takes’ — ‘The Don’ts of Whistling’ and ‘A Family Again’ — from a work planned as the sequel to Black Rainbow. They continue with the totalitarian regime and theme of control of memory from that book and seem to be based around the son of the protagonist during the father’s absence on his quest. Only the first of these narratives works as an independent story, held together by the amusing conceit of whistling developed to an artform. As in other works by this writer, the reproduction of working-class Kiwi speech often seems forced, and his penchant post-Ola for inventing bits of song lyric only hits the right note occasionally. ‘Heat’ is a pre-release episode from The Mango’s Kiss depicting a comic faleaitu performance of ‘Antony and Cleopatra’ by visiting entertainers. A love affair begins between a local girl and one of the musician actors, and her disappearance gives rise to a host of stories speculating about her fate. The theme of endless imaginative invention — how stories beget stories — is increasingly seen in Wendt’s later work, and is paralleled in The Mango’s Kiss by a proliferation of tales about the fate of a Samoan youth who runs away to sea.

Other stories mark Wendt’s move to Auckland and depict foibles of family life in the suburbs. In ‘Deliver Us from Alice’ there is a convincing tension as we see a boy traumatised by domestic violence turn into a man fixated on tidiness and a death cult built on the memory of a dead daughter. ‘The Bird’ reveals the complex life of a Samoan gang leader, who is also a devoted grandson, a dedicated aiga ‘fixer’, a supporter of international charity agencies and a spiritual quester. ‘The Eyes Have it’ records the humiliation of a head of family laid off from his job and resenting his slide into ‘female’ domesticity and impotence. It is spoiled by the overworked puns and stretched metaphors of sight indicated in the title. By far the best story is the last, ‘Waiaruhe’, in which a middle-aged woman finds liberation in escaping to the family summer cottage and discovering the underside of her social set as she raids their deserted houses. Wendt evokes the shift in her relations with her husband with effective subtlety. The interest in female experience is slyly signalled in a typically late-Wendt moment, when the husband finds his wife has been reading ‘a novel, Ola by Albert Wendt, a writer he’s never wanted to read’ (184). This piece is also worth note because it marks a clear shift towards the urban Auckland society Wendt now inhabits.

The motif of blackness, first developed in Black Rainbow and mentioned in passing in ‘Deliver Us from Alice’ and ‘The Bird’, is continued in another innovation in Wendt’s output — the poster-poems in Book of the Black Star
As part of his teacher training, Wendt took art classes, and in recent years he has returned to drawing and painting, mixing visual treatments of Polynesian myth and design (darkness, stars, spirals) that gesture to Ralph Hotere again, but has its own graffiti-like energy — something that crosses gnomic symbolism with a comic book. There is an air of personal jeu d’esprit in Wendt’s (re)turn to his youthful medium that might be seen as self-indulgent, but the ‘messy’ art work (rapid and ragged energetic swirls and sharp angles filled-in with hand-drawn lines of black felt-pen, with irregular, often smudged lettering) is at least a serious piece of fun, addressing some of Wendt’s perennial themes. [see figs 1 and 2] The book conveys a deliberate sense of the personal and emotionally engaged, as opposed to the ‘cool’ computer-age design of many visual narratives. This is supported by the conversational tone, allusions to Auckland street names and drinking in the back yard. It is appropriate, too, to the story-line of a young philosopher-writer-drug addict friend whose death transfers into the writer’s dreams a vision of life symbolised in the potent mystery of the Black Star (le fetu uliuli). There is an echo of all Wendt’s other elegiac celebrations of ‘his dead’ and the transformation of the past and pain through art into some vision of tomorrow and laughter.

In the context of New Zealand art, the use of hand lettering as part of the visual text also connects with the influential experiments of painter Colin McCahon, carrying the same portentous element of religious vision alongside a personal intensity that is both Romantic and destructive of the Modernist elevation of the artistic persona and/as the great work of art. This problematic of self-presentation and the religious theme can be tracked back to Wendt’s early debt to New Zealand poet, J.K. Baxter, and can be seen in the self-deprecating but always present narrator who is loaded with a vision he feels helpless, but compelled, to transmit (see Wendt’s poem, ‘Conch Shell’, for example). Dreams are the usual vehicle for managing these troubling legacies, and the reluctant shaman, accused like the Biblical prophets of being always ‘dark’, is a figure running back through all Wendt’s work, notably manifesting in his novella Pouliuli. However, The Book of the Black Star is more playful in delivering its minatory message of global destruction (seen here in images of ecological damage to the ocean and its creatures). The quirky buses that drive through its pages, for instance, have the quality of children’s art, echoing the nursery-rhyme elements of a grandfather’s celebration of family in Photographs.

The spiral of generation and cosmic swirl fits with the open-endedness of much of the work in this book. As with a lot of the author’s other writing, it has the air of pieces left over from earlier publications and sketches of work to come (the notes confess that part of this book ‘comes from Albert Wendt’s forthcoming, as yet untitled, novel’). Wendt is a good example of that dictum about the great writer producing the same work over and over again, but more than most writers, he seems always to be able to express that work in new and challenging forms, always on the move in his ‘ever-moving present’.
Fig 1. From *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt, 2002, reproduced with permission of Albert Wendt.
Fig 2. From *The Book of the Black Star*, Albert Wendt, 2002, reproduced with permission of Albert Wendt
Those who have followed Wendt’s work will know that one of the novels he has long-promised is a tribute to his grandmother. All of his literary experiment, in prose at least, harks back to his grandmother Mele, a family storyteller who blended moral fable, local history, traditional myth, tall yarns and ‘the good bits’ from Western literature in what is known in Samoa as fagogo (Fairbairn-Dunlop). He also deals in fierce social satire, taking on the license of the shaman-actor in faleaitu theatre supposedly possessed by ancestral spirits (Va’ai). All of these strands came together in his prize-winning epic, Leaves of the Banyan Tree, a portrait of Samoan society in the latter days of colonial rule and the early days of independent subservience to the cash economy; but the full-length treatment of Mele’s lifetime — growing up through the late 1800s and into the beginnings of Samoa’s resistance to colonial disregard for local culture and social mismanagement — appears as The Mango’s Kiss (2003).

Like much of his other work that has been turned out between teaching and promoting new writers from the Pacific, this new book has been drafted over many years. Sections have appeared as self-contained stories (‘Prospecting’ [1981] and ‘Daughter of the Mango Season’ [1984]) and the author has gone as far back as his very early story ‘A Descendant of the Mountain’ (1963) to dramatise the traumatic impact of the 1918 influenza epidemic that led to political protest against New Zealand’s administration. There is an echo, too, of ‘Birth and Death of the Miracle Man’ (1977) in the novel’s slow transformation of Mautu, the upright pastor of Satoa, into an agnostic storyteller. In the short story, this happens mysteriously and suddenly, but in the book, the transformation is due to a growing friendship with Barker, the atheistic Englishman turned Island trader. (Barker is an avatar of the dwarf trickster Tagata from the ‘Flying Fox’ section of Leaves of the Banyan Tree).

One of the strengths of The Mango’s Kiss is the sympathetic treatment of the complex central characters. This owes something to Wendt’s interest in the many ‘sides’ we all have to our selves (52) and our cultures. Mautu’s father was both ‘the staunch quiet Christian whose main “weakness” was for women’ and the taulaaitu (medium-priest) of the pagan god, Fatutapu:

As children, Mautu and Lafatu were soon conscious of the other side of their father and aiga, and, like everyone else, learned early not to refer to it publicly or directly. It existed: you observed it, learned from it to respect it, to be afraid of offending and mishandling it, and to be proud that your aiga possessed such power and knowledge.

You accepted the missionary outlawing it, but you also accepted it was in your moa, your centre. (200)

The multi-faceted bearing of such a contradictory load is manifest in Mautu’s spiritual wrestling which continues as a frame for other stories across the whole novel (he is a version of Pastor Simi in Leaves of the Banyan Tree). Within this frame, we follow the growth of his precocious daughter Peleiupu, as she both discovers a traditional gift of second sight (25, 82) and learns her way into white
education. The portrayal of her mother, Lalaga, is admirable for its complexity. She is simultaneously worried about, disapproving of, fearful for, and resentful of the talents and license afforded her husband and daughter. Lalaga has her own inner contest between obeying her mission education, maintaining the social respectability expected of a pastor’s wife, supporting her husband despite his tolerance of ‘pagan’ tradition, and indulging her lively physical passions — this latter trait permitting some of the most graphic sex scenes in Pacific writing.

Some readers may find parts of the novel excessive, distasteful and perhaps gratuitous. But Wendt uses his sex scenes to engage with the long-running debate over the real nature of Samoan society — paradise of free love or straight-laced rule-bound conservativism. Later in the book, there is a ‘splatter movie’ (a blood-soaked horror genre developed into a cult artform in New Zealand) episode about child pornography. The reader at once squirms at the relish shown in the violence and recognises the critique of something so topical in many societies. Wendt plays with the titillating and sensational aspects of popular culture, but always turns them into serious social comment. As suggested earlier, though, storytelling is mainly what the book is about. One chapter is dedicated to the meta-fictionist labyrinths of Borges, and Mautu the pastor spices up his teaching — even maths lessons [35] and his sermons (23) — with stories derived from the secular books and parodic colonial romance tales of his friend Barker’s life and library (27–32). Self-aware narration of a range of stories is also indicated when Wendt has Peleipu attend school in Apia and meet a version of Robert Louis Stevenson (91–116) whose presence also haunts ‘Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree’/Leaves of the Banyan Tree. The author also depicts three generations of two families that show traces of his own genealogy. As in Black Rainbow, there are hidden jokes from real life: one stern missionary’s name, for example, is a Samoan version of ‘Smiler’, which is an Anglicised version of the name of Wendt’s colleague and friend Witi Ihimaera, that name in turn being a Maori form of the Biblical Ishmael. A doctor who settles in Satoa to pry into cultural tradition while cultivating gay relationships with local men is given a name blending those of Samoa’s most famous anthropologists, Derek Freeman and Margaret Mead. Part of Mautu’s genealogy ties him to Tauilopepe from Leaves of the Banyan Tree (41, 203, 245) and so the narrative keeps circling and spreading. The novel thus parades its view of culture as a dynamic of mixedness, in particular connecting its episodic tall tales, fictionalised history, disguised autobiography to the oral tradition of fagogo.

In this, there is perhaps something of the multi-faceted cubist assemblage of Picasso, but the rambunctious yarning of the sensationalist and moralising fagogo does not necessarily aim to make its complexity into a modernist organic unity. The aesthetic of the fagogo as performance for a mixed audience is that it should have something to suit all tastes. Of course, this also means that not everything will be to everyone’s taste. In a performance, the audience can wander off, sleep, start up a game of cards and tune back in when ready. In a novel, because it is a
novel and we are used to certain conventions there as well, we might expect
some kind of suspense, or thematic or symbolic continuity to sustain our interest,
especially when it is a thick novel. In other words, we need handles to grab onto
if the novel allows us to wander and return. Wendt does set up such techniques
in *The Mango's Kiss*: the mystery of the missing sailor son Arona, for example,
is kept alive until the end, and there are certainly some moments of lurid action
to grab our attention. (The trader Barker reveals a Dickensian tale of child abuse
and vengeance in the confession opened after his death.) Wendt also entertains
in a virtuoso invention of Mautu's entire genealogy complete with foundation
myths and the proverbs deriving therefrom (203–10).

The old theme of Camusian existentialism as a middle way between ancient
spirituality and either modern godlessness or 'mission' rectitude is reworked in
the friendship between Barker and Mautu. The interest in how we become the
stories we are told and tell is also present. Arona and Barker's son, Tevita, for
example, are nicknamed 'Crusoe' and 'Friday' as a result of Barker's storytelling
and their close friendship, though it is the native Arona who lives out the Crusoe
adventure, while *afakasi* Tevita remains in the village to marry Peleiupu (175–
77). If there is one central theme besides storytelling, it is perhaps the idea that
asserting independent will and breaking with tradition (180, 236) are necessary
acts but the actors and their families always pay a price (279) and are only
redeemed if their deeds serve to carry the past forward into the future; but the
 tightness of symbolic continuity found in other work (notably the novella *Pouliuli*,
and even the epic *Leaves*) is not here. *Mango's Kiss* is a 'good yarn' with dramatic
highlights.

Another recurrent motif, however, is that of the mysterious, often unwanted,
talent — a motif which runs through all Wendt's writing. This theme or motif is
centred on the child prodigy Peleiupu (her name means 'beloved in words' and
she inherits R.L.S.'s library as well as a weighty understanding of human sorrow).
She is the favourite daughter of the doubting pastor Mautu and protegée of trader
Barker. When she realises she has unusual insights that seem to connect to the
pre-Christian spirit culture of Samoa, she seeks out an old healer, who advises
her never to deny the gift, since it is what she is, but not to display it to others
(82). When she foresees the suicidal end of the atheistic English renegade Barker,
she is traumatised into catatonia and, against her mother's staunchly Christian
principles, has to be taken to her aunt, who is the keeper of the cult of her clan's
'pagan' deity and a skilled exorcist/healer. The price for Peleiupu's healing is
paid by her younger sister who is taken to train as the next 'priestess' of the atua
Tuifolau. Unfortunately, Peleiupu's wisdom and preternatural connection with
the spirit world seems to fade away from this point into mere business acumen
when she becomes an adult.

This transferral of Peleiupu's powers from the spiritual to the material world
is incorporated into the drama of the book. At first, it occurs as part of her
mother’s price for her return to the aiga — Pele has to teach the village how to cultivate vegetables, and her business sense spills over into developing the Barker family’s trading network when she marries Barker’s son Tevita. Part of the anti-colonial, anti-racist message of the book relies on regular upstaging of white prejudice by smart ‘natives’, and Pele’s force of personality and strategic acumen plays a leading role in dramatising this. However, it does modify our admiration for her and leads to resentments in her community as well as in her husband. At one point a character is mocked as a navigator who has forgotten how to read the stars, and there is a danger that readers will see all the people in the book as having lost their way and thus find no one they can identify with strongly (336). It is interesting to see what would have been a trenchant condemnation of the commercialisation of culture in *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* accepted here as a clever means of modernising Samoan society, even though we see Pele profiteering from the ravages of the influenza epidemic and becoming a ruthless ‘godfather’ when she avenges her crime syndicate-leading brother — there are clear echoes of the *Black Rainbow* underworld in the last section (332, 415). So long as the stories arising from the mix are entertaining and the effect is to consolidate the family and to maintain links with the traditions of pre-Christian spirit worship, all this seems to be forgiven by the writer as another aspect of the rich and sordid tapestry of modern life.

We readers are woven into this tapestry: we are our stories; stories do not need to be tidy with a clear moral at the end; stories feed on stories and generate more stories; culture is an ongoing story in a never-ending present (299, 380). These ideas are not pushed to the ‘experimental’ metafiction of *Ola* or *Black Rainbow* in *Mango’s Kiss* (although there is reference to several South Seas romancers, mainly Somerset Maugham; and Janet Frame appears as Janet Border, also a writer of romances [385]) so much as reinserted into the ‘traditionally syncretic’ *fagogo* form. This suits the novel in its ‘baggy monster’ mode, but its potential for an endlessly rambling lack of focus can be frustrating. Readers accustomed to Wendt playing with complex philosophical ideas and powerful poetic symbolism may see in this work something of a step backwards; it is certainly a relaxation. There are, however, satisfying complexities, one being the motif of disease. For example Barker ultimately finds belonging in his adoptive community when he catches its unique mysterious fatal illness and the holy outsider Lalaga also submits to the ‘blessing’ of this local disease. Illness as a challenge to orthodox acceptance of God’s benevolent purpose reaches its most intense expression in the recreation of the influenza epidemic that killed off so many Samoans (due in large part to colonial indifference). Here Peleiupu’s talents are put to good use in organising quarantine and sanitation for the village, and there are some biting exchanges between the desperately self-reliant and embittered villagers and the pompous, ineffectual New Zealand officials and their Samoan lackeys, that effectively exploit the protocols of Samoan speech-
making. We see a version of Wendt’s grandfather here in the old chief Sao, who declares in favour of the Mau resistance (302), and his half-caste grandson Tevita assumes something of the identity O.F. Nelson - one of the leading figures in the fight for self-government later on. However, the emotional intensity of this section tends to dissipate, sliding into the sentimental deaths of Mautu and Lalaga and into the voyage by Peleipu and Tevita to New Zealand to find the long-lost brother Arona. The book overall, though, has definite narrative drive, and as a lively entertainment offering insights into shifts in Samoan attitudes and practices over the last two hundred years, is a perfectly successful ‘big yarn’, sending up its own devices in regular mention of the colonial romances many of us, including Samoans, were raised on.

Finally then, to Wendt’s latest work. In the ongoing process of renewal and return that marks his œuvre, he has revisited the start of his public writing career at the time he was teaching at Samoa College. There he wrote two plays, staged in 1972 for the Apia School Drama Festival and the first South Pacific Arts Festival, but never published. As he returned in later years to the visual arts, so too, he has turned again to writing for theatre, fulfilling a promise first made in 1970. After years of having a typescript in a drawer, revising it to final draft in 1996, and having a couple of stagings come to nothing for lack of funds, The Songmaker’s Chair appeared as part of the Auckland Festival in 2003. It was performed by the Auckland Theatre Company, with Nathaniel Lees as Director and main actor. The story is of the family of Peseola, living in New Zealand since 1953. The children adapt to their world in different ways: one rises through the Education Department and marries a palagi (white woman); another drops out of school and signs up for the military, marrying a Maori marijuana dealer who is trying to make it in the arts. Peseola rules everyone like a mafia don and his long-suffering wife, Malaga, tries to keep the peace among their offspring. Gradually their stories all come out: the resentments, the rivalries between brothers, the daughter who goes wild to compensate for a secret shame, all of them longing for the approval of the stern patriarch. The action gains intensity as accusations and confessions intertwine and the father reveals he has called them together to pass on his chief’s role.

Social realist content, with some comic repartee interspersed (including some impromptu material, much of it in Samoan), is offset by a gauze drop that shifts the lighting and allows a sense of mystery and ritual, which is enhanced by moments when the family mimes communal meals. Creation chant and hauntings by totemic owl spirits mix with contemporary rap songs. The price of migration, the struggle to keep community and tradition alive in a different society, and the nature of the ‘heart’ that ensures survival are the central themes. The old man’s chair stems from Wendt’s memories of his own father, a matai in Samoa, and is the centre of the play’s action. Mats become changeable objects until the end, when the old man dies and is wrapped in them to be carried off by the mourning
family, an action that gives the play the iconic aura of Greek tragedy. The play is a tribute to the generations of Pacific Islanders who moved to New Zealand and to the people who received them.

The purpose of this article has been to introduce readers to the more recent work of a major if still widely undervalued writer. If there is a focal point of critical analysis, it is to demonstrate how complexly interconnected Wendt’s output has been, and how richly varied. The storytelling goes on in endless mutations of a quest for justice and for meaning in the particular terms of Samoan and Pacific postcolonial existence.

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CHRISTIE MICHEL

Interview with Albert Wendt

Albert Tuaopepe Wendt is the most acclaimed novelist, poet and short story writer from Samoa and the South Pacific literary region. Born in 1939 in Western Samoa, he is a member of the aiga (extended family) Sa-Tuaopepe, branch of the Sa-Tuala and he was brought up in Apia where he completed his primary school education. In 1952, he was granted a scholarship from the New Zealand administration and moved to the New Plymouth Boys’ High School in New Zealand from where he graduated in 1957. Later on, he went to the Ardmore Teachers’ College and completed a diploma in teaching in 1959. In 1964, he obtained an M.A. in history at the Victoria University (Wellington) for his thesis on ‘Guardians and Wards: A Study of the Origins, Causes, and the First Two Years of the Mau in Western Samoa’ (political movement for independence).

Wendt worked as a Teacher for a few years, and was promoted to the position of Principal of Samoa College in Apia. In 1974, he was appointed Senior Lecturer at the University of the South Pacific and returned to Samoa to organise its new centre. From 1982 to 1987, he was professor of Pacific Literature at the University of the South Pacific in Suva (Fiji). He has been teaching at the University of Auckland since 1988. As one of the major artists in the region, Albert Wendt has played different roles: for instance, he was the director of the University of the South Pacific Centre in Apia; edited Bulletin, Samoa Times, and Mana Publications; and he was the co-ordinator for the Unesco Program on Oceanic Cultures. He plays a dominant role in the promotion of South Pacific Literature, encouraging and promoting the work of new writers.

As for the acknowledgement of his talent, both Sons for the Return Home and Flying Fox in a Freedom Tree were made into successful movies. He was awarded the Landfall Prize in 1963, the NZ Wattie Award in 1980 for Leaves of the Banyan Tree, and the Commonwealth Book Prize for Southeast Asia and Pacific in 1992. He has also written two unpublished plays. On the whole, his poetry and his novels reflect the multiple heritage of his pelagic culture. His attempt to deconstruct the South Seas myths conveyed by the exotic literature of the nineteenth century and his enthusiasm to create and promote Pacific Literature indicate the depth of Albert Wendt’s constructive response to the ‘Polynesian Void’ and his commitment to the promotion of a new Pacific awareness.

Albert Wendt is currently a professor of English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand and he is at the centre of the creation of a written Pacific Islands literature. As I was preparing my doctoral thesis on his novels, I had the opportunity to speak with Albert Wendt, at the University of Auckland in 2000.
Hello, Professor Wendt. I would like to begin this interview by asking you about your favourite character? Do you have one? and if so, do you think your favourite character embodies the best elements of your vision of Samoan society?

I have never thought of that because you know you develop as a writer — it is like when you start as a young writer you may like the character you are writing about, two years later, when you have more experiences, you look back and you may not like the same character. So it is a changing thing. It is like people asking what is your favourite book? I don’t have a favourite book. It depends on the stage of my life — I like a book and later on I like some other book. So the choice of my favourite book or my favourite character is not that important but also it changes. You may have noticed already that there are a lot of similarities between some of the characters. The figure of the con man or the figure of the man who has been an orphan keeps appearing in my work for one reason or another. There must be a psychological reason. A lot of the main characters, I found out over the years, have parts of my past in them. A part of my grandmother keeps appearing. Some of the characters recur and some of the ideas recur. In some books I may analyse freedom and individual choice and the next books emphasise other things.
CM: You told me that there is a new book to be published. Could you tell me more? Is it to be a new Leaves of the Banyan Tree or do you try another style as you did in Ola or Black Rainbow?

AW: I have been working on this new novel [The Mango’s Kiss] for about sixteen years on and off. I began not long after Leaves of the Banyan Tree was published. The style of the beginning is similar to the style of Leaves of the Banyan Tree. But then because I have been writing it for about sixteen years, the style changed in the book. That is one of the things that I would like to keep in the book. I want readers to identify that the style changes, because over the period of time I have published lots of other works (Ola and Black Rainbow). By doing those books, which in many ways are quite experimental, I have learned a lot, so that the sixteen-year-old novel is heavily influenced by these two other books and by what I found in them. Part of the new novel, which is an older novel anyway, is not really new. Someone suggested that I rewrite the whole novel and my answer was no. I want to leave it as it is. I have published parts already. So the new novel is really a reflection of how hard the development as a writer was over sixteen years. But it is a family saga like Leaves of the Banyan Tree, and I wanted to keep that. The novel starts in 1860 and I have written it up to the 1920s. My intention was to come up to 1967 but it was too big already. It is about 700 pages already, and I have to cut it so what I want to do is probably keep the novel up to the 1920s; but the style of writing is not historical, it is mostly contemporary.

CM: I would like to ask you a few questions about themes that are recurrent in your books: I notice that the women in your novels are either parodies of powerful women on committees about whom you talk quite ironically, or they are not powerful at all. Except for the main character in Ola, your protagonists are men. Is this typical of Samoan society? Are the women caricatures? And if so, what function does this serve? Or do they have a narrative purpose?

AW: Well, all three are true. When you are writing a book, it doesn’t matter what gender your characters are. A lot of what comes out is what you are. When I was very young, I thought that a lot of my most important portrayals were of women.

It is also a growth. Every writer has this. The way you portray characters is the way you develop as a person. People forget that writers are not just writers. So as we mature, that is also reflected in our writing. Do not forget that the creation in the writing is not necessarily a reflection of real people.

We all have our versions. So my view of the characters I have in my books — and they are mainly Samoan characters — are my own versions.
You have to remember it, because I believe there is no one reality out there reflected by everybody; we create our own reality. So when someone comes and says: well, Albert Wendt’s works are an analysis of the Samoan culture, I am very surprised. It is only a reflection of the culture because I happen to be writing about that country and have Samoan characters. Do you see what I mean? It is the same if I am now beginning to write about Pacific Islanders or Samoan characters living in New Zealand because I am now living back in New Zealand. *The Song Maker* is my first full-length play about a migrant family who has been living here since 1963 — the first generation, who were the grandparents, their children and their children’s children — so you have three generations of this family living in New Zealand. So I am now writing about Samoans living in New Zealand. You can say that because they are Samoans, I am still commenting on the Samoan way of life and how it has transplanted itself here; but you can also say that it is only Albert Wendt’s versions or depictions of a reality that is different for all people… We forget that it is all artificial. It is a creation by a writer. We may get some idea of what the culture is like or what the people are like from the book, but to go to a novel looking for accurate anthropological answers or sociological information is a dead end. Anyway, anthropological depictions of a culture are also just versions. They are made up as well (laughs). When Derek Freeman argues that his views are authentic, I question all of that. When Margaret Mead says that her visions are the most accurate on Samoa, I question that too. When I say that this is my vision of Samoa, it is only my vision. We all have different views and different preferences; and the way women look at the world is different from the way men look at the world. Our age, our gender, our upbringing, our belief system — all influence the way we look at the world or the way a writer writes his book. So I do not go for canons, I do not go for arguing that literature is an accurate depiction of a particular culture or a particular people. We develop our own pictures of what the country must be like. The danger at the moment is that I am the only novelist and people tend to take my view of the Samoan culture (laughs) and put my words against those of Margaret Mead or Freeman. Their views are also fictions. Even if they are supposed to have done serious scientific anthropological research, what they see is also determined by the type of people they are. When I go to different countries, I see those countries through the way I am. A few years later, if I live there, after I meet a lot of people, the way I see the country is very different from when I first arrived there. I am sure people like me, going back to Samoa years later to look at the accuracy of their research, would have had a different view. It is just another view. I see very little difference between autobiography, which is supposed to be factual, and fictions — there is no real difference.
Interview with Albert Wendt

CM: In February 1997, you explained to me that all the names in your books were chosen for their symbolism and that in Samoan language some of them were representative of the character’s personality: Tauilopepe’s mother’s name means moon; La’au means tree: is it a genealogical tree, like the Banyan Tree, like the freedom tree?

AW: Masina means moon, and month. When the European concept of month came in Samoa, we gave it the name of the moon, because of the way we worked on the calendar. The name for hour is *itu la*, *itu* means side, *itula* means the side of the sun; so if you say it is five o’clock you say *itula sulua*, it is the fifth side of the sun. *Itu* is a concept in Samoa that is very important in terms of relationships. Tauilopepe is a made-up name: Pepe means the youngest son, Tauilopepe means ‘to select in a special way’, sorted among all the other children. But you will find that most Samoan matai (chiefly) titles go back to ancient times, to old generations. Usually you have a story of how the title came about. For instance, the title of my family, our title Tuaopepe, *Tu* means to stand, *ao* meaning sun and *pepe* meaning child. The original title first began with a young child standing in daylight, so when he was chosen by my family to be the head of the family, generations before, he was given the title Tuaopepe, which still continues and my eldest brother occupies. 

La’aumatua means true, it means mature or the original tree. La’aumatua means the parent tree. Well, the symbol of the tree is common to all cultures, it is not only a Samoan symbol. It is a reflection on all the ties, the genealogical ties: all families have genealogical ties. But in Samoa, the names continue with the titles. For instance, Faleasa’s son’s name, Moaula means red rooster. As for Faleasa, *fale* means home and *asa* means wading through — someone who is trying to find his way home.

A lot of the Samoan names were made up, I deliberately put them together but they have meanings. You do not make up names like Soane because Soane is the literal translation of John. But there are names that I made up to reflect the character.

CM: You also told me in 1997 that I was the first person to ask about the numerous suicides in your books. Moreover, I know that the suicide rate is very high among young Samoans. Would you say that suicide, in your work, is connected with the existentialist notion of suicide by Camus or is it connected to other Samoan symbolic values?

AW: It started early in my work. I see suicide not in the heroic way now. In the existentialist philosophy, suicides tend to be heroic: ‘I own my life and I own the right to take it away’. I don’t see it that way anymore. I see suicide in relation to the Samoan way and the way of most Pacific Islands. The suicide rate is so high amongst Polynesians, among young Polynesians
or young Pakehas, that it is no longer heroic. I was wrong in many ways, it is tragic, absolutely tragic. There is something wrong in young people taking away their own life. There is something wrong with the culture, there is something terrible happening within the way of life which forces the young people to destroy themselves. So I see it in a more real and tragic way. Even though I still have characters who do choose to take their own life, they do so in a desperate way. But I don’t want to romanticise suicide, like I tended to do in the past, because it is not romantic. It is real. The suicide rate in New Zealand is very high, it is very high in Samoa, it is very high in most countries.

CM: There are also several themes that are recurrent throughout your books and that can be considered as your personal themes: I studied the final sentences in your works and there is laughter in several of them. What does laughter mean? Pepe laughs, Faleasa laughs, Galupo laughs at the end of Leaves of the Banyan Tree.

AW: Laughter is very important in most literatures. It is one of the few ways we can get out of the tragedies and sadness and we can survive in a better way if we have a good sense of humour. That is why even in the darkest moments, in most literatures, you will find that the writer has a good sense of humour. When Galupo is laughing at the end of Leaves of the Banyan Tree, it is not really laughter for him, it is a kind of laughter of triumph now that he has taken power, but it is also sort of comparing him, to the dogs; it is a sort of yelping to the moon. So it is a sort of negative and a sort of very positive image at the end. In Pouliuli there is a lot of humour which is a dark humour. It is a very dark book, very gloomy book, but a kind of funny book. All my students think it is funny. It is very dark and gloomy and the only way to get out of the gloomy atmosphere is to have a good sense of humour, even though the characters are getting destroyed at the end. I like funny books anyway and I like humour in fictions, but I do not like light humour. The humour in Pouliuli is particularly dark. Laughter is also a relief, you relieve all the sadness and the suffering. It is also a laughter in the face of death or whatever — it is a sort of defiance.

Most societies have comedies because they need to have comedy to keep themselves alive, especially if it is a very authoritarian society and a very repressive society. How do you attack the people in power? … In Samoa, you call that faaleaitu because in Samoa you have political comedies that go back hundreds of years. When the skit is on, in those comedies, you can attack anyone in the village. You can make fun of the pastor, of the chiefs, and they are not supposed to get angry. It is now being used in the modern Samoan comedies. You can attack anybody.
The society allows this mechanism but it will not allow you to do that in any other situations.

CM: *What does silence mean to you? Some of your characters (the protagonist of Sons for the Return Home, for example) want to escape the silences of the villages, because they are forced to face their fears. So why do some others like to stay in the lava fields?*

AW: I know what you mean. Silence is very difficult to live with. When you are silent, you can see your problems much easier. They come to you, there is nothing else to distract you. Your problems and all the other things that are worrying you come back to you when you are silent, and when nothing is silent, you feel everything else in your life, all the distractions.

CM: *The last theme I would like you to comment on is vanity: this term returns again and again: ‘all is vanity’ from the Bible is omnipresent; the word ‘vanity’ is in your titles, and in your chapters. Is the conflict for power and freedom vain and do you want to say that human life is vain and empty like the Void or do you mean pride?*

AW: It could mean both. The drive for power is a very vain drive in the sense that it is a competitive ego trip. There is another drive for power that the saints have: it is a power trip that does not harm people. It is a positive form of the ego and for humanity. A lot of the characters are vain because they love themselves. The first thing you have to do to get out of the self is, of course, to destroy the self. It is a Western idea but it is also very Samoan. All you see is yourself and you will not see anything else. That is why the prophet says all is vanity. There are different sayings, whether it is Samoan or not, but loving yourself always gets in the way. It drives people to do selfish things which destroys them or people around them. You have to have self love, so I am not saying that self love is bad. You need self love to protect yourself, to advance your own ideas and to grow. The type of self love which I find quite destructive is the very egotistic kind: everything exists just for you. We are all like that to some extent, and usually men who seek power for their own sake are like that more than most.

CM: *So would you go as far as saying that the struggle for freedom is vain too?*

AW: I think this struggle is worthwhile because you are struggling for something that is very positive. You want freedom to be yourself and you want freedom for other people, whereas the struggle for freedom in the very egotistic and vain sense is all for themselves — it is freedom to dominate other people and to exploit them.
CM: I would not like to make a mistake, but is it proper to use the ‘self’ or the ‘ego’ in your works, because there are Western ideas and Western terms that you use too.

AW: In Samoa terms like I, we, and us, are quite different from the Western ideas. *Oau* means ‘of me’, but the most important term is ‘us’, *matoa*, *tatua*, and you must always put them before the self. The individual defines his self in relation to the others, to the group, *itu*, the *Va* thing. You are yourself in your relation to other people and to other things. You are connected to everything. Whereas in the very Western term ‘I’ you can always divorce yourself from it. In Samoa, the very concept of ‘I’ is not. The ‘I’ is only the ‘I’ if it is part of the group, connected to the *Va*, connected to all the other things: to other human beings, to other creatures and even to other inanimate things, to trees and anything else.[…]

CM: My next question deals with alienation. This term seems to sum up issues like the use of social masks, the issue of freedom, the issue of power and the fact that your characters are not what they would have liked to be. Would you go as far as saying that Samoan power brings alienation from within, because it is alienating and alienated? Would you say that colonialism brought alienation, with religion for instance? Are your characters alienated because of the denial of freedom?

AW: Alienation is caused when you have a culture which moves into considering everything that you are, and everything in your life, is not worthwhile, and proceeds to destroy it. You are making people feel ashamed of their own way of life. They become more alienated from themselves because they do not know their own ways and they do not know about their own cultures because colonial governments do not teach local languages … so where are they? They are quite lost. The recovery comes when they become aware that their culture is worthwhile and when they start to fight to make it survive. Then the process is reversed in the sense that they say to the culture that came in, we are alienating us so you can go.

The alienation of the self is very important; the Western thing of the artist being an outsider is not just particular to the West, because somehow some of us are born with the feeling that we do not belong to anywhere. Even if you grew up in a good family that loves you, you can say ‘I do not feel at home here’. It is not a bad way to be. The romantic myth is that most artists feel that way, but I know a lot of people who are not artists and who feel that way too.

Anyway, the whole culture is not alienated. There are some of the ways of the past that I like, some that I do not like. What I do, and what a lot of people do, is that we create our own sub-culture. You choose friends who you get along well with, and we create a sub-culture. In that way, we feel that we belong to a group, even if we do not belong to the
bigger one, the national culture. Most societies are like that, even in small communal societies like Samoa, even in villages, we meet up with people who are like ourselves and go to the same church. But I do not like sub-cultures where churches dominate, that force everybody to be the same — or when a political group decides that the only way to live your life is to do what they tell you.

The whole alienation thing is even worse in the West in the sense that the old way of life has been totally shattered, extended families have been shattered. So you live on your own with your wife and two or three kids. You live on your own in a huge city. That is a form of alienation that becomes more and more important because the cities become larger and larger and they say that industrialised societies dominate the whole world.

Most societies began like Samoa: rural, communal. And then family ties were shattered because of people migrating to cities, trying to live a life on their own, with a few friends, a few relatives, and it is a part of the twentieth century that I do not like. You now have cities like Mexico City which are not cities: they are civilisations on their own.

CM: I read that you were 'an angry young man'? Are you? Were you? Why were you angry? Is your revolt against those imposed values and is it at the origin of your desire to write?

AW: I was. But they sensationalised it. I am still basically a very angry person — about the condition of the world and how people are badly treated. I am less angry now. I used to be quite angry openly.

That was a sort of key label at the time: it was very popular in the sixties and in the seventies to call people the angry young generation. Most artists you will find and most human beings who would like to change the world are angry — they are not happy with the world as it is. The word angry is thought to be a bad word — quite negative; whereas anger is very positive. I do not like the way people treated us so I will write about that. I do not like the way I feel: why am I feeling this way? I do not like what is happening in literature. I do not like what is happening in the Pacific in relation to the colonial powers moving in. So you become labelled as an angry person. But in actual fact you are protesting certain things you believe in, and against certain things you do not believe in. If you look back at the history of art, you will find that it is one of the artist’s motivations — you can call it anger, but it is a feeling that some things are not right in the world. Sometimes you are quite angry in what you write and what you say.

CM: As you know, I am very interested in the different forms through which freedom could appear in the Samoan psyche and in your works. It is quite crucial to know that the idea of personal choice is part of the origin
of the creation, because from what I read, children and adults, women (Sia Figiel) and your characters have trouble dealing with freedom.

AW: Freedom is the same in most countries, but it is defined differently. Some cultures give a lot of freedom to individuals and some cultures give a lot of freedom to the group. In those groups, children are supposed to behave in a certain way, teenagers are supposed to behave in a certain way, old people are supposed to behave in a certain way. There are limits to how we should behave, which is freedom as well. Limits are put on freedom. We all learn how to manipulate it and how to use it to benefit ourselves. Some people are far more unscrupulous manipulating it for themselves. For example, some of the characters in my books are making a lot of money destroying other people. It happens in most countries. But the story of the creation and the gifts of the God is a very important story.

CM: Could you tell me the Samoan myth of human creation?

AW: Tagaloalagi, the supreme God, one day asked his messengers to take a piece of fue (vine) tagata and lay it out in a place called Malae la (sun) — this place was known as Malaela because of this event — and to leave this piece of piping vine in this malaela to see what would happen. So after time had passed, Tagaloalagi asked his messengers to go back and check what had happened. He got there and saw that the vine had turned into ilo (worms, maggots). Tagaloalagi came from Heaven, and he shaped these maggots in the forms of human beings: it is how human beings were created. Into them, he put the following gifts: first, loto which is spirit, courageous spirit; secondly poto which is the ability to think; atamae which is intelligence; agaga which is soul; finagalo which is the ability to choose, or make decisions. The last one is the ability to doubt.

Those are the most valuable things in the Samoan evaluation of human personality. All those gifts are integrated in what we call a human being. When we die, we turn into maggots again (laughs). And that is why vine is known as fue tagata, meaning the vine out of which human beings came. That is why that place — the malae of the sun (malaela) — is very important.

NOTES

1 Formerly, Western Samoa. Nowadays, Independent State of Samoa.
2 Best screenplay in the Tokyo International Film Festivals.
3 Current debate asks what theoretical term might suggest the specificity, the multiplicity, the historical and political background, the literary creation in this region and the literary patterns on this new literature. Theory offers many possibilities: postcolonial, postmodernist, resistant, third world, fourth world, Commonwealth, post imperial, new literature in English…
4 Christie Michel is currently writing up a doctoral thesis at the University of la Réunion on the major themes of Albert Wendt’s fictions.
Paul Sharrad’s recently released book on Albert Wendt, the first monograph on the outstanding literary figure of the Pacific region, is not only an ambitious but a profoundly successful scholarly study that deserves our attention. It enters the critical discourse on the ‘new’ literatures in English as a timely reminder of the importance of a regional literature and of Wendt’s literary and critical contribution to this discourse, both widely neglected among critics from beyond the Pacific. Having been engaged with Pacific writing for many years, Sharrad’s receptive, accurate and thoroughly informed critical analyses in *Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature: Circling the Void* (2003) offer the reader a balanced appraisal of the writer’s achievement. At the same time the book invites examination of Sharrad’s arguments and insights and affords the opportunity to comment upon Wendt’s most recent works that are not included here, as well as on publications of other Pacific writers to whom Sharrad does not necessarily refer. This twofold approach, I suggest, will contribute to our understanding both of Wendt’s literary achievement and the diverse mosaic of Pacific writing. Here though, I am well aware of the terminological problems ‘Pacific’ writing has encountered, differing geographical, ethnic and cultural parameters having been variously used to categorise the most widely dispersed corpus of literary texts among the ‘new’ literatures in English. Wendt’s own position as the editor of *Lali: A Pacific Anthology* (1980), *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English Since 1980* (1995), and most recently (with Reina Whaitiri and Robert Sullivan) of *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English* (2003) is in itself indicative of the ongoing discourse on naming a regional literature by simultaneously drawing demarcating boundary lines of inclusion and exclusion that stretch or shrink, as the case may be, the locale of ‘Pacific’ writing within the vast oceanic region extending from Hawaii to Aotearoa / New Zealand and from Papua New Guinea to Easter Island.

Giving expression to the writer’s life-time experience in Samoa, Fiji and Aotearoa / New Zealand over a period of more than half a century, Wendt’s poems, stories and novels as much as his critical writing represent the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the Pacific expanse, which in Sharrad’s words has imbued him with an ‘ever-expanding vision of Oceania, including New Zealand, as his adoptive home’ — and importantly, with a vision that rejects ‘a limiting view of tradition that would insulate local identity from the complex
interactions of global modernity’ (vii). It is precisely this awareness of the correlation of the local and the global that underpins Sharrad’s study of Wendt’s work published between 1955 — when his first story ‘Drowning’ was included in a New Zealand annual school magazine — and 1999 which saw the release of *The Best of Albert Wendt’s Short Stories*. Indeed, the interaction of the local and the global, which I have referred to elsewhere as a transformative process towards the glocal, plays an important role in his more recent writing, including the poetry collection *The Book of the Black Star* (2002) and the novel *The Mango’s Kiss* (2003).

*Albert Wendt and Pacific Literature* testifies to Sharrad’s sovereign handling of the author’s substantial literary output that he subdivides into three chronologically distinct periods that are held together by Wendt’s ‘consistently looking towards a modern metaphysics grounded in myths of Oceania that might underpin visions of a just, humane society’ (18). The book’s structure suggests the usefulness of focusing on single works that epitomise the writer’s ongoing quest and distinct points of arrival in each period. Thus, among his early works, *Sons for the Return Home* (1973) generates and represents an aesthetic model for the Pacific writer at the interface of a colonial written and a traditional oral culture, while his poetry in *Inside Us the Dead* (1980) expresses a tragic sense of life filtered through different modes such as absurdity and satire, anger, protest and introspection. Jointly, both texts reflect contradictions of Samoan colonial and postcolonial history which are of central concern to Wendt at this time in his literary career.

Of special relevance for the next stage is the critic’s positioning of *Pouliuli* (1980) as a text that resists a single reading as either ‘universalist’ or ‘oppositional’ (119). Such an assessment connects with Sharrad’s interest in contextualising / historicising Wendt’s work as Pacific writing on the one hand and postcolonial on the other. Seen in perspective then, *Pouliuli* points towards the author’s outstanding work of the middle period, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* (1980), where in contrast to Homi Bhabha’s argument, mimicry does not destabilise the colonial discourse. Such a stance isolates Wendt and his novel from other ‘Third World’ writers and their work of the 1970s. Besides, and to an even greater extent than previously, *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* emphasises the processual character of Wendt’s quest manifesting, as Sharrad puts it, ‘a strong sense of unfinished business’ (144) that in turn appears to have invited the writer to probe into the possibilities of using a whole range of differing narrative approaches such as allegory, fantasy, myth-creation and recreation, realism, sociological and anthropological statement. What is intimated here but really comes to the fore subsequently is Wendt’s increasing concern with the distinction between self, history and fiction (180). Both, *Ola* and *Black Rainbow*, his two novels of the 1990s, are such exemplary texts which also connect quite visibly to global postmodernity with their conspicuous featuring of self-referentiality, intertextual playfulness and genre mixing, all of which easily fit into the processual character
of Wendt’s work. Nonetheless, Sharrad maintains, this path is not followed for its own fashionable sake, but because of the author’s ‘dynamic view of enacted identity in the “ever changing present”’, that is grounded as much in postmodernity as in indigenous traditions, and here in particular in the image of the *nu* with its associations of ‘gap, void, outer space, time immemorial’ to which Wendt adds his own existential void of modern postcolonial life (247). Letting both experiential spheres converge almost to the point of fusion, Wendt’s definition of himself as ‘pelagic’ man mustering an ‘oceanic identity that allows for modern ideas of movement and dislocation while retaining a flexible sense of regional locatedness’ (250) underlines the writer’s stance as neither of a ‘diasporan’ nor a ‘homegrown’ nor of a ‘third’ or ‘fourth’ world variety, and consequently questions the usefulness or validity of critical approaches along their respective postcolonial trajectories like mimicry and hybridity, in-betweenness, third space, centre and periphery. In other words, Wendt’s self-definition and Sharrad’s understanding of his position work against placement in a ‘postcolonial critical ghetto’ (251).

Basically, I agree with Sharrad’s reading of the author’s work, which unfortunately has had little bearing on the postcolonial theoretical discourse, yet it naturally also raises a number of questions. Is Wendt’s position perhaps less representative than exceptional, even unique among his Pacific colleagues from the various island groups, including Hawaii and Aotearoa / New Zealand and can the contemporary (postcolonial) artist actually bypass the tangible pressures and effects of globalisation any longer? Or put differently, would ignoring them not happen at the expense of self-deceit? Do Wendt’s most recent publications follow the clear-cut path of ‘circling the void’ Sharrad has outlined and finally, has his perception of an ‘oceanic identity’ not after all been instrumental in moving his work closer to that of ‘postcolonial’ writers elsewhere?

To respond to these questions let me now look at several recent works both by the author as well as from the Pacific region. The editors of *Whetu Moana* have extended the collection’s geographical range further than *Lali* and *Nuanua* but restricted its content to the genre of poetry. On the one hand such a step reflects the overall growth of writing from the Pacific with Maori literature playing quite an important role, which does not make it feasible any longer to publish prose-cum-poetry tomes. The inclusion of Maori and Hawaiian poets on the other hand is obviously meant to set up the signifier ‘Polynesian poetry’ as a more circumspect category replacing the imprecision of ‘Pacific’. Yet, the perusal of more than 250 poems by nearly 70 authors from seven countries hardly enables us to easily define their common ground other than geographically. Their themes, forms and modes as well as the range of authorial concerns differ widely and need to be put into perspective for at least two reasons. Now we are dealing with a younger generation of poets whose mobility is greater and whose exposure to the modern world accordingly exceeds that of their forbears. At the same time we must remember that the historical, political and social conditions shaping
and prevailing in the seven countries Aotearoa / New Zealand, Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, The Cook Islands, Niue and Rotuma have not been pressured by global processes into a homogenous totality. Indeed, Polynesian poets face simultaneously pervading dissimilarities.

At the cost of simplifying the issue, obvious differences can be pinpointed. Thus, Maori poetry (the largest section of the book) offers a wide range of themes, linguistic and formal features that result both from a vivid cultural memory and political self-assertion as well as from its long-lasting contact with Pakeha culture. Both influences have contributed to its present richness, ranging from resorting to oral forms of communication — narrative, dialogue and incantation — to classical and experimental forms including concrete poetry, hip hop and postmodern meta-poetry. Besides, the multilingual situation has invited code switching and the use of Maori, Pidgin and colloquialisms. Hawaiian poets, however, still perceive themselves as living in a colonised situation. Their work has much in common with American First Nations writers with whom they share writing-back positions and an insistence on asserting their own cultural heritage including the validation of their myths and legends. The poems’ at times incantatory nature is further strengthened by the use of Polynesian words, names and cultural references. By contrast, Samoan and Tongan voices imbued with the experience of national independence frequently critically engage with their respective society’s contradictions, at times more subtly, and in the case of Samoan poetry often in a humorous mood, wittily or even satirically. Here we can assume that Wendt’s influence has not been altogether negligible, while the two poets from Niue and Rotuma and quite a few Cook Islanders who have spent most of their lives in Aotearoa / New Zealand have certainly been exposed to Maori and Pakeha culture.

Of special interest in the context of Wendt’s own more recent writing is the finding that Whetu Moana contains voices that tend towards the writer’s ‘oceanic identity’, combining the local with the global. Here, I would like to mention ‘urban iwi: thei mauri ora!’ (46–47) with its image of ‘the city is our marae; skyscraper/ tekoteko with a hundred square eyes’; ‘death at the christmas fair: elegy for a fallen shopper’ (183–84); ‘Why Am I Auditioning for TV?’ (205–06); and the concrete poem ‘U Turn’ (262). All underline the assertion of an oceanic identity which in spite of the global onslaught will yet ‘pull the mana of our tupuna from / within our globalised selves, and breathe again’ (47).

Among book-length publications of a younger generation of poets, Robert Sullivan’s Star Waka (1999) invites a reading of many of its poems as ‘disembedded’ since their ‘contextual openness’ or the entrance of global cultural signs prevents their being simply tied down to the specific individual or communal events they thematise. However, their ‘locality’ is not altogether erased since the writer sets out to create their own space, that is, to ‘localise’ his poems in his own tradition-influenced manner. This often occurs by using handed-down oral poetic and stylistic conventions, prosodic patterns or symbols, among which
‘star’ and ‘waka’ figure prominently. *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), a poem originally designed by Sullivan as a libretto with multiple voices and intertextual references, displays its pelagic nature literally and metaphorically as distinctly as does *Star Waka*. After his death Cook’s journey to the world ‘down under’ transforms into a fantastic journey through the ‘underworld’ of Hades / Rarohenga, guided by the mythological Greek and Pacific double of Orpheus-Maui. In the realm of this poetically (re)created ‘locality’ that encompasses both worlds, echoes of Homer, Dante and Maui’s story are evoked in a fused, fantastic-realistic-historical narrative. Furthermore, references to (Western) mapping, the use of rhythms and ‘translated’ wording of popular music and colloquial phrases, as much as postmodern ironical self-referentiality to the poem’s textuality, infuse a global dimension into a Pacific world with its memories of Cook’s arrogant and violent colonisation for which he is punished.

Admonished by Orpheus-Maui to learn, ‘to look back on an explorer’s past,’ the final message in *Captain Cook in the Underworld* reminds us of the important Maori concept encapsulated in the saying ‘nga tipuna ki mua, ko tatou kei muri’: ‘the ancestors in front, we are behind’. It stands at the centre of Witi Ihimaera’s *Woman far Walking* (2000), a drama whose ‘glocal’ character relates it to quite a few other Pacific plays. The ‘local’ experience of colonisation is remembered by Tiriti, the 160-year-old human ‘incarnation’ of the Treaty of Waitangi, in a dialogic confrontation with her alter ego that results finding the generosity to forgive because she has learned from the past. Circling her own void, Tiriti ‘enacts her identity in the “ever changing present”’ much as Wendt proposes and creatively presents it in his writing. Dramaturgically speaking, globally practiced theatrical devices such as stage props, lighting, music and voice-over are merged with the Maori colours of black, red and white, *waiata* tunes and Maori rhetoric and haka performances at crucial moments in the story. The ‘local’ is neither totally erased nor replaced in a process of global cultural homogenisation but transformed into the mélange of the glocal.

Such transformation is further enhanced through the employment of the fantastic, an artistic device not only shaping this play and *Captain Cook in the Underworld* but also of relevance in Ihimaera’s story *The Whale Rider* (1987) and his novel *The Dream Swimmer* (1997). In *Sky Dancer* (Ihimaera, 2003) however, recourse to the fantastic is more sustained and reveals more than a temporary incursion of the modern, global-wide near-obsession with the fantastic. Here the fight of the land birds in defence of their territory, and their survival as the inhabitants of Tane’s forest against the sea birds that try to occupy it for their own colonising and exploitative purposes, echoes a Maori cosmogenic myth and ecological concerns to save the forest in Aotearoa / New Zealand against capitalist profiteers. The narrative of the dramatic events in the fantasised realm of space and time that happen far beyond the ‘time portal’ through which two humans enter to support the land birds, merges Maori myth retelling with the technical aspects of Star Wars into a glocal heroic fantasy. Additionally, in both the fantastic
and the realistic sections of *Sky Dancer* we also encounter numerous intertextual references — to European medieval romance, St. John’s ‘Revelation’, Chaucer’s ‘Parlement of Foules’, contemporary musicals, action films and actors — all of which underline the openness of this Pacific text to global literary practices and cultural elements.

*Sky Dancer* invites comparison with Wendt’s earlier *Black Rainbow* (1995). Although its author has called it ‘an allegorical thriller’ (Sharrad 205), it boasts a great fondness for intertextuality as well as a fantastic dimension in the protagonist’s search for his family and in his repeated encounters with fantastic figures that transform his quest from its realistic beginnings into a virtual reality. In contrast to Ihimaera’s work, however, Wendt’s novel focuses much more strongly on the individual, while *Sky Dancer* foregrounds communal action and the fate of the community. Apart from this, and though its mode is not exactly utopian, it still gives us cause for hope, whereas *Black Rainbow* is much closer to dystopian fantasy fiction. Interestingly, the Samoan author’s last novel *The Mango’s Kiss* invites comparison with the Maori novel. In its design as a fictitious history of Samoa over a period of nearly half a century, exemplified by the fate of Peleiupu and her family, it joins the female protagonist’s successful handling of ‘modernity’ in its differing garbs with the gradual transformation of a closed-in and self-sufficient insular society. The economic, financial and social success story is one of individual entrepreneurship and communal flexibility. Yet as both do not permit themselves to be cut off totally from their Samoan cultural heritage, tensions arise as much in individuals as in public life: strains, however, that again testify to the emergence of the very oceanic identity Wendt situates in the conjunction of modern aspects of dislocation and the sense of flexibility of regional locatedness.

I want to conclude my observations on a small and selected number of Pacific texts by asking whether we come across a similar constellation in two recent volumes of poetry. In Wendt’s *The Book of the Black Star* the multivalent metaphor of the black star evokes a number of varying responses in the poet who describes it, attempts to define it or simply addresses it in a questioning mood like: ‘Black Star, were you born during the First Dawn before Tagaloa-A-Lagi invented the Alphabet of Omens?’ Furthermore, we come across apparently simple epigrammatic statements, references to and memories of a person called Sam, of family, home and Samoan myths and finally, of poetic reflections upon the efficacy and the effects of the mysterious black star. The pattern of individual poems and their boundedness to this important Pacific signifier remind us of *Star Waka* and yet at the same time draw our attention to the very different and specific nature of ‘imagetexts’. Combining, even fusing handwritten texts in English or Samoan with ink drawings, white and black, light and shade, script and drawing, creates symbiotic enunciations where text and image mutually support, underpin and enhance each other in a manner similar to contemporary Pacific paintings where artists have incorporated texts and numerical figures into coloured images and
forms. But the recurring shapes of star and spiral are to be read as ever present symbols of life, in contrast to many paintings where texts are messages of postcolonial ‘writing back’. It is precisely in this assemblage of the mundane and the mythical where I would again locate the glocal element, now not in the writer’s written work but in imagetexts through which Wendt adds a new facet to Pacific art.

John Puhiatau Pule’s *Tagata Kapakiloi — Restless People* (2004) is a very different book in its insistence on the existential problematic of the individual. In place of communal concerns or connotations to the noumenon in Wendt’s imagetexts, there are two voices who infrequently enter a dialogue from shifting perspectives: unstable identities whose existential predicament reflects dislocation and search. ‘Restless people’ refers back to Pule’s earlier written and painted work — ‘which relocates’ the artist to his home Niue that he left for New Zealand at the age of two — and at the same time relates them to Wendt’s early poetry. Interestingly, Sia Figiel’s Samoan novel *where we once belonged* (1996) similarly underlines, I would conclude — if such conclusion is indeed required — that the literary development of the Samoan author as presented in Sharrad’s study of Albert Wendt, does not reflect that of Pacific writing in general. Yet, it is similarly correct to say that it indicates the direction other writers have also chosen, though the overall picture of Pacific writing is far from uniform.

NOTES


2 Considering for example the then momentous status of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), this is the more astounding because of the three authors’ local and cultural ‘vicinity’ to the Pacific and, even more so, because of Wendt’s seminal essays on Pacific writing — for example, ‘Towards a New Oceania’ (1976), ‘The Writer as Fiction’ (1983) or ‘Novelists and Historians and the Art of Remembering’ (1987) — all of which contribute essentially to understanding Samoan and Pacific writing. Nor for that matter has Subramani’s comprehensive study *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation* (1985) impacted at all on *The Empire Writes Back*. It appears that neither Wendt nor other Pacific authors fitted its grid of postcolonial theory. See also Sharrad’s Bibliography (265–81) for the scant critical reception of the whole region.

3 The poet Samuel Cruikshank in his own words is a Maori-Scots kid, conceived in Christchurch, gestated in Tonga, surfaced in Fiji (46). Authors of the other examples are Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard from Samoa, Tracey Tawhiao and Briar Wood from Aotearoa/New Zealand.

4 Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s phrase of a procedure ‘in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices’ (49) aptly describes this process.

5 Since Christopher Balme’s *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-colonial Drama* (1999) quite a few publications have dealt with the Pacific Theatre. See for example, Balme and Carstensen (2001), Kelly (2001), Peterson (2001), and Maufort (2003).
See also Wendt’s novel *Ola* (1991) where the first person narrator is almost obsessed with her own self. Similarly, Sia Figiel’s *where we once belonged* (1996) highlights the predicament of the Samoan woman caught between individual needs and communal constraints. In contrast to the Samoan writer’s general foregrounding of the individual, Maori novelists commonly create much closer bonds, tense though they often are, between the individual and her/his community. See for example, Patricia Grace’s novels or Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* (1990) and *Both Sides of the Moon* (1998) or Kelly Ana Morey’s *Bloom* (2003).

Sharrad mentions a few postcolonial writers whose recent works have similarly turned ‘to dystopian fantasy fiction’ and suggests that perhaps ‘living on the edges of empire makes people particularly aware of the corruption of high ideals’ (214). Yet such reading not only leaves aside Ihimaera’s writing (see for example, *The Whale Rider*) but also that this particular subgenre is a global phenomenon.

Among quite a few painters who come to mind are Shane Cotton, Emare Karakawa and Robyn Kahukura from Aotearoa/New Zealand, John Pule from Niue and Lily Laita, a Samoan-Maori artist. See also his novel *The Shark that Ate the Sun* (1992).

See the entry ‘Pule, John Puhiatu’ in Robinson and Wattie (454–55).

For a very recent overview of Pacific writing cf also Paul Millar (2002).

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Interculturalism and Dance-Theatre.
Interview with Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, (OAM) Choreographer-Dancer
Bungendore, ACT, Australia, January 18, 2004

Inspired by two of the female greats in early modern dance, Americans Loie Fuller (1862–1928) and Doris Humphrey (1895–1958), Elizabeth Cameron Dalman has been at the forefront of transcultural modern dance collaborations in Australia since the late 1960s when she brought dance with a socio-political subtext to Australia through the work of her mentor-collaborator, the controversial Eleo Pomare.

Study in Europe with Kurt Jooss at the Folkwangschule in Essen, West Germany, and with Martha Graham, James Truitte, Alwin Nikolais, and Eleo Pomare in New York in the early 1960s, led to the founding of the Australian Dance Theatre (ADT) in Adelaide in 1965 with classical dancer, Leslie White. Elizabeth Cameron Dalman continued as sole Artistic Director from 1967–1975. ADT remains a leading choreographic institution in Australia — for example, it is currently demonstrating the ‘ballistic choreography’ combined with new media influences, of Director, Gary Stewart. Cameron Dalman is credited with imparting ‘a passion for exciting new ways of moving to a new generation of modern dancers, including Jennifer Barry, Gillian Millard and Cheryl Stock’ (Craig and Lester 421). Since 1994, Cameron Dalman has been the recipient of several awards for her contribution to dance in Australia. She is a senior associate of the Australian Choreographic Centre and continues to teach, as well as choreograph and dance in critically-acclaimed, small-scale productions internationally.

In this interview, I petition for ‘attention to dance as theatre art with the same willingness and imagination we might give to other forms of literature’ (Theodores 7). I am a sculptor and textile-installation artist who worked with
Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, in 2002–2004 on my artwork called *The Irish Linen Memorial*. Through working closely with Cameron Dalman, I have come to understand her emphasis on the sculptural use of space, and to appreciate the political imperative of her work.

**LT:** You have a career history of working on social justice or humanitarian issues in collaboration with other artists, would you tell me about that? For example, when you choreographed *Release of an Oath* in 1972, a news-clipping from Dunedin, New Zealand called this work, a first rate drama. ‘We have stepped beyond the experience of movement alone and are plumbing the depths of man’s search for truth.’ What was it that politicised you as an artist, which vaulted you into taking such an early lead in cross-cultural artistic productions?

**ED:** The Vietnam war sparked it off. But, really, it goes back further than that — my father had fought in World War II, so I spent my early childhood without my father and that left a big impression on me. I felt deprived because he was away for three and a half years, and when he came back he took another year to recover from the trauma. So, in 1967, it was my opportunity to speak out about war. I created a work called *Sundown* that referenced, in particular, the horror of the Vietnam War. We [The Australian Dance Theatre] took it to Europe the following year.

**LT:** That’s interesting, because in preparation for giving a lecture about my Irish Linen Memorial and The Art of Death to a class at the College of Fine Arts (COFA) in Sydney last year, I interviewed my mother about her experience with the sectarian Troubles in Northern Ireland. These recent times were almost less disturbing for her as the palpable feelings of grief associated with losing out on not having her father during her childhood years of World War II — those same anxious feelings of which you speak. In Northern Ireland, conscription was not mandatory and so my mother’s family was the exception in the community in which they were living. I think that people forget the traumatic intergenerational emotional consequences of war, even for those at a great distance from the actual events.

**ED:** Adelaide, where I lived in the 1960s, was very isolated — Europe and America both seemed so far away. Artists used to talk about the ‘tyranny of distance’ — not just within Australia but also globally. Air travel was not as it is today. Besides, Adelaide had very little contact with other states and cities, even in the local newspaper; and there was little international news. It seemed that Australia was very turned in on itself.

As well, the situation for indigenous Australians was bleak — you certainly weren’t able to work with them collaboratively, as I have done within the last few years. We did not study Aboriginal culture in schools,
and we saw very few Indigenous peoples in the cities. There were some anthropological studies made, but they were almost an invisible race for most Caucasian Australians.

LT: So, globalisation and the ease of international communication and trade, together with the World Wide Web, have altered the sense of artistic community in Australia, today?

ED: Yes, I believe so, but it is different today. In the 1960s we marched in the protest marches because we believed we could change the world. Like artists from other disciplines we [dancer-choreographers] were provocative and outspoken, idealists with a utopian vision, believing it was both our right and our responsibility to reflect the events of our time back to ourselves and to our society.

LT: Marcia Siegel, New York dance critic, reflects your sentiment when she states,

> Modern dance, by its nature, must be constantly renewing itself.... Modern dance is the most eloquent and humanistic of theatre dance forms. In its several stubborn ways it speaks of and to the individual. For this reason most of all, we need to spare it from the increasingly mass-minded pressure of a depersonalised society. (99)

What were your early influences?

ED: My first dancing teacher, Nora Stewart, had taught me Margaret Morris dancing. Morris was a modern dance pioneer in England who had studied with Isadora Duncan’s brother. So at a very early age I had a taste of the Moderns and this prepared me for my study of other pioneers such as Loie Fuller, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey to name a few.

I have always been interested in the potential of new ideas about space, as well as with sound and image. In 1970, I toured a work called The Time-Riders — The Oldest Continent, across Australia that was a collaboration with the Polish conceptual artist, Stan Ostajo Kotkowski. This work included an early form of a laser beam projection with two screens — front and back projection. It was ‘pre’ new media! I would like to work more this way in the future with this kind of cross-disciplinary performance space.

One of my strongest mentor-collaborators was Eleo Pomare, with whom I am working again this year in Taipei. It shows how much the world has changed for minorities and for modern dance when you realise that three of his works have been documented by The American Dance Festival as masterworks and archived as important achievements by African American choreographers.

LT: How did you both meet?
ED: I lived in Europe in the late 1950s and early ‘60s. It was during that time that I attended a performance by José Limón in London. He changed my life forever! … I knew that I wanted to find a way to work like that — where the spirit and the heart moved through the dance and flowed through space. I searched for years to find a teacher who worked in this ‘modern’ choreographic style. I finally met Eleo Pomare at the Folkwangschule in Essen, Germany, which was then directed by Kurt Jooss (1901–1979).

Eleo, who had studied with José Limón at the High School of Performing Arts in New York, inspired me with his teaching and choreographic work. I studied and performed with Eleo from 1960 to 1963 for a period of gestation in Europe, yet, I finally came back to Australia. Then, Eleo came here in 1972 when I was directing the Australian Dance Theatre in Adelaide. Our work was about humanity, the human condition, and Eleo is the one I credit with training me in how to bring such concepts through the dance choreographically.

LT: You and Eleo are credited with bringing a rhythmic strength to Australia’s dance heritage. It is in this arena of modern dance where your achievements are listed most compendiously. For example, as listed in the Modern Dance chapter to the scholarly Currency Companion to Music and Dance, 2003, (eds. John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell) in entries by Lee Christofis, Shirley McKechnie, Carole Y. Johnson with Raymond Robinson.


By the finish of the book, we are acquainted not only with the history of black dance, but we also know much more about the enslaved and the enslavers, the psychology of colonialism, and the nature of those who have danced their way out of poverty and racial prejudice into the opera houses and concert halls of the world.

The book begins with an introduction about dance from the point of view of the Portuguese slave traders, 1441.]

ED: This book is of its time, written when the black/white racial relations in the USA were very divisive. Yet, the book speaks about the roots of the inspiration of those early years. Here is a picture of loading slaves onto ships bound for colonies in America.

Dancing the slaves’, on board ship was a common occurrence. It was encouraged for economic reasons; slaves who had been exercised looked better and bought a higher price. (Emery 6–7)
And, here, a passage about,

Condemnation of dancing by the Protestant church, specifically Methodists. Many old dances became ritualised and were incorporated into secret religious services, as the only remaining link with the African homeland. (Emery 48)

During the period of the burgeoning civil rights and modern dance movements, Eleo stated, in *Negro Digest*, 1967, and *Ebony Magazine*, in 1969,

Let’s face it, the ‘powers-that-be’ are not interested in seeing ‘Negroes’ in any way but as rhythmic freaks about whom they say, ‘They certainly do have a good sense of rhythm’. Well, I am not an animal and I won’t tap dance … I am a human being and have the same feelings that any other human being would have. I don’t want to *entertain* them. (Pomare qtd. in Emery 47–48 italics in original)

Our role is to break ethnocentric thinking patterns which have led these people [the classical ballet establishment] — drunk with power — to believe that theirs, although dead, is the superior art. (Emery 309)

**LT:** I have always liked the idea of *living art* and my sculptural practice centres around such notions. That is why I admire dance. For example, my memorial, even though it commemorates those who have died and are put to rest, is a living memorial. As well as being commemorative, *The Irish Linen Memorial* is also a type of direct-action social protest against violence — and that is why working with you has been so informative and meaningful. Your choreography, together with the original score, composed by Tom Fitzgerald, keeps the artwork alive in real time.

When I lived in the United States in the 1980s, I was taught by the African American painter Sam Gilliam from Washington, DC, and recently, I worked with the African American architect, Mel Streeter & Associates in Seattle, Washington. In the USA the large African American population makes for much more racial integration than in Australia, although I am impressed by the year 2000 *Arts in a Multicultural Australia Policy*, implemented by the *Australia Council for the Arts*, which has increased awareness of diversity in cultural production and audience reception, since the early 1990s.

**ED:** Yes. I remember working with The Eleo Pomare Modern Dance Company in New York City, in 1966, when persecution of African-Americans in the United States was rife. Black people were regularly interrogated by the police for no reason — picked up on the streets, as it were. Often, dancers would come in to practice, talking anxiously about their friends or cousins who had been taken by the police for questioning. It was very frightening.
LT: The political environment of the 1970s Civil Rights struggles in the United States, and working so intimately with Eleo, certainly grounded your work in themes about justice and the empowerment of the human spirit — issues that change democratic society. What brought you to create work on the troubles (1969 — 2000), the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland?

ED: The work I choreograph tends to develop simply because I feel so strongly about an issue that I want to make an expression about it. The content may come from a particular story, which I then strip bare to its emotional core. For example, the work *Sun Down* is based on *The Women of Troy* by Euripides. I took the approach of an ageless and universal cry against war. The art came from a humanitarian point of view and a cry for negotiation rather than aggression.

In 1972, I read a newspaper story about a young woman in Belfast who was stoned, tarred and feathered because she fell in love with a man from ‘the other side’. The barbaric actions towards this woman seemed absolutely medieval to me living in Australia, in the latter half of the twentieth century! I believe my work on human rights and anti-war produces a social comment about the present, but with ideas that are also universal. That’s why I believe the young people in Taiwan, last year, had access to *Release of an Oath* (translated into Mandarin as *Prayer*), which was originally created in 1972. They understood the basic content about power relations and oppression, as Taiwan has had its own colonial history with both Japan and China.

LT: I agree. I worked with the Taiwanese painter Chin Ming Lee in Belfast in 1999 and he was very astute about what was going on politically and culturally in Northern Ireland. We made a presentation together for a group called The Survivors of Trauma in North Belfast and tried to dialogue how some of the issues could be seen as interlinked. I am interested if you have any Irish heritage?

ED: No, but I have a strong Celtic background. My mother’s family, a Methodist family, came from Cornwall, England. On my father’s side there are Scottish and Welsh connections — one ancestor and his family moved to Australia in the mid-1800s. In 1991, I took a trip to Cornwall, England, Scotland, and Wales to explore this part of my identity.

The Northern Ireland problem is very disturbing because it is religious, and since I often work with spiritual issues in my dance, I find this aspect particularly terrible and terrifying. You can see how I work on this aspect in the ‘*Holy are You*’ section. There are three larger-than-life figures in my group vignettes. These figures are almost caricatures: a judge, a nun, a figure who embodies the Christian Cross, and dancers with money
symbols on their gowns. The dance makes a cynical comment on how power corrupts human nature but also on how the soul and spirit can never be crushed. This work opens with a lament that illustrates hardship, mistrust and injustice.

In the piece that I have been doing with your sculptural installation, the separate elements of the linen landscape are intentionally integrated into the choreography. This kind of choreography is considered highly dramatic. There is the handkerchief section, which includes waving goodbye … which is quite a traditional image. Some of the elements have a religious or a spiritual subtext: such as the bed-sheet which is a shroud and, at one point, acts like a wedding veil. And then, in the washing section we create the sense of emotionally washing away all the terrible things that war creates! The last section is a processional with three St. Veronica-like shrouds with large digitally-printed, black and white images on them.

LT: For you, environmental justice and socio-political justice issues are intertwined. As artists, we have both been influenced by the pioneering research of Gloria Feman Orenstein on the women surrealists, and one aspect of their legacy — called an eco-feminist, or feminist-matriarchic, identification. Orenstein makes the claim that this identification, together with certain key recurring imagery, is a major thread which links a canon of work by female artists. Orenstein’s 1990 book asserts that the arts are a catalyst of social change, not simply adjuncts to political activity, and that artists are healers, who can foster a live-giving culture. Orenstein states,

The ceremonial aspect of art is now understood to be potent enough to raise energy, to evoke visions, to alter states of consciousness, and to transmit vibrations, thoughts, and images that, when merged with the energy of political acts (such as the protests at the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant, the Livermore Weapons Lab, the Nevada Test Site, the women’s peace camp at the Greenham military base in England, and the Women’s Pentagon Action) can create a critical mass powerful enough to alter the energy field of the participants. The rituals enhance and augment the political actions, binding the participants together in a shared spiritual community and creating the opportunity for healing. (279)

This passage of Orenstein’s seems to reflect your artistic practice of dance and performance.

ED: Respect for nature and each other are key to our survival on the planet. This great rush towards materialism is very aggressive. If we are in partnership with the earth then we have to give up trying to be the economic materialist. The main themes that I have developed in my work over the 1960s and ’70s were about the Australian landscape about which I am
passionate, the mythology of indigenous Australia and socio-political issues — which I position in a more humanitarian, rather than political approach. Then, in the 1980s and ’90s a lot of us were exploring the New Age movement and the importance of finding one’s self identity through art and self-expression, together with the importance of the arts in a new evolving consciousness.

LT: So, you do not denigrate that movement of which many are now suspect, from the vantage point of the new millennium.

ED: No, it has been mainstreamed into popular culture and marketed in an ugly way. Yet, if you look at the seriousness of it’s prime movers — for example, Krishnamurti and his fellow Indian Philosophers and the Western interest in and re-evaluation of the ancient cultures, together with the brave work of new communities which have, indeed, lived out some social experiments, like Damanhur community in Italy — I don’t think you can denigrate it. The New Age brought more of an understanding to our politics of wanting to change the world by changing ourselves. I feel this period confirmed for me the whole previous modern art movement. Perhaps there was an ancient era before humans took up warfare … and that relates to the work of Marija Gimbutas and Gloria Orenstein of which you speak.

LT: I’d like to know more about your interest in multicultural issues.

ED: In 1987, I came back from Italy because the land here pulled me. I really wanted to come back and find my Australian voice again. Contrary to when I came back in 1963, Australia was a really exciting place to be artistically — especially in the multicultural aspect of it. Finally the Indigenous voice was being heard, and, with that, an ecological consideration of place and identity was higher on the agenda for discussion. Most of my work, since 1987, has been about intercultural collaboration and our relationship to the earth.

LT: In British Columbia, the 1970s brought a cultural renaissance of Indigenous art which started in the late 1950s. Where was Australia in that sense?

ED: I can explain the state Australia was in, in 1991, in regards to racial relations, by telling you a story about one of my classes. I encouraged students to investigate their own cultural heritages. Most of the Australian students who were Anglo-Celtic felt that they were simply, ‘Australian’ and that there was no further investigation necessary — most were unconcerned that they were Settlers. However, one had memories of her grandparents, who had fled Latvia. Then, one black student (who indicated she was German) used a personal drawing to talk about herself. She said she had no memories of her childhood, previous to the age of five … I get
goose-bumps even thinking about this young woman…. It turns out that this girl had been adopted, a Stolen Child, who perhaps didn’t even realise her Aboriginality…. The wonderful thing is that then she began her own search after that and found her Indigenous family in Australia.

LT: That the arts can help heal and bring about transformation is rewarding. The grief in the Indigenous communities, here and in Canada, is palpable. The legacy you talk of is similar in British Columbia where Indigenous children were taken and educated in Residential Schools, against their families’ wills, and a certain legacy continues today in the form of the provincial foster care system. In 1998, a Statement of Reconciliation was made by the Canadian government; infamous lawsuits have also been brought about in cases of extreme abuses and some financial support has been put in place to support community-based healing. Would you explain your background further about working with the Indigenous community in Australia?

ED: In the 1960s, I began to explore Aboriginal myths about the Australian landscape as inspiration for my choreographic work. So, I met up with Aboriginal elders, including Kath Walker/Oodgeroo Noonuccal, (1920– 1993). She used to see a lot of our ADT works. I would always ask her permission for the use of these stories as choreographic inspiration. One of her very strong remarks to me, I remember, was, ‘Elizabeth, our people should be doing it, but they are not — somebody has to do it — so please keep doing what you are doing’. She used to send me poems and stories that she wrote, asking me to choreograph them and use them in workshops. So, in that sense, I felt that part of my mission was to assist the Indigenous voice to be heard, and I realised that this could be done through the dance, on a heart level, rather than a political one.

Around the same time, in 1969, I made trips to Darwin, to meet with Aboriginal elders and dancers. In 1970, I was very fortunate to meet Sandra Holmes in Darwin, who, at the time, was personally supporting and documenting the work of a well-known Indigenous bark painter, Yirawala, from Gunwinggu tribe Western Arnhem Land. We were invited to Melville Island when there was a very important Tiwi Pukamani ceremony. Sandra asked me to help document a lot of that material. We sat with the Tiwi people and discussed the possibility of forming a dance-theatre group that could travel throughout the mainland of Australia. Yet, it seemed much too early for such a vision and it did not eventuate — this is 1969, I am talking about. But it was a wonderful and very precious opportunity for me to be in that position — sitting and talking with the elders of Melville Island, asking them what they wanted and how they wanted to go about such ideas.
The ceremony that Elizabeth Cameron Dalman would have attended would have been similar in 1969.

(Photograph: Diana Wood Cowley)
Back in Adelaide in the late 1960s, I studied informally with Charles Mountford, who has written many books about Aboriginal culture. He had his own office in the back of the Adelaide Museum. At that time, the Adelaide Museum had the artefacts collected by Mountford from the Australian American Scientific Expedition to the Arnhemland, 1949.

I was a regular student to his office — specifically for learning from him about his experiences with Indigenous communities and about his specific research.

Another researcher was Catherine Ellis, an extraordinary woman who went up into the Central South Australian desert. She recorded and notated the women’s dances and songs. She was probably one of the first white women to start such research. Catherine Ellis was attached to the School of Music in the Aboriginal Music studies department in Adelaide. So, I was informally researching and trying to make contact with Aboriginal people wherever I went. Kath Walker’s remarks gave me the strength to continue what I was doing.

LT: After your directorship of ADT you returned to Europe, and lived in Italy for about ten years. What happened after that?

ED: When I came back to Australia from Italy in the late 1980s, the Aboriginal voice was being heard. For example, The Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Skills Development Dance School and Bangarra Dance Theatre, Sydney, had been formed. In 1988 I went to the Mimili community, near Fregon in the Central desert, as an Artist-in-Residence. It was during the time of a huge Inma, where Indigenous tribes from all around came to meet, celebrate, and share dances together. We were included in many of the ceremonies and presented some of our own dances as well. There was no way I would have taken on Aboriginal themes in this period. It was just wonderful that this period marked their opportunity to express themselves.

It’s only been in this last year, 2003, upon invitation from the Ananguku community at Fregon, Central desert, that I have embarked upon a new collaboration with Indigenous issues and Indigenous artists. The Mirramu Dance Company, which I direct, just completed the first creative development stage on a work called Red Sun, Red Earth. I see this as a continuing, ongoing process of exchange in creative development where we are working as two groups, listening to each other and sharing both sides.

LT: Changing tracks now, in the mid-1980s to ’90s Vancouver Canada was feeling its identity as a place on the Pacific Rim and we had a new wave of immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Could you speak about the contemporary dancers you work with in Taiwan?
ED: In general, I try to find the common artistic threads and expressions from the different backgrounds. I search out the things that connect us together as human beings. These young dancers in Taipei are from a culture different from my own. For example, why would things in Ireland have anything to do with them? I simply changed the way I passed my information on to the dancers. I talked about things they could relate to that had had the same effect as politics in other places. That was how I worked with Release of an Oath. Because it is a highly dramatic piece, I think they had more access to it. Certain costumes really freaked them out. Of course, they had no problem with the jeans and vests, and, once they got used to the other costumes, they really embodied them!

LT: Yes, that is something I want to talk about, the use of textiles and costuming in your work.

ED: Well, for me, the human body is a very important element, and, therefore, carefully thought-out and well-designed costuming is essential. This is as much a part of the dance as the dancer — the two elements work together and complement each other, one enhances the other. The moderns, inspired by Isadora, wanted to see the line of the body. The design of the movement in the space was as important as the steps themselves.

I have always been intrigued by silk since I danced an homage to Loie Fuller — one of the early modern dance pioneers who worked in Paris, in the early 1900s. She choreographed with the actual material. Fuller was famous for her use of materials. She was also the first person in the theatre to use electric light and is remembered for the theatrical effects she created!

In researching, I found that Loie Fuller had used twenty-two metres of silk for one dance — her Serpentine Dance, 1892. So, I consulted with designer Patricia Black who made large wings for me, out of silk, based on Loie’s design. Instead of having the different coloured lights that Loie Fuller used, I used projected images on the silk, so you didn’t really see me — the audience simply sees images dancing across the space. I loved that so much that, I remember saying to myself, ‘One day, I will do a production that is all silk!’

It was many years later that the whole concept of Silk-Lake and, then, Silk, my theatre piece, happened. This was produced for The Street Theatre in Canberra, 2002. This work was based on the history of silk material, the silk worm, through the cocoon to the spinning and weaving of the silk and even the moth. Through research, I found out about how silk was taken out of China by a Chinese princess who carried the silk cocoons in her hair! In this production, I was exploring a fusion between mobius kiryuho, the Japanese art of flowing movement and contemporary western dance. In the final creation, we had sixty metres of silk hanging in the dance-theatre space! (see photo of Amanda Miller and Kyoko Sato)
Elizabeth Cameron Dalman, Mirramu Dance Company, outdoor production of Silk (Photo: Robert Guth)
Silk, Mirramu Dance Company, Amanda Miller (on chair), Kyoko Sato (seated), (Photo: Robert Guth)
In 1998, I collaborated on The Lace-maker, a solo dance for poet Kathy Kituai, at the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. This work explores a domestic interior and an inter-racial marriage. Kituai’s words speak for themselves.

*Threads*

I am the night
I am my own shadow
I am the wind

  Lifting lace curtains
  on a woman’s bedroom window—
the night
ensnared in the weaving
blackness
caught in a torn patch

bleeding
light onto a black lawn

Street lights
are white sequins
circling
as a woman circles
patterns in lace
breathing night

Sequins are cotton
woven into light
woven into dawn

woven into birds

You are a woman weaving patterns
in white cotton
You are a woman dreaming
You are the torn patch

letting the night back
into the room

(An excerpt from the beginning of The Lace-maker by Kathy Kituai.)

In your Irish Linen Memorial, the installation comes first and so I had to integrate the body with the material. The symbolism of the material then becomes a part of the choreography. A sheet, for example, can speak. To start with, I might ask, what does it arouse in us? The sheet becomes a third dancer. So, the duo actually makes a trio. We make the sheet move into a third body of the dancer in a symbolic way. That’s what makes the choreography in that work, not just the separate elements of the linen landscape but an intentionally integrated choreography.

(Photo: Creative Image Photography, Canberra)
LT: Did you alter your costuming for a different cultural context in Taiwan, when you reproduced Release of an Oath?

ED: The nun’s costume was made with more Asian tailoring and detailing, yet, for the rest of the outfits, nothing changed. Working with a costume which produces a dramatic effect may sometimes be more difficult because it requires characterisation and, therefore, you need theatre training, as well as movement training. The Taiwanese dancers were very dedicated and found the dramatic tensions needed in the work.

LT: Were there any particular challenges you encountered when working in Taiwan?

ED: The most difficult dilemma was language and my own sense of inferiority in not being able to speak it. My residency at the Taipei Artist’s Village was for two months, which is a long time to be immersed in another language. I love the symbolism of their language, but, tonally it is very difficult, unlike when I learned to speak Italian! I had a Taiwanese translator most of the time, but, of course, dance speaks across all languages. Especially, if you can speak emotionally, because this is the same wherever one goes. We had to re-title the work because Release of an Oath does not translate well in Mandarin, so we called it Prayer. The other pieces produced there, with The Taipei Tsai Jui-Yueh Foundation and The Grace Hsiao Dance Theatre, were Sun and Moon, Motherless Child (from Sundown), All My Trials (from This Train), This Train (from This Train) and segments from Leaving that was inspired by a Buddhist poem.

LT: One could compare your practice with the ‘spiritual interculturalism’ of one of your peers, contemporary visual artist, Hossein Valamanesh (also from Adelaide) whose art installations, land art and quiet ritual artworks have influenced me since I came to Australia, in 2001. Ian North, writes about Valamanesh’s work in a 2001 catalogue published for the Valamanesh retrospective by the Art Gallery of South Australia. He states,

Valamanesh has been able to move ‘in and out of cultures’ in Adelaide...as if to recognise that people from all sides are players in the formation of contemporary social identity. The last point is crucial: Anglo-Celtic artists, for example, can and must be fully imbricated as anyone else in the formation, possibilities and limitations of the global paradigm for art. Adelaide, then, is nowhere (special), yet everywhere; by the same token it is not at all to aggrandise Valamanesh to suggest that he could stand for all contemporary artists. (68)

ED: Australia is the oldest culture in the world and one of the youngest nations in the world. This happens nowhere else. In the last ten years much has
"Release of an Oath," 1972, Choreography, Elizabeth Cameron Dalman
(Photo: Jan Dalman)
changed. The Anglo-Celts are a minority now. It is important for us to find out about other cultures, the Middle East and other strong traditional cultures, as well as acknowledging the terrible history with our Indigenous peoples. I love Australia, but unless we are willing to find out more about others, we are a lame multicultural society.

LT: That is an apt dancer’s metaphor!

ED: We need to show more respect and understanding in active ways. It is easy to talk about ‘integration’ and ‘reconciliation’ but to actively participate requires much more listening and sharing. I have always believed in the potential of the arts and culture to explore and enhance the negotiation of intercultural territories.

With thanks to Elizabeth Cameron Dalman for her time in a hectic schedule. Additional thanks go to Sydney photographer/photo-archivist, Kalev Maevali, for introducing me to Elizabeth Cameron Dalman and Colin Offord, 2001.

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BEVERLEY FARMER

KNOWING ANNA
i.m. Anna Rutherford

1 Paskedag

Remember the dinner we all gathered at Anna’s for

on the Easter Sunday
Grey trees in the windows

in grey light  the snow gone  the lake loose

a hare the kids set off
on the brown fur of the bank

—whoosh! of a train—
Anna upstairs taking her time

the colours of water going lake—
deep in the table cloth

and the shimmer of wine
glasses raised  come nightfall
2 Midsummer

The last time I saw
Anna we saw the New Year in

here they had a fire sculpture
all set and ready to go

in the park down by the pier—
black water underfoot

a black lighthouse on the hill—
only this fierce icy wind

kept putting it out flare
fizzle flare

fizzle not that we minded
Give me a fog sculpture any day

Or the bonfire burning mmm?
like old times on the other shore.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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MELISSA BOYD is an Honorary Fellow in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong. In 2003 she was awarded the NSW Premier’s History Fellowship to write a biography of Mary Alice Evatt. The exhibition she curated of Mary Alice’s paintings, drawing and sculpture Mary Alice Evatt: Mas’ 1898–1973 was shown first at Bathurst Regional Art Gallery in 2002 and has since toured to various venues including Heide Museum of Modern Art in Melbourne, SH Ervin Gallery, Sydney and the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery. It will be shown at the Flinders University City Art Gallery, Adelaide in 2006.

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