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Reading, Writing and Understanding the Postcolonial

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2016

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Acknowledgements

All the words of wisdom in the world could not ever fully equip someone for the journey ahead – and so it turned out. What follows is the product not only of four years' academic work, but four years of upheaval and change in my life away from university. I want firstly to offer my thanks to Neil Lazarus for his support over the past years, for giving me confidence that my writing is important and original, and for doing so particularly when, for various other reasons, it has been difficult for him to do so. Thank you.

Thank you to the Warwick community more generally, primarily for funding my studies, but also for helping my development as a scholar. Warwick possesses an incredible spirit of research and I have been fortunate enough to be a part of it. On which note I want also to thank Warwick's Centre for Human Rights in Practice for taking me on and pushing me and my writing forward. I am a much better writer for your input. Thank you also to friends and colleagues in the English department, for your good conversation and for your all-round supportiveness. It has meant more to me than you probably realise.

Thank you once more to Abigail Ward, who can take some of the credit for me being here at all, and who has become a great – albeit a rarely seen – friend.

I want to thank my family for always being supportive and interested and proud. Thank you for homing me in emergencies, and for putting up with me more generally. It has been, for all of us, a testing few years. It means everything to me to arrive here at the end with us still intact.

Finally, thank you to Meghan, to whom I owe more than I could express. You were there with me at the beginning and you are here with me at the end. You have been patient with me, especially in the last year or so, when I have been pushing to draw everything to a close. I know that it cannot have been easy. Last time, I thanked you for being my best friend. You are still my best friend, and soon you will be my wife. I dedicate this to you.

Declaration

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the department and the course. It contains all my own work except where it contains work based on collaborative research, in which case the nature and extent of the author's individual contribution shall be indicated.

The chapter included as an appendix, 'The Indian Premier League, the Spectacle and the Illusion of a Nation,' was written as a side-project to the India section. It is published elsewhere in volume 40, issue 2 of *The Journal of Sports and Social Issues*.

Abstract

The work here seeks to revamp the way that we read, write and understand the postcolonial during an era in which the field's modishness has receded somewhat, but when its historic objectives remain. Broadly speaking, the thesis is an attempt to examine the ideas that, merged together, equate to the current geography of the postcolonial world. In the first section, I look to the production of value – and specifically, to the process of valuing cultural capital, which delivers to us an important logic: that the postcolonial world appears to us not as it really is, but how it has been written into being over time. The second section reflects upon the settler polities of Australia and South Africa, where I read the works of Archie Weller and Zakes Mda and posit the notion of an arc in their writing, a trajectory that over time sees the novel gradually recede from its engagement with the explicit discourses of colonialism and postcolonialism. Thereafter I turn to recent rise of non-fiction writing to prominence in India. Here the focus concerns the way that the Indian city has been written into the public imagination crudely, as an apparently reasonable synecdoche of all Indian life. I explore the way that the visible spectacle has come to stand at the zenith of representational forms, with the corollary that the written word has lost something of its authority. I introduce recent works of non-fiction that seek to respond to these simplified projections by literarily occupying small-scale Indian spaces: Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* and Amit Chaudhuri's *Calcutta: Two Years in the City*. In the final section, I argue for revamped postcolonial reading strategies that are better able to reflect the concrete worlds that literary texts address. I encourage a wider and indiscriminate constellation of non-white British literatures, before offering individual readings of Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*.

Introduction

I want to begin here with a personal reflection about my entry into the field of postcolonial studies in the mid-2000s, not out of some solipsism or self-indulgence, but because I feel it serves as a useful anecdote about the burgeoning and hemorrhaging of the field as an academic discipline around the turn of the century. My sense in short is that, for a host of reasons – some unavoidable – what we might think of as the activist dimension of postcolonial studies has been less potent than it might be. If I can make clear at this early stage both my own position within the field, professionally and discursively, and also how I came to arrive there, it will better explain the thrust of the views that follow. The course I opted for at Nottingham Trent University in autumn 2006 began quite unsurprisingly with an exploration of post-Windrush literature; unsurprising because, quite in keeping with a perhaps characteristically British inclination towards epochalism, the arrival of 492 migrants at Tilbury Docks in 1948 marked an irrefutable and irreversible shift in the direction of the British empire. The likes of Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Nichols, Caryl Philips, David Dabydeen and Derek Walcott all featured heavily on the syllabus, while James Procter's anthology, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998* (2000), was a mainstay, and seemed to provide an accessible cache of ideas about what it meant to "do postcolonial literature". In his introduction, Procter writes, 'As *Writing Black Britain* works to remember what is a seriously under-historicised field of inquiry, it inevitably *re-members*, or re-organises it'.¹ Of course, I remember coming to think, postcolonial writing is not just concerned with history: it automatically comes to stand as history in its own right. Selvon's

¹ James Procter (ed), *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 2.

characteristic lilt was archetypal; Walcott's and Dabydeen's subversive treatment of the English literary canon felt like an indomitable literary blueprint; and later, when I finally read it, Rushdie's triumphant literary *mélange* was incredibly seductive. The bellicose rhetoric of Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon, meanwhile, which provided a revolutionary frame against which the novelists were read, was rousing. The more advanced courses in the following years took in writing from sub-Saharan Africa – Coetzee, Ngugi and Achebe, of course, and new, exhilarating texts by the likes of Zoe Wicomb – as well as what I might be tempted to call Caribbean identity literature, or simply non-white literature, in the shape of Merle Hodge and Edwidge Danticat.

Wicomb, though, in particular, struck me deeply. Given the wider theoretical and socio-historical contexts the course had introduced – historical readings of the post-war dissolution of European colonies, scholarly interpretations of the triumphant but decidedly problematic emergence of non-white writing, the gradual but determined unpicking of the West's cultural superiority by canny and innovative novelists from the former colonies, and the tangible sense, by the 1990s, firmly rendered in fictional narratives and in the addresses of the lecturers themselves, that postcolonialism was a much more complicated beast than its name suggested – given all that, a text like Wicomb's *David's Story* (2001) felt to me like some great literary epiphany. With the benefit of hindsight, I realise now quite how equally brilliant and dangerous the South African author's novel is to the literary scholar. A convoluted and stiflingly self-reflexive narrative about a writer apparently unable to do justice to her subject's story because of the burdensome weight of expectation she feels on her own writing, *David's Story* pronounces the death of the literary narrative at every turn, and does so in a way that anticipates a new understanding of History all told. Arguing with each other at one moment midway through the book, the narrator and her subject, the eponymous David, are at loggerheads about the most fitting way to write the story of Dulcie, David's mysterious military colleague, into the narrative. The narrator recounts the pair's disagreement: 'I suppose, David confesses,

that I don't see the need to flesh her out with detail, especially the kind invented by you. You see, she's not like anyone else; one could never, for instance, say that she's young or old or middle-aged. I think of her more as a kind of – and he has the decency to hesitate before such a preposterous idea – a kind of scream echoing through my story.

A scream, I laugh, a scream? You won't get away with abstracting her. Besides, Dulcie is the very mistress of endurance and control. Dulcie knows that there is only a point to

screaming if you can imagine someone coming to your rescue; that a scream is an appeal to a world of order and justice – and there is no such order to which she can appeal.

And since when do you know so much about her? he asks.

David knows nothing of the art of inferencing, or perhaps he doesn't realise how much he has told me, even if it is somewhat opaque. Because of his inability to speak of her, he has promised to make notes on Dulcie. Writing things down, I suggested, would clarify what it is you want to say, bring to the surface things that you have not thought important, or simply have not remembered.

You mean, he retorted, make up a story, invent things.²

The sensation of reading the book makes one feel as though it is not only the narrator who resembles a dog chasing its own tail, but readers too; and it leaves one seriously questioning the utility of any writing. In the passage above it is impossible to locate a centre to the story, for the narrative is so self-referential. Every utterance the narrator makes is a nail in her own coffin. What a masterstroke it is, one thinks, upon reading those final words of hers: 'My screen is in shards. The words escape me. I do not acknowledge this scrambled thing as mine. I will have nothing more to do with it. I wash my hands of this story.' (p. 213) Wicomb provides a compelling commentary on the complex politics of contemporary representation by appearing to throw her own narrator's labour to the wolves. That the novel ends by renouncing its own narrative, then, despite the fact that in doing so it appears to have told the most important story of all, seemed to me, the eager undergraduate, ground-breaking.

I suggested above that the novel is a dangerous document in the hands of the literary critic or scholar, by which I mean that its shape is so easily made paradigmatic. It seems to say to the reader, what could you possibly hope to achieve by reading this? One gets a similar sensation when reading the self-conscious memory narratives of, say, Kazuo Ishiguro or Breyten Breytenbach, in the sense that those two authors also draw attention to the fallibilities of literary or spoken testimonies. 'All art is artificial,' Breytenbach writes in his autobiographical *A Season in Paradise* (1980). 'Writing cannot be a direct means of communication. Writing comes between and hampers saying and hearing (or understanding.)'³ This, of course, appears in a book that is very consciously a writing of a highly volatile South Africa of the 1970s. On undergraduate reading lists, where these texts like Wicomb's are placed alongside greater historical contexts – here, of course, within the framework of the immediate post-apartheid

² Zoe Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001).

³ Breyten Breytenbach, *A Season in Paradise*, trans. by Rike Vaughan (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p.168.

era – there is perhaps an overinflated significance bestowed upon the novel, not because the novelist would wish for this, but for the much simpler fact that the rhetoric of postcolonial literature, in some of its fictions and in some of its theoretical projects, resembles a discrete and readable textual landscape that could quite easily become self-perpetuating – quite removed from the real-world developments that it seeks to respond to.

By some reckoning, and as I see it, that is precisely what began to happen in some of the scholarship around postcolonial literary studies and in some of its teaching. In the case of *David's Story*, the narrative concern with representation runs in tandem with the delicate industry of identity production, the prospects and the pitfalls of transitory literary narratives in the years after apartheid. The book's textual fluidity and self-reflexivity is its *coup de grace*. As Andrew Smith puts it in his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (2004), though, 'there is a sense in some later postcolonial theory that [the] concern with representations – with story or text – has swallowed up any interest in the world that is being represented.'⁴ Indeed, the thrust of Smith's consideration here, which makes the case against the sanitising of postcolonial studies scholarship, and which offers a similar line to that of multiple academics during the past decade or so, is something of a cornerstone of the thesis that follows.

II • The Case of Zoe Wicomb

Before continuing, then, allow me to explain the nature of my discontent by furnishing my position with an example, for it is not enough to make generalising comments about the limitations of a branch of scholarly work, just as it would be imprudent to do so without making clear how exactly, to my own mind, things might have been, or could be, done differently. Let me continue to take the scholarly discussion around Zoe Wicomb's writing as a focal point. The author's post-apartheid writing – that is, her fictional work published since *David's Story* at the turn of the century – responds with aplomb to the sheer

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 257.

complexity of contemporary South African socio-cultural politics. Engaging with the conversation around the contrarities of history-making and identity, she manages to stage narratives that both create and destroy histories and identities; in response to the widely perceived limitations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) ethos of restoration through documentation, she nimbly and imaginatively asks probing questions of the nature of representation itself by writing, to echo the narrator of *David's Story's* words, texts that delete themselves (*DS*, p. 212).

Now, one must acknowledge the way that the rhetorical and selective textual landscape of the TRC and its reports came to dominate debates around the representation of trauma, conflict and history by the late 1990s, in South Africa and later beyond it. Questions were raised in droves, by novelists, scholars and commentators alike about what could, should and would be "represented" in the post-apartheid era. This begins to explain the preponderance of such themes in the works of not only Wicomb, but in other South Africans' writing: in Antjie Krog's TRC writing, J.M Coetzee's autobiographical work, Yvette Christianse's *Unconfessed* (2006) and so on. In turn, it might suggest something of the portability of the thematic concerns of postcolonial writing when one considers how similar tropes concerning the unreliability and unrepresentability of histories appear much further afield in the likes of, say, Bernadine Evaristo, Peter Carey, Tariq Ali and so on, which is not to suggest a South African origin for the trope, but merely to comment on the passage of postcolonial leitmotifs.⁵ It also explains the wave of scholars who later read these fictional texts and theorised the silences within them, interrogated the utterances the narratives could not give voice to.⁶ 'Dulcie ... must sacrifice both her voice and her sexuality in order to be part of a liberation movement,' writes Keith Tate of *David's Story*, in what is a somewhat typical response to the novel. 'She is never fully articulated in the novel,' he goes on, 'but her importance in David's life and to the movement is

⁵ See Bernadine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001); Peter Carey, *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

⁶ See Rosalind C. Morris, 'In the Name of Trauma: Notes on Testimony, Truth Telling and the Secret of Literature in South Africa', *Comparative Literary Studies*, 48:3 (2011), 388-416; Shane Graham, "'This Text Deletes Itself': Traumatic Memory and Space-Time in Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*", *Studies in the Novel*, 40:1/2 (2008), 127-145; Aryn Bartley, 'The Violence of the Present: *David's Story* and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Comparative Literary Studies*, 46:1 (2009), 103-124.

incalculable. The gaps in Dulcie's story cannot be read as negative subtextually laden space but as peaks highlighting a vast landscape of representational issues.⁷

However, my sense is that the inadequacies of the TRC ethos of reconciliation through documentation and testimony came to dominate discussions of South African literature to the extent that disproportionate attention was given to what text could not say. Consequently, it was almost as though the battle to take stock of modern South Africa and its literary output was a battle waged overwhelmingly on an ideological footing, resulting ultimately in the aestheticization and institutionalization of literature's always inevitable incompleteness. In other words, the post-apartheid novel *par excellence* seemed at times to be the one that managed to say nothing at all.⁸ True, *David's Story* makes a bold statement concerning the always violent, partial and unreflective writing of history, and it niftily inserts into its narrative visible absences, like glaring elephants in the room, which continually draw attention to the dearth of marginal and doubly marginal voices in the history of the apartheid struggle. Nevertheless, how many times, and in how many different ways, do we need it pointing out that Dulcie, David's assassinated guerilla comrade, cannot be represented in the novel? I find this fact obvious enough in the text itself, and it seems to me more important to consider what Dulcie does say *despite* her silence rather than what she cannot say *because* of it, in and beyond the novel. Otherwise, to my mind, studying the novel becomes an exercise limited to only meager postmodernesque observations about the unsuitability of written narratives.

My point is this: Dulcie becomes as deliberate and as obvious a metaphor as one could wish to see – a blatant rhetorical device through whom the narrator tries to inscribe an account of female involvement into the story of the apartheid struggle. What this tactic arrives at, though, is not the conclusion simply that Dulcie is a 'screaming silence'. Dorothy Driver sums up the story of Dulcie aptly in the afterword to the first edition of the novel when she writes:

⁷ Keith Tate, 'Zoë Wicomb and an Examination of Representation and Femininity in *David's Story*', 365 *Postcolonial Theory and Literature*. Online.

⁸ See Breyten Breytenbach, *Dog Heart* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (London: Vintage, 1999); Ivan Vladislavic, *The Folly* (London: Serif, 1994); Elleke Boehmer, *Bloodlines* (Claremont, RSA: David Philip, 2000).

Dulcie's is the unwritten, pressing story of our times. Dulcie's story is a story of what has not yet been said about violence and betrayal, political commitment and love, about writing and representation and truth... The notion of the unrepresentable, so fashionable a concept in postmodern and postcolonial debate, is deconstructed in Wicomb's text: it is given a historical context and a political force. (p. 232)

In crude terms, then, what is added to Driver's original comments by Minesh Dass, a decade later on, when for sixteen pages he draws conclusions almost indistinguishable from the earlier writer's? 'The only story [Dulcie's] body will tell, does tell by refusing to move, is the story of her silence,' Dass writes.⁹ And later: 'All texts that speak of silence (but necessarily do not speak silence) are in actual fact speaking of the moment at which speech and history become possible... Thus *David's Story* interrogates not just the past, but also the silence that enables us to think and write the past'¹⁰ In and of itself, I find nothing amiss here, for Wicomb is indeed making the point that the documenting of silence serves in the novel as an enabling and locating device, not unlike the way that a signpost points to a landscape from a distance away without ever being part of it. However, to my mind, Dass does not go on with any great conviction to add anything new to the discussion; which is not to suggest that the linguistic landscape of the text does not warrant ongoing study – such as he attempts to provide. It is simply to suggest that a discussion such as this should surely take us beyond the sort of claims that Wicomb makes in her own words at the opening of the novel itself: 'This is and is not David's story.' (p. 1)

I find that Dass is not alone in this somewhat, to put it bluntly, *uncommitted* brand of literary studies scholarship. When Ludmila Ommundsen reaches the conclusion of her 2010 study of Wicomb's follow-up novel, *Playing in the Light* (2006), it is a little disappointing to find that her conclusions have something of an anodyne ring to them. Given that the very title of the novel largely makes clear the figurative thrust of its narrative – which is concerned with the family history of a South African woman whose parents feigned whiteness in order to avoid the apartheid-era recriminations of living under the designation "coloured" – it seems rather uninspiring that Ommundsen, drawing finally upon the words of Homi Bhabha, suggests only that:

⁹ Minesh Dass, "'Amanuensis' and 'Steatopygia': The Complexity of 'Telling the Tale' in Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*", *English in Africa*, 38:2 (2011), 45-60 (p. 51).

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

Wicomb has constructed a narrative of Colouredness conveying a sympathetic understanding of the dramatic condition of the Coloured as inescapably social beings, shaped by their own actions which, in turn, are shaped by the pressures of the society in which they live and its history. She has depicted 'the borderline existence' of the coloured, 'a hybridity, a difference "within," a subject that inhabits the rim of an "In-between" reality.'¹¹

Again, it is not an unfitting suggestion to make. Nor does it miss the mark when Ommundsen suggests that: 'Conciliation and reconciliation, merging and mixing, associating and dissociating: there are no fixed rules for finding one's way in life.'¹² True enough, the protagonist of the novel in many ways stands representative of South Africa's heterogenous "in between generation" of the 1990s and after – those who, in Ommundsen's words, experience a 'crisis of seeing'¹³ caused by the rupture that accompanied end apartheid. Yet I find the author's claims rely too heavily on a critical looseness that the notion of so-called "in-betweenness" affords. It is a landscape of metaphors that Ommundsen seems to want to inhabit. What of Wicomb's rendering of white guilt, though? What of the various politics of colouredness in the novel? How do the underhand and abstruse relationships between Wicomb's mixed cast of characters demonstrate that the past dishonesty of "playing in the light" indelibly marks the present?

How and why might we go about reading Wicomb differently, though? Let me very fleetingly offer an alternate avenue for discussing that most pressing of theoretical concerns in *David's Story*: Dulcie. Contrary to the belief that she is always inevitably an ephemeral and notional device, I find that Dulcie is actually an articulate disruption to the male-centred narrative of the apartheid struggle in the sense that, even in her silence and in her death, she works to derail the notion of male soldiers as protectors during times of conflict. Meanwhile, she is a clear and uncomplicated symbol of continued and manifest gender violence in the years following apartheid. When the narrator acts as mouthpiece for Dulcie, documenting the torture she sustains at the hands of her male comrades, the former is both shedding light on an often overlooked aspect of the struggle – that is, the torture tactics that took place within the armed wing of the African

¹¹ Ludmilla Ommundsen, "'Once I Was White, Now I Am Coloured': Outside the Dark Closet and Through the Looking-Glass in Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*", *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 11:2 (2010), 85-98 (p.95).

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 96.

National Congress – as well as committing a latent and unavoidable violence of her own on modern South African women’s bodies, simply through the doomed act of trying to write Dulcie at all. ‘She will not ask for an explanation,’ the narrator puts it, ‘[she] will not protest, since they can offer only lies. She has done nothing less than her duty, nothing less than fighting for freedom and justice – even though these words have now become difficult. That too, then, is why she cannot speak.’ (p. 179) We are not to read Dulcie in a way that only confirms the lack of a female perspective in the apartheid struggle; instead, we are to see that her resistance to textual strategies holds a contemporary significance. That is, the physical violence committed against women during the apartheid years leads to a discursive violence that continues much later, and it is a violence that not only prevents writing back to an historic female presence, but also foils attempts to write the modern South African woman. As Meg Samuelson has put it tellingly elsewhere, we might observe Dulcie’s ‘refusal to assent to the domesticity into which previously militant women, such as David’s wife, Sally, have been subsumed during a postwar backlash against women that aims to restore the gendered division of spheres partially disrupted by the liberation struggle.’¹⁴ Accordingly, in a line of inquiry that gets at the heart of what *is* accomplished by the narrator in the novel, Samuelson reads the narrator’s account as ‘[a] form of violence on a woman’s sense of self.’¹⁵

III • Critical Strategies

It is not my aim, neither here nor in the thesis that follows, to bemoan the state of postcolonial studies by the mid-2000s, particularly not retroactively – that would seem a counterintuitive enterprise. Nonetheless, the overall shape of the field is important to what is written hereafter, not least because my research has sought to respond somewhat to comments, like those made further above by Smith, which have encouraged a different type of literary criticism. To my mind, there are structural and natural reasons that the postcolonial in an academic capacity

¹⁴ Meg Samuelson, ‘The Disfigured Body of the Female Guerrilla: (De) Militarization, Sexual Violence, and Redomestication in Zoe Wicomb’s *David’s Story*’, *Signs*, 32:4 (2007), 833-856 (p. 850).

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 851.

has come to resemble something that is paradoxically both wider and narrower than its name indicates. This is to note that the remit of postcolonial studies is much broader than its designation suggests and that important work continues to be enacted in its spirit, if not always in its name; but that the self-reflexive preoccupation with the field's own parameters, in certain circles, has somewhat limited the way it has been represented at a wider level – with deleterious and unhelpful consequences to public discussions, in some political arenas, and to academic courses.

The generation of scholars whose introduction into the field has been made possible as undergraduate students in British universities since the late 1990s, has been nurtured on a diet of intellectual material that does not – and, to some degree, cannot – reflect the vastness of the work being undertaken across the much broader remit of postcolonial studies. Historically, the structure of the university has not necessarily lent itself to the sort of literary studies teaching and scholarship that would also fully account for, say, the anthropological, economic, social and dimensions of postcolonial literature. This is in many cases simply a logistical obstacle. Although my belief is that this is changing with the emergence of some important interdisciplinary research collectives. In Britain, the Northern Postcolonial Studies Network, based is a good example of this, as is the Postcolonial Speakers Series, which operates out of Nottingham Trent. At a continental level, the Postcolonial Studies Initiative at Utrecht University, for example, regards itself as a platform for the *application* of postcolonial thinking in Europe, and has produced some hugely helpful theoretical and anthropological work in recent years relating to migration into the continent. And, as the editors of *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* pointed out in 2005, that collection's essays show how scholars have also '[forged] ahead into some vital if nascent areas for postcolonial research: media studies, environmental studies, religious studies, linguistic and semantic analysis, auto-ethnography, and the sociology of global cinema'.¹⁶ However, my point is that literary studies courses cannot feasibly cover the ground required to fully explain the intricacy of the field and its embeddedness within wider discursive landscapes. Because of this, I argue, postcolonial studies is often presented, or is at least understood occasionally, in a

¹⁶ Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaur, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Etsy (eds), *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1-38 (p. 5).

way that does not make visible the full range of work carried out in its original spirit. Which is to note, in other words, that while new and important work continues to be undertaken, and while the discovery of older anti-colonial work continues to help define the parameters of the field even now, the outward face of postcolonial studies as a discrete academic discipline sometimes appears narrower than it should.

While I have suggested that there are valid impediments to the structuring of postcolonial studies, there are those who lay some of the responsibility at the door of fellow academics for willfully overlooking the field's human dimension. Benita Parry, much like Lazarus, writes of the way that 'an indifference to social explanation'¹⁷ has come to blight some English and Cultural Studies faculties, which is a comment on the overly cultural and textual understanding of the field. In addition to this academic dimension, there would seem to be a consensus that the persistence of imperialism in new guises continues to be underestimated. Without acknowledgement of this, the thrust of the field is blunted. In his contribution *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, David Scott suggests the ways in which the critical impulse of the field has been somewhat lost, in places at least, because of its normalizing. 'In my view,' Scott suggests,

A critical strategy – which comprehends, among other features, the kinds of questions taken up and pursued, the target confronted and engaged, and the stakes claimed – is a historical formation inasmuch as it is always assembled and set to work within a distinctive conceptual and ideological conjecture or problem space. A critical strategy, in other words, always answers (however adequate this is judged to be) a discursively constituted demand. In my view, therefore, it is always important for a critic to inquire, at any given conjecture, into the ways in which a critical strategy conceives its demands, its ends, its yield, and its limits – how it conceives the operational field, so to put it, of its practical action. In particular, however, I am interested in that moment in the life of a strategy at which is solidifies and hardens into a disciplined and cumulative research apparatus; this is the moment at which, having arrived at a sort of plateau of maturity, it begins to slide from criticism toward method, or in Thomas Kuhn's memorable idiom, from a revolutionary paradigm toward a normal one.¹⁸

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¹⁷ Benita Parry, 'The Institutionalization of Postcolonial Studies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 66-80 (p. 74).

¹⁸ David Scott, 'The Social Construction of Postcolonial Studies', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, pp. 385-400 (pp. 385-386).

IV • Outline

With Scott's words from above in mind, then, I should expand upon my own critical strategy. To a degree, this thesis heralds an attempt to read beyond the rhetoric of the postcolonialism that I (perhaps unavoidably) first encountered in the mid-2000s. It is an attempt to avoid what my own mentor Neil Lazarus has elsewhere termed the 'unwarranted determinism'¹⁹ of postcolonial studies scholarship, which is to comment that I have wanted to draw new connections between literary texts, to read atypical or under-explored texts, not with the intention of, shall we say, *arguing the postcoloniality* of them, but in the hope of seeing what sway the discourse of postcolonial studies has had on their production, reception and understanding. Broadly, then, I am interested in the different ways that we might – rather than the ways that we *have*, or *must* – read, write and understand the postcolonial. Accordingly, I started out my research first and foremost with the grand aim of being exploratory, beginning with only a loose and preliminary trajectory – in this case, a study of the different literary outputs of, respectively, the settler state, the formerly occupied colony and the colonial metropole itself. It was intended as a triangle of sorts: on one side, with the novel as it has emerged in the settler states of Australia and South Africa; on another, with non-fiction writing arising from contemporary India; and, finally, with contemporary non-white writing from Britain. This perhaps begins to explain the breadth and the rationale of what follows.

In the first chapter, by following in the footsteps of Arjun Appadurai's and Pierre Bordieu's work on value, I look to the establishment of a sort of standardising of literary value in the geography of the so-called postcolonial world – and, specifically, to the process of literary texts' investment with a manner of cultural capital. This involves firstly addressing the power that is exercised in producing that postcolonial geography, the acknowledgement of which delivers to us an important logic: that the world appears to us not as it really is, but reflects the way that it has been written into being over time, scholarly, politically, culturally and so on. More than that, the power structuring this geography is resolutely embedded, even as the rift between it and its

¹⁹ Neil Lazarus (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, p. 5.

accompanying reality is steadily widened amid wider historical developments. The fact that the stubbornness of a discourse is maintained pertains to the fact that discourses not only structure geographies, but also keep in place these systems of value and valuation. Meaning this: objects, ideas, knowledge and so on, within a postcolonial geography, are always inevitably placed within the boundaries of a value system that has been created in its own name. In turn, the chapter introduces into the debate the question of literary texts, which we as literary critics would want to invest with social values – that is, as though the novel holds, however diversely from one text to the next, a sense of social didacticism – but which can often be understood on different terms, almost as though these were objects valued according to prevailing tastes and trends. This chapter sets up an important theoretical argument in what follows, for it makes the claim that texts in postcolonial geographies stage, or are made to stage, unbecoming versions of historical realities.

The consideration of the cleave between material and textual world is taken up again in the second chapter, where the thesis attends to the place of the novel with two specific postcolonial geographies: South Africa and Australia. It reflects upon the negotiation of the relationship between the literary text and the specific politics of the postcolony, here in terms of the settler politics of Australia and South Africa, both of which have in recent decades attempted to embed a rhetoric of multicultural citizenship into social life. Through an exploration of the fictional works of Archie Weller and Zakes Mda, the chapter posits the notion of an arc: a trajectory that can be discerned over time and which sees the writers' novel gradually recede from their engagement with the explicit discourses of colonialism and postcolonialism. The way I see it, texts such as these do not necessarily engage with the *bona fide* politics of their chosen literary locales, but instead tap into, and critique, postcolonial liberation narratives. Which is to say that, through Weller and Mda, one might trace the development of postcolonial Australia or South African in a way that illuminates the ideological, rather than literal, state of the nation. At the end point of the arc, so I argue, while the politics of the postcolony are still defined by issues of difference, domination, injustice and so on – a series of concerns that have been the mainstay of writing during the period – the wedlock between the writers'

novels and postcolonial discourse itself *can be seen* to have been renegotiated. This chapter engages in the debate concerning the value of literary texts in what some have termed an unequal world literary space. In such a space, literatures of the centre (Euro-American texts, for example), those whose high value is assigned automatically on the basis of their closeness to that perceived centre, are privileged over those literatures of the periphery (any other texts) whose values, by contrast, are predetermined by their relative distance. I assess the way in which both writers, Weller and Mda, have responded over time to the inequity of this literary model, not necessarily by directly addressing that centre, but by developing an independent aesthetic of their own. This chapter is focused overwhelmingly on the sway of anti-colonial discourses and the way in which novelists have battled discursively with them, almost separately at times from the political and cultural conflicts being waged beyond the world of the novel.

Beyond this, the thesis turns to the matter of non-fiction writing and its recent rise to prominence in India. I find the emergence of this branch of predominantly privileged Anglophone writing curious, particularly for the way that these texts appear to challenge what Brennan has elsewhere called the ‘epical dimension’²⁰ of cosmopolitan postcolonial writing, instead favouring more ephemeral and less grand literary narratives. The chapter concerns the way in which the Indian city has been written into the public imagination crudely, as an apparently reasonable synecdoche of all Indian life. In the first part of the chapter, I explore the way that the visible spectacle has come to stand at the zenith of representational forms, with the corollary that the written word has lost something of its authority. In what I read as a manner of neo-imperialist enterprise, I suggest that the modern Indian metropolis has been framed in images that reduce its complexity to simple, oppositional clichés: spaces of rich and poor, danger and opportunity, modernity and backwardness. Following this, I introduce recent works of non-fiction by several expatriate or overseas writers that ostensibly seek to respond to these simplified projections by literarily occupying small-scale Indian spaces; in other words, by acknowledging the depreciated value of the word and writing as a more immediate pursuit, in an attempt at what I call live archiving. The chapter focuses its attention on three works: Katherine Boo’s

²⁰ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 38.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Bombay Slum (2012), Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) and Amit Chaudhuri's *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). In the case of the former two, my argument runs that Boo and Mehta attempt to give themselves over to the powerful current of Bombay life, writing the details of the respective itineraries that come as a consequence, and in doing so stage their own modest challenges to the totalising views of the city. In both cases, the writers' own degree of privilege is a significant impediment to the types of lenses they are able to employ; but, accordingly, both writers seem to acknowledge their position as part of conscious narrative strategies. Chaudhuri's effort, meanwhile, is a more problematic inhabitation of Calcutta. His two-year sojourn in the Bengali capital is driven in part, it seems, by a desire to recuperate a lost sense of Bengali modernity. Yet his position, as a travelled, middle-class academic, ultimately prohibits him from engaging socially with the space, and it duly quashes the possibility of writing the city beyond his own sphere of privilege. In fact, this strand of Indian writing more generally is somewhat problematic for the way that it interacts with the space it represents. Again, though, there is a sense that the writers are responding to a twofold fact: the unreflective presentation of an intensely changed (or changing) Indian space and the changed position of writing in relation to an equally intensified Indian *time*.

The final section of the thesis returns to the question of valuing literary texts. It addresses the way in which habitual postcolonial reading strategies have in some cases had the unfortunate consequence of undermining the social value of literature. In the first place, I explore the development of a reservoir of signs and slogans that have come to direct some of the critical work undertaken in the name of postcolonial literary studies, before positing that a different approach is required, wherein not only a different language is necessary, but also a new way of selecting texts for study. Following this, I undertake three reading exercises. The first responds to the narrow canonisation of postcolonial literature by suggesting new methods of negotiating a way through the field. It argues for asking different questions of literary texts, thus opening them up to debates better suited to establishing contact between them and the social lives they speak to. Second, I undertake a reading of Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue* (2006), a novel that

has received scant attention in the near-decade since its publication; possibly, I suggest, because of its disparity with the author's debut, *Brick Lane* (2001). This chapter speaks to the need to acknowledge the singularity of literary texts, particularly in order that we avoid reading what is absent rather than what is present. Inasmuch, I read *Alentejo Blue* as a text that raises important questions about contemporary belonging, questions that have, to date, not necessarily provided the answers they might have done. In the final part, I undertake what is best thought of as a restorative reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). As a novelist, Ishiguro has been read through various schematic lenses, only a few of which, I argue, have been particularly helpful to our understanding of his work's place in the field. Given that Ishiguro often appears to mislead readers in his novels, I push for a more responsible way of reading him, a method wherein our knowledge of familiar literary symbols and landscapes is shelved in the process, so as to permit the emergence of a new critical toolkit. This section, and indeed the whole thesis, proceeds upon a number of straightforward assumptions: firstly, that postcolonial literary studies encompasses a vast geography and is thus open to the inclusion of an equally vast number of literatures; secondly, that the motive at the heart of the field is not, and rightly should not be, any different to its initial aims three decades or more ago; and that, simply, the tools of the postcolonialist's trade are in need of a substantial revamping in order that subsequent critical work retains its value.

Reading, Writing and Understanding the Postcolonial is an attempt to examine contemporary landscapes, texts, objects and ideas that all bear the markings of colonial pasts and imperial presents. Like much of the work enacted under the broad remit of postcolonial literary studies, it seeks to interrogate the links between the discursive landscapes of texts and the solid environments they respond to. Yet it does so with a hope of resisting the temptation to anticipate those links. Thematically, then, its breadth and the scale of its ambition are to be read hopefully not as a reflection of any oversight, but as a telling commentary on the vastness and the complexity of the geography of the postcolonial world – and how it has been read, written and understood.

CHAPTER ONE

The Politics of Value and Postcolonial Literature

I • The World as a Map

Let us turn to the matter of regulating space and time. That is, the idea that discursive acts – strategic, unintentional or otherwise – may come to pass for legitimate markers of spatiality and temporality. Sir George Airy's 1851 establishment of the Greenwich Meridian, for instance, in a roundabout way made the profoundest of declarations that time began and ended in imperial London. That splitting of the globe into Eastern and Western hemispheres in those exact cardinal terms, divisible along a line running longitudinally through the heart of Europe, has had incalculable ramifications geographically, politically and militarily. Equally, consider the inclination of imperial mapmakers to place themselves literally at the centre of the world. 'This is the omphalos syndrome,' writes Jonathan R. Barton, 'where ethnocentricity leads to mapping outwards from the navel (omphalos) or centre of the world, regarded by the ethnic group as its own perceived centre, not a geometric or arithmetic one.'¹ As much as what I am discussing here also calls to mind specific ramifications of imperial-era instances of geo-political strategising, such as, say, the drawing of the Radcliffe Line or the Sykes-Picot Agreement – in short, two examples in a whole gamut of colonial cartographies – I am gesturing more towards what we might think of as the wording of the world. Specifically, I am referring to how master narratives have been constructed out of initially piecemeal declarations, but have come to act over time as functioning regimes of knowledge, reservoirs of intelligence

¹ Jonathan R. Barton, *A Political Geography of Latin America* (Florence, KY: Psychology Press, 1997), p. 40.

invested with value. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, a number of literary usages of the term “Middle East” – by General T.E. Gordon and Captain A.T. Mahan² – effectively wrote into existence whole swathes of territory under a particular term (in the same way, of course, that the propagation of its precursor, the Far East, had done). ‘It may be assumed that the most sensitive part of our external policy in the Middle East,’ Gordon had written in a 1900 text, ‘is the preservation of the independence and integrity of Persia and Afghanistan.’³ Two years later, apparently unaware of Gordon’s usage, Mahan writes: ‘The Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day have its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar...’⁴ We might of course speak of the term’s contemporary obsolescence as an accurate geo-political marker, but I would argue that it is impossible to disavow its enduring coherence *as a term*. Who is to comment on what bearing the very wording of the world along an East-West axis – that divisive geography – has had upon contemporary socio-politics? To what degree can it be said to have fuelled the fire in the so-called War on Terror, for instance? (While we are on this, there is something significant about the fact that, in 2013, when so-called Islamic militants decapitated a British serviceman, seemingly in an act of revolt against “Western” forces’ presence in Iraq and Afghanistan⁵, the killers did so only a short distance from Sir George Airy’s line of origin at Greenwich. The ideology of the West had apparently been reconnected with a physical geography at source.)

My point here, then, is not concerned necessarily with the insouciant imperialist labelling of the world with terms like “The Middle East”, “The Orient” or “The Third World” (or their more contemporary equivalents: “The Developing World”, “The Global South” and so on). Nor am I taking issue with the wider historical habit of imperial force to position itself at the centre of things. Instead, I am referring to what we might think of as the creation of the world in hand strokes – the unavoidable seduction of words inducted into a

² See Clayton R. Koppes, ‘Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term “Middle East”’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 12:1 (1976), 95-98.

³ Cited in Koppes, p. 96.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵ Fusilier Lee Rigby was attacked in May 2013 near to his barracks in Woolwich, London. Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale attacked Rigby by first driving into him and then decapitating him at the roadside. ‘The only reason we have killed this man today is because Muslims are dying daily by British soldiers,’ one of the attackers announced to a bystander who captured the footage on a mobile phone.

canon of “world history” and the lofty value invested in them, along with the fallacious credibility granted to the lines drawn by cartographers. Thus, I am not writing of the world in its literal dimension, but as a parallel world entirely: the world *as we know it*: an entity that has been narrativised. In the middle of this, I am most interested in one’s seemingly mandatory acquiescence to these regimes of knowledge. To point out this sense of unavoidable compliance is not to speak only to the power resident within its discourse, but to the fact also of one’s seemingly inherent predisposition toward explanatory geographies. In other words, I am thinking of our innate desire to form landscapes underwritten by coherent narratives, patterns, boundaries and so on. Let me provide an example. We can claim with a degree of authority that U.S incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq in the last decade or so (alongside notable allied forces), have relied upon the political upkeep of an explanatory geography wherein most of the geography southeast of Turkey, north of Saudi Arabia and west of Pakistan has been deemed threatening and suitable for intervention. (This excludes, of course, the awkwardly placed Israel.) Such would explain the downplaying of civilian casualties following air strikes in Syria and Iraq, and also the low profile given to the poor human rights record of Saudi Arabia, a key U.S ally. Anything that threatens to unravel the geography is kept quiet, and *vice versa*. Incidentally, what becomes the fate of those civilians who must live amidst the desolation that follows these military interventions? They become inducted into a separate geography altogether: a humanitarian geography: a space kept apart from its geopolitical counterpart. Fear and sympathy cannot exist in the same place, it seems.

That the presentation of landscapes in this way offers only certain versions of the truest picture – of which there could feasibly be infinitely more (none of which could ever perfectly reflect the real world, of course) – is not really the point. This is what efforts to order landscapes have historically amounted to, and will continue to amount to: finding ways to explain geography in holistic, systematic and taxonomic terms, always favourable to preordained agendas. Hence where this chapter now turns, to the piecemeal construction, in academia, of a postcolonial and global cartography.

* * *

II • Knowledge and Value in Literary Space

There has been a call issued in the field of anthropology for a greater acknowledgement of the connectedness between individual objects as they circulate and the way these movements are structured, and with how, ultimately, this all plays a hand their valuation. The call sounds out for an understanding that the movement of any single thing or series of things across a large geographical system is regulated by specific cultural, social, or economic parameters. In turn, such a call suggests that any notion of a single, homogenous system is a fallacy. In *The Future as Cultural Fact* (2013), in his description of how traffic flows in a global context, Appadurai identifies an often unacknowledged underbelly that accompanies the movement of goods, trends and so on. As much as ‘cultural objects, including images, languages, and hairstyles, now move ever more swiftly across regional and national borders’,⁶ he suggests,

at the same time, illegal or unofficial markets have emerged everywhere, linking societies and states in different parts of the world. These lateral markets that involve traffic in human organs, armaments, precious metals, and sex work, to name but four examples, make extensive use of the power of the internet, cell phones, and other sophisticated communications technologies. They also take advantage of the differential policing of national boundaries, the destruction of many rural economies, and the state corruption that characterizes many parts of the world. Such illegal commodity circuits, for example in Africa, also bring apparently desolate economies to major ports and commercial hubs, such as Rotterdam, through the global movement of everyday commodities like refrigerators, air conditioners, cars, and other consumer durables.⁷

Appadurai’s concern here responds to the continued tendency to think of globalisation as a sort of parade of unregulated movement, for better and for worse. I would tend to agree with him. The visioning of globalisation as a swift, irrevocable and sweeping process refers, I argue, to what I have above called an explanatory geography. In other words, it simplifies a complex and infinite arrangement of commodity circuits, in which certain things travel smoothly and quickly while others do not, and transforms these circuits into something complete and symbolic. Take the analogy of a wave, for example, which is the *sui generis* analogy for globalisation. But this reductionist geography fails to account for the fact that while, say, South Asian migrants to Britain have in large

⁶ Appadurai, ‘How Histories Make Geographies’, p. 61.

⁷ *ibid.*

numbers taken up professional posts in the National Health Service, many more Southeast Asian migrants have been able only to gain employment in menial service sector jobs, a factor not entirely reflective of qualifications alone. The circuits in which things move – circuits, plural, because ‘not everything moves through the same circuits’,⁸ Appadurai writes – are beset by obstacles and bumps. His explanation for this draws upon Indo-Chinese interactions: ‘Why is there not greater interaction between the film industries of Hong Kong and Mumbai in regard to plots, characters, narratives, finances, production, or distribution?’⁹ he asks. While he suggests that Indian filmmakers, fascinated by the consumer cultures of East Asia, have in recent years included more references to the likes of Hong Kong and Singapore in their films, the reverse is not true. Why not? he asks. ‘These are all questions of blockages, bumps, and interference,’ he suggests,

in what is otherwise seen as a festival of interaction and celebration between India and China. In general, it is fair to say that any fast and heavy traffic is due to the force of the market of commodities and services, of capital and its flows, and of the energies of entrepreneurship. Where the traffic is weak, it is generally a matter of cultural prejudices and of various state policies. All modernities emerge in the tension between heavy traffic and the opposite, slow traffic.¹⁰

Let us expand upon this final supposition a moment. Appadurai’s argument, to put it another way, is that the movement of things is governed by a combination of demand and access, with the gradations of scale of both variables in constant flux. Yet, what he points to both in this, and also in the previous, chapter, is the idea that particularly in the field of anthropology these tensions have been somewhat overlooked. It is a question of the perceived value of things, and of how effective the valuation process is in retaining a social character. Making reference to the work of Igor Kopytoff, Appadurai notes how ‘[c]ommodities... can usefully be regarded as having life histories. In this processual view, the commodity phase of the life history of an object does not exhaust its biography: it is culturally regulated, and its interpretation is open to individual manipulation to some degree’.¹¹ Kopytoff himself writes of the various biographies we might helpfully attach to objects (economic, political, professional) before suggesting

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 68.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 69.

¹¹ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Commodities and The Politics of Value’, *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 9-60 (p. 23).

that: 'A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings and classified and reclassified into culturally constructed categories.'¹²

Keeping Kopytoff in mind, then, let us now push the debate toward a literary footing, where I think cultural valuation is significant. More specifically, the terrain I want to consider here is the literature that we might argue emerges out of the postcolonial or the developing world. (More of this in a moment.) Now, despite the fact that Kopytoff's claims lend themselves more kindly to the valuation of more obvious commodities, imagine that the object under discussion were not, say, a car, or a quantity of copper, or an antique firearm, but a literary text. The valuation itself is undertaken by the literary critic in the same way that valuing the hypothetical car might be undertaken by a dealer. There is an obvious difference in the types of commodities we are dealing with – notably the use value of the car outweighs its equivalent in terms of the literary text– but it is worth noting that in both cases the valuation is undertaken in accordance with what Kopytoff terms a 'collectively shared cognitive order'.¹³ In other words, both objects arrive within a system of predetermined measurement that has, over time, been honed. Thus, the literary text arrives in the hand of the critic, and his valuation is subject to a preordained system of meanings. (The car, meanwhile, arrives with the dealer and he too possesses an agreed-upon system of measurement.) It is important that Kopytoff's suggestion of how this order comes to pass is acknowledged more fully. He notes first of all that value and exchange are governed by the fact that the world contains neither objects all of the same value, nor objects all of uniquely different values. Which is to suggest that both extremes, complete heterogeneity and complete homogeneity, are unfeasible. He writes: 'Culture achieves order by carving out, through discrimination and classification, distinct areas of homogeneity within the heterogeneity.'¹⁴ This is simple enough: one groups things together that ostensibly share a similar value and then discards the things that do not. Now, presuming that the hypothetical car arrives on the forecourt of a second-hand car

¹² Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64-91 (p. 68).

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁴ Kopytoff, p. 70.

dealership, its value is determined by any number of intersecting factors: age, brand, model, mileage, the reputation of the seller and so on. These factors are processed through a conduit of knowledge that Appadurai calls technical knowledge, evaluative knowledge and mythological knowledge. While technical knowledge is more likely to be standardised – like the knowledge needed in, say, mining techniques or on production lines – elsewhere knowledge is subject to the likes of judgment, taste and individual experience. As such, when the car comes to its valuation, the dealer's figure is reached by calling upon these different knowledge bases.

The literary text, though, for obvious reasons, does not give rise to the same technical knowledge. Or, at least, it is not as easily standardised knowledge. As a consequence, the literary text's valuation within its presumed field is based primarily on the judgment of critics, commentators, theorists – in short: experts – whose own words contribute perpetually (even if sometimes inadvertently) to the overall regime of value. In other words, it is they, the standard-bearers of knowledge in the field, who are able largely to dictate the terms of the valuation of texts that arrive in the system. On the back of this, there are two important considerations to bear in mind. The first pertains to the fact that, in the scenario where personal judgment is a larger-than-usual factor in the valuation of literary texts, it is difficult to recuperate, say, its cultural or historical biography because knowledge of the circumstances of its production is downplayed. Appadurai writes: 'The fact is that knowledge *about* commodities is itself increasingly commoditised. Such commoditisation of knowledge regarding commodities is of course part of a larger problem of the political economy of culture itself, in which expertise, credentialism, and high-brow aestheticism all play different roles.'¹⁵ In short, the problem with the commoditisation of knowledge itself is that knowledge is divorced from the factors that ought to be seen contribute to it.

It is at this point, then, that the valuation of literary texts emerging from the postcolonial and the developing world within their presumed critical fields – postcolonial literary studies, world literature, development studies and so on – becomes all the more significant. Because, if we are minded to agree with Franco Moretti's observations that, firstly, the world literary system is 'one and

¹⁵ Appadurai, 'Politics of Value', p. 57.

unequal'¹⁶ and is arranged around a core and a surrounding periphery, and, in turn, that 'the destiny of a culture (usually a culture of the periphery) ... is intersected and altered by another culture (from the core)'¹⁷ – then we would surely agree by extension that ensuring the right of culture at the periphery to perform on its own terms is potentially socially, historically and politically pressing. Put another way, the literary text's retention of its own unique biography is of vital importance.

Let me clarify, then. My understanding of value here is informed by Appadurai's conviction that commodities circulate in uneven and not always fully visible circuits, and that these commodities are then worryingly under-read as objects lacking the complex and revealing biographies they actually possess. Consequently, what is often taken to be the value of something is in fact a reading of it only from a certain angle at a certain point in time, and which overlooks a number of crucial factors that have enabled its production. In turn, and much like Appadurai does, I follow Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital, both in terms of what he understands it to be – which is, broadly speaking, a long-term valuation of things in symbolic terms – and what it leads to, which I shall get to below. I am particularly interested in Bourdieu's sense that cultural capital can be acquired by he or they who effectively take ownership of the means of production of cultural goods. He writes:

Cultural goods can be appropriated both materially – which presupposes economic capital – and symbolically – which presupposes cultural capital. It follows that the owner of the means of production must find a way of appropriating either the embodied capital which is the precondition of specific appropriation or the services of the of their embodied capital.' holders of this capital. To possess the machines, he only needs economic capital; to appropriate them and use them in accordance with their specific purpose (defined by the cultural capital, of scientific or technical type, incorporated in them), he must have access to embodied cultural capital, either in person or by proxy.¹⁸

My own sense is that, in some postcolonial geographies, the embodied cultural capital expended in the production of goods can be hijacked by actors who foresee a profit to be made from them, economically or otherwise. In other words, cultural capital is transferrable from the small-scale producers of goods

¹⁶ Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (2000) 54-68 (p. 56).

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Culture', in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. By John Richardson, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241-258 (p. 247).

into the hands of larger and more powerful bodies. This often insidious transfer is to be read as a neo-imperialist enterprise that impacts the wider understanding of goods as cultural objects. Not only this, this hijacking of cultural capital, in postcolonial geographies especially, has the deleterious outcome of unreflective readings of value producing equally unreflective readings of taste and tradition. For example, imagine that a version of a traditional Indian garment is produced *en masse* by a clothing manufacturer responding to a demand for Indian goods in non-Indian markets. The original garment is prized for its delicateness and the skill that goes into its production. Given the scale of the exercise, though, the labour expended on the mass-produced version is less skilled and less time-consuming, and thus much different to the original. The manufacturer profits economically from the cultural capital (the symbolic value) held by the garment, though, in the sense that, by the time it reaches the market, a symbolic value has been retained. In other words, cultural capital is easily exploited. Be it at the hands of large-scale manufacturers producing cultural goods, then, or publishing houses who manage to profit from the manuscripts that land in their in-trays, or simply academics mishandling the symbolism of texts and environments, the true value of goods is often hidden because of the power and the deceptiveness of cultural capital. Bourdieu goes on to write:

Cultural capital in its objectified state presents itself with all the appearances of an autonomous, coherent universe which, although the product of historical action, has its own laws, transcending individual wills, and which, as the example of language well illustrates, therefore remains irreducible to that which each agent, or even the aggregate of the agents, can appropriate.¹⁹

Now, my interest hereafter is in the idea of literary texts as cultural commodities and in what Bourdieu conceives of as the institutionalised state of cultural capital. For me, the novel is a prime example of a text with close links with cultural capital, not least because it is to my mind the postcolonial text *par excellence*. At the hands of reviewers, publishers, literary studies scholars and so on, the perceived symbolic value of the postcolonial novel at an institutional level has occasionally resulted in misinformed understandings of what one might think of as literary value. By such a reckoning, the postcolonial novel is read not primarily as a literary text, but sometimes as a literary commodity.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

III • Postcolonial Literary Studies

I would put it roundly that the biographical work mentioned above was somewhere near to the heart of postcolonial studies when it emerged as a discipline in the western academy in latter years of the twentieth century. As many European colonies were being relinquished in the post-1945 era, the emergent, self-determined sites required a degree of restructuring, in multiple senses of the word. While scholarship under the explicit banner of ‘postcolonial studies’ would not emerge until later, precursory intellectual work had long accompanied anti-colonial struggle, and sought to stage interventions into long-held ideological assumptions about the colonies (and the colonisers, for that matter). In this respect, the seminal works of the likes of Aimé Césaire, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Frantz Fanon *et al.* were significant not only in terms of their alignment with actual anti-colonial struggles, but for the way that they fought fiercely for ideological territory. That is, these figures sought through textual means to restructure epistemological certainties that had held sway in colonies and colonial strongholds for several centuries – certainties bound tightly to the key cornerstones of western modernity: Enlightenment reason, literary culture, capitalism, democracy and so on. That it was ideological terrain that later became a prominent, and often overwhelming, focus of postcolonial studies, more so than, say, material historical or social terrain, is central to my concern here. We are to make something of the discernible shift of the term ‘postcolonial’ from a periodising to an analytical concept. By this I am referring to the fact that, in the latter years of the twentieth century, the term became increasingly decoupled from concomitant historical realities (albeit, or perhaps precisely because of the fact, that it was arguably beyond the scope of this single term to represent the space it sought to in the first place). Thus, one of the recurring concerns of postcolonial scholarship was to (re)arrange the parameters of a putative postcolonial locale so that its definition and its accompanying lexicon best reflected the vastness and the complexity of meaning signified by the term. I do not wish to rehearse the terms of this debate here, not because it would be entirely without scholarly value – much of the erstwhile debate has provided

engaging and much needed commentary, certainly – but for several reasons that I shall expand upon briefly here.

In the first place, I feel that the very slipperiness of the term ‘postcolonial’ has been too key a determinant in the state of the eponymous field as it stands today, which, to my mind, is a weaker intellectual force than it might still be. To be clear, the recuperative and restructuring core of work undertaken in the name of postcolonial studies, seen by many to have lost some of its explanatory and analytical function by the turn of the century, is, to my mind, central once more to our attempts to intervene in the ideological shape of the world – and particularly, I argue, since 9/11, the so-called War on Terror and (potentially) the Arab Spring. By this, I am suggesting that, while one cannot overstate the importance of arguing for a sensitively rendered definition, there is a danger of overdoing it, so to speak, which is to the detriment of the field’s initial objectives. Nevertheless, that I argue for the retention of the original aims of postcolonial scholarship pertains to the fact that it always ought to have been a simultaneously disruptive and explanatory venture, through which the enduring ideological life of imperialism could be addressed and exposed for what it was. How fitting that venture has once more become. To the monolithic events of the early twentieth century that I have already mentioned, we might also add, albeit perhaps prematurely, the emergence of the Islamic group, ISIS. We might see that the postcolonial critical toolbox might be of pertinence here, too. The origins of this militant, Wahhabist force are traceable back far further than just to recent U.S-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. The knots in the narrative, though, which feature among them the influence of historic British conquests in the region, the pre-eminence of an imperialist United States in the public imagination, the impact of modern-day Saudi Arabia’s political alliance with the West (but its ostensible complicity with ISIS’s fundamentalist ideology), as well as sectarian in-fighting in the Middle East between Islamic ethnic groups – all these knots require unravelling in order that we begin to appreciate the complexity of the picture. In a conflict that appears, in its (presumably) early stages, to be largely bankrupt of ideas capable of explaining it, the sort of cultural-historiographical scholarship that has been at the heart of the

postcolonial studies project may well prove helpful in providing critical frames of reference.

Secondly, then, my thoughts are that too much attention has been given to the intellectual or theoretical dimension of the postcolonial. In other words, the debate begun by the likes of Anne McClintock and Arif Dirlik in the early 1990s²⁰, which took issue with the parameters and the potential of postcolonial studies as a coherent field, ought to have signalled a departure. Instead, the concerns McClintock and Dirlik raised continued to perturb scholars years later. That Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, who had in 1991 asked, 'What is post(-)colonialism?'²¹, then returned to readdress the same question nearly fifteen years later, only this time to ask what it *had been*, is a measure of an ongoing fixation. My point is not so much that the debate took place, for at its heart was a desire shared by many that the work of postcolonial studies did not end up masquerading as something that it ought not to have been; rather, I put it only that, with a degree of regret, debates in the 1990s about postcolonialism, the postcolonial intellectual and postcolonial studies (and various other inflections on the same theme) spent too long arguing over the terms of the debates themselves.

In place of an exhaustive bibliography of postcolonial studies scholarship, then, let me offer my own shorthand reading of the field, for argument's sake, and proceed from there. As I have suggested, the field is marked from early on by a preoccupation with the (in)accuracy of its name. The dropping of the hyphen signals a shift, so that postcolonialism (contra post-colonialism) takes on the feeling of a strategy, rather than as an historical referent. In this strategic sense, postcolonialism is politically motivated, in that it seeks to offer challenge to a centre-periphery relationship that places the colonised always in the latter position. It seeks to retrieve through discursive means the suppressed agency of colonised individuals and to recuperate thereafter a sense of subjectivity capable of reinstating the individuality (and collective solidarity) of an oppressed group.

²⁰ See Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry*, 20:2 (1994), 328-356; and Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonial"', *Social Text* 31/32 (1992) 84-98.

²¹ Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 'What is Post(-)Colonialism?', *Textual Practice*, 5:3 (1991), 399-414.

Postcolonialism has sought to revise an imposed historical narrative whereby the colonial encounter is regarded as pre-eminent, and in which the pre-colonial history of the colonised is passed off as non-existent. Finally, it has attempted to move the postcolony out of the reach of its colonial-era discourses of subjugation and dependence. In order that it achieves these goals, there is a general feeling that the project must avoid slipping into a strictly textual practice. That such a risk exists at all pertains to the fact that it is the novel comes to be regarded as the foremost postcolonial form. In the words of Mishra and Hodge:

The European bourgeois novel comes with a pre-existent philosophical apparatus that implicitly questions the representation of history to the extent that any counter-historical move must begin with a reading of the capacities of the novelistic genre itself. The extreme extension of this theory is that the post-colonial as a duplication of Bakhtin's essentially polyphonic reading of the novel form makes the post-colonial redundant. It is important that we meet this hypothesis half-way, accept that a European epic narrative mediated through the European bourgeois novel was an available discourse to the post-colonial writer, and then fill out the other half of the equation with those very precise, historically and culturally specific distinctions that mark off post-colonial difference without constructing, in turn, a post-colonial homogeneity that cancels out its own oppositions and fractures.²²

For Mishra and Hodge, then, the novel is always inevitably an act of compromise in which a European bourgeois form meets with what Jorge Luis Borges has elsewhere called 'local colour'.²³ Later on from Mishra and Hodge, Moretti would argue persuasively that all modern novels emerge out of this compromise between 'foreign form and local materials'.²⁴ Nevertheless, there is a general sense that the nature of the address of the postcolonial novel, in the unavoidable encounter it provokes between centre and periphery, makes its capable of enacting the sort of strategic enterprise postcolonialism is seemingly necessitated by. Due to the fact that this encounter is unavoidably played out as some sort of problem-to-be-resolved between the foreign and the local, the essence of the postcolonial novel is understandably beset by a distinct sense of disjointedness; that is, a division between triumph and dispiritedness at the intersection between the hopeful future and the difficult past.

All this noted, the threat of postcolonial studies slipping into an overwhelmingly textual pursuit has remained. In fact, to a degree, that early

²² Mishra and Hodge, 'What is Post(-)Colonialism?', p. 404.

²³ See Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Argentine Writer and Tradition', *Selected Non-Fictions*, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Levine and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin, 2000), pp. 420-427 (p. 423).

²⁴ Moretti, p. 60.

worry has come to fruition. This is not to downplay the role of literary criticism. Rather, it is only to mark what the likes of Aijaz Ahmad warned of concerning what is, to his mind, the '[displacement of] an activist culture with a textual culture'²⁵ and what Perez Zagorin, here writing in terms of postmodernism, writes on the matter of historiography. 'By depriving historical knowledge-claims of any relationship to the actual past,' he argues, 'postmodernism dissolves history into a species of literature and makes the past itself into nothing more than a text.'²⁶ In both cases, there is apprehension concerning the removal of the linkage between lived history and the social fact. What, though, are the implications of what Ahmad and Zagorin warn against? What is the cost, to postcolonial studies in particular, of the loss of an activist dimension? Zagorin, to be sure, is writing specifically of postmodern historiography. Nevertheless, both he and Ahmad (along with others) share the thought that the unchecked elevation of purely textual encounters with texts comes at the cost of texts' ultimate integrity – be they historical documents or novels.

The issue is the assignment of a misinformed or overly inflated value to a text – misinformed in that, say, a critical reading of it leaves important questions under-explored – with the eventual outcome that the whole system of value is obscured. A concrete example is helpful, here. In the case of the novel, a value is assigned at first by the writer who writes of it critically and places it within a network of other texts, by his or her own design. Assuming that the novel is the postcolonial form *par excellence*, from which a narrative of postcolonial experience is thought to be retrievable, then, in turn, the role of the critic or the theorist can be likened to that of the historian. Yet, just like Zagorin's historian, the literary historian's treatment of texts, or carefully arranged series of texts, as discrete artefacts capable of claiming a place in a postcolonial history, simply because textually they conform to the familiar understanding of the postcolonial novel, is amiss. Take as an example a novel such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), in which the author delivers an account of a lowly Indian street cleaner, Bakha, an "untouchable" according to the taxonomy of the orthodox Hindu caste system. The narrative covers a single day on which Bakha

²⁵ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), p. 1.

²⁶ Perez Zagorin, 'History, the Referent and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now', *History and Theory*, 38:1 (1999), 1-24 (p. 14).

is publicly chastened on account of his lowly status, before finding his worldly hope restored by stumbling upon a Gandhian rally. One of the key passages of the novel comes as Bakha inadvertently brushes a passer-by, whose outrage at contact with the untouchable leads to a public shaming for the sweeper. Thereafter follows an internal monologue in which Bakha comes to articulately address the lowliness of his status. It is worth quoting the passage at length:

‘Why was all this?’ he asked himself in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself. ‘Why was all this fuss? Why was I so humble? I could have struck him! And to think that I was so eager to come to the town this morning. Why didn’t I shout to warn the people of my approach? That comes of not looking after one’s work. I should have begun to sweep the thoroughfare. I should have seen the high-caste people in the street. That man! That he should have hit me! My poor jalebis! I should have eaten them. But why couldn’t I say something? Couldn’t I have joined my hands to him and then gone away? The slap on my face! The coward! How he ran away, like a dog with his tail between his legs. That child! The liar! Let me come across him one day. He knew I was being abused. Not one of them spoke for me. The cruel crowds! All of them abused, abused, abused. Why are we always abused? The santry inspector [*sic*] and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don’t mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It’s only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!’

Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer. The contempt of those who came to the latrines daily and complained that there weren’t any latrines clean, the sneers of people in the outcastes’ colony, the abuse of the crowd which had gathered round him this morning. It was all explicable now. A shock of which this was the name had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing smell, touch and taste, all into a quickening. ‘I am an Untouchable!’ he said to himself, ‘an Untouchable!’²⁷

In order that we do justice to what is clearly an extremely rich and complex passage of prose, our reading must always remain alert to its various dimensions. Of course, it must necessarily address the fact that Bakha’s whole outpouring is actually private, uttered silently: this seems a fairly evident point that Anand is emphasising. We must then acknowledge the extent to which this complicates Bakha’s apparent taking ownership of his own agency in the repeated declaration, ‘I am an Untouchable!’ This might lead us in turn to assess the discursive efficacy of the monologue, in which the sweeper does emphatically find an answer to his own social questions, albeit an answer that is voiced only to

²⁷ Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 51-52.

the passive reader. We may witness in the simplicity of his answer, 'I am an Untouchable!', which is simultaneously triumphant and despondent, the very crux of Bakha's subalternity. From this we might find that the statement's plainness allows the slogan to stand representatively for all India's sub-castes. Equally, we might see that at a narrative level, this occurrence acts as a device that foreshadows the novel's denouement: in the straightforwardness of the consecutive phrases, 'They hate dung' and 'I hate it too', Anand anticipates Bakha's later encounter with Gandhian equality at the rally. That is, by gesturing in passing at the sameness of Bakha and the high-castes, in their mutual dislike of dung, the stage is set for a reconciliation of the high-castes and the Untouchables in Gandhi's public address. Meanwhile, in Bakha's passing threat, 'Let me come across him one day', we can register the seed of a challenge that manages to speak beyond the narrative, prophesying an eventual revolt against the caste system. All the while, though, as we glean from Bakha's account the silent, stifled birth of a subaltern consciousness, we must bear in mind the world beyond the text. We should not lose sight of Anand's relative privilege, of course, and that he was both Cambridge educated and an acquaintance of Gandhi himself. Nor should we overlook the ambiguousness of the British Raj's role in the enforcement of the caste system, the swell of public opinion in 1930s India against Hindu orthodoxy, and the novel's place within the context of Gandhianism and the social reformation agenda of B.M. Ambedkar. We must not ignore the fact, meanwhile, of Gandhi's own input in the novel, given that its actual shape is attributable to his guidance. 'In retrospect,' Anand writes,

I feel that, under the tutelage of the Mahatma, who did not pretend to be an artist, I was able to exorcise all of those self-conscious literary elements which I had woven into the narrative in anticipation of what the critics might prove. [...] Also the old man suggested the removal of my deliberate attempts at melodramatic contrasts of the comic and the tragic motifs, through which the spontaneous feelings, moods and lurking chaos in the soul of Bakha had been somewhat suppressed.²⁸

I am gesturing towards the opening out of a passage to wider spheres, in the way literary criticism is naturally wont to do. The passage from the novel must be read, then, at any one time, in a closely analytical manner, as a device governing

²⁸ Mulk Raj Anand, 'On the Genesis of *Untouchable*: A Note', in *The Novels of Mulk Raj Anand*, ed. by R.K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige, 1992), p. 11.

a strategically contrived narrative, and as a passage of text whose politics are deeply complicit in the social climate of 1930s India. This all barely even broaches the issue – and the particularly poignant one, too, given the era – of the status of Indian writing in English at the time of publication. Nor does it address, as we could well do, the prevalence of humanist debates in India and beyond during the same period, debates that complement the novel's plot. My point is not only to suggest that we must encounter texts open-mindedly, but that our reading must always at least signal the complicity of any text in wider spheres of influence. In other words, were we to try to preserve the value of Anand's novel as a text of social importance (of which he would surely approve), we must take from it only what it relinquishes willingly. In this case, we should see that the novel presents Bakha as the conscious linchpin of Anand's social reform agenda. The protagonist's voicelessness, as much as it serves as a motif both confirming, and offering the possibility of deliverance from, his low status, is also a necessary plot device that enables what is ultimately a Gandhian conclusion to the novel. Finally, then, we must avoid the temptation to isolate Bakha's silent monologue as some sort of message suppressed, for it really could not be otherwise. The novel's social integrity would disintegrate if the sweeper had uttered it aloud. I think, on this occasion, it would be unhelpful to commandeer Bakha's monologue for any greater purpose than to introduce readers to a social agenda. To my mind, he is better regarded in this way than as some manner of heroic narrative figure whose interior monologue gives voice to, or retrieves the agency of, an oppressed group.

I raise this here for the reason that we might historically have read Anand's novel differently, with a completely different outcome. The problem with postcolonial literary studies, as some have seen it, has been the overprivileging, initially in the point of a text's reception, of any combination of the following: specific modes or narrative devices used to express alterity; particular rhetorical devices to articulate plurality, hybridity, otherness and difference; particular metonyms of agency and individual subjectivity; the novel as a state-of-the-nation address. By which I mean that we might well have discerned in *Untouchable* things that were helpful to the coherence of our literary theorising – the consistency of

Bakha's compromised address alongside other silenced literary figures, perhaps – but it might well have moved us out of reach of other possible meanings. This historical strategy has been self-perpetuating so that, for Timothy Brennan, '[a]s the work pours forth, authors ranging from Brazil to South Asia tend to exist not as individuals but as elements in an intertextual coterie that chooses them as much as they choose it.'²⁹ While the title of this section points towards what 'the postcolonial leaves out', the question of what it leaves in is pressing, for it returns us to the matter raised earlier concerning the mapping of the world. From the turn of this century, in particular, debates on the place of postcolonial literary studies have fragmented, perhaps logically so, given that the cogency of the postcolonial world as a knowable entity has been further tempered by its entanglement in the debate over world literature. What we have been left with are numerous literary spaces.

I endorse the hypothesising of Pascale Casanova, who, in 'Literature as a World' (2005), posits that understanding a "world literary space", a parallel territory between literature and the world, 'relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literature nature'³⁰, would enable the sort of reading suggested above. Casanova writes:

Here, struggles of all sorts – political, social, national, gender, ethnic – come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms. Working from this hypothesis, while trying to envisage all its theoretical and practical consequences, should permit us to set out on a course of criticism that could give a unified account, say, the evolution of poetic forms, or the aesthetics of the novel, and their connection to the political, economic and social world – including telling us how, by a very long (indeed historical process), the link gets broken in the most autonomous regions of this space.³¹

In order to expand upon this system of reading, Casanova annexes Henry James's metaphor of the Persian rug, which,

[v]iewed casually or up too close ... appears an indecipherable tangle of arbitrary shapes and colours; but from the right angle ... will suddenly present the attentive observer with "the right combination" of "superb intricacy" – an ordered set of motifs which can be understood in relation to each other, and which only become visible when perceived in their totality, in their reciprocal dependence and mutual interaction'.³²

²⁹ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 203.

³⁰ Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as a World'. *New Left Review*, 31 (2005), 71-90 (p. 72).

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*, p. 73.

The world literary space, to Casanova, is not equal. Much as she vouches for a more open-ended manner of reading practice, Casanova concedes the enduringness of the 'national filter', as a 'kind of "natural" frontier which prevents the analyst from considering the violence of transnational political power relations as they impact upon the writer'.³³ What we have, then, is a system that is beset by reductive reading habits – habits that, by Brennan's reckoning, eventually beget writing habits. Crucial to Casanova's hypothesis is the accumulation of 'literary resources',³⁴ which secure a national literature's entry into the world space. These resources are gained over time through struggles 'over the definition of literature, over technical or formal transformations and innovations', she suggests.³⁵ In a roundabout sense, Casanova notes that literatures of the periphery are inducted into the world system through their engagement with literary debates that, ultimately, resonate outward from the centre. I would put it that, in the case of postcolonial literature, it is the eponymous term itself that is taken as a natural filter by some readers so that, as an extension of Casanova's comments on the prohibitiveness of national filters, a proportion of literary analysis fails to look or see beyond the postcoloniality of texts. (Again, over time, writers too have been influenced by the same predisposition.)

If we can assign a genuine shortcoming to this practice over a period, it has perhaps been the failure to recognise the social, cultural and historical values of certain literatures. Which is to suggest that, instead, literatures have been occasionally inducted into a system that has diminished texts' social value at the cost of inflating their, shall we say, cosmopolitan value. (By contrast, the same inclination has failed to induct other texts at all, on the basis of their lack of relative value in the same system.) In crude terms, consider how projects such as Heinemann's African Writers Series or the Longman Caribbean Writers collection include, and then privilege, the content of certain texts at the expense of others; consider the same process replicated at a scholarly level, in which this initial selection of texts is distilled so as to give narrowed perception of the space

³³ *ibid.*, p. 80.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁵ *ibid.*

it speaks for; and finally, speculatively, consider the long-term effects and motives of writers who desire to see their work in print – how are their motivations tempered by their canonised literary predecessors? This is to ask: how deeply was the understanding of African female migrants in the 1960s and 1970s guided by the centrality of a text like Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), or the understanding of mid-century Barbadian culture by George Lamming's *Castle of my Skin* (1953)? Broadly, I am writing of a practice that has had a twofold consequence in which, firstly, the over-privileging of a cosmopolitan literary reading agenda has led, secondly, to the establishment of a map of literature that is somewhat detached from the social, historical and cultural life it speaks for. I mark the departure of this thesis by posing two inextricably linked questions. Firstly, what should be the ultimate hopes for any literary text from the so-called periphery? And thereafter: Does our current repertoire of literary analysis enable that objective to come to fruition?

INTERLUDE
*Reclaiming the Biographies of Objects:
The Cultural Life of the Samosa*

I • South Asian Food in Britain

I think it is important to understand how a recuperative biography might look, and how exactly it might respond to an existing model of cultural valuation. What the likes of Appadurai and Kopytoff have claimed of objects generally, Ian Cook and Michelle Harrison have claimed specifically of food. They argue for “re-materializing the postcolonial geographies” of food, suggesting that earlier work on cross-over foods – those items of “exotic” origin that have been commoditised for, say, British supermarket shelves – has overwhelmingly involved ‘cultural readings of commodities that pay no heed to processes of commodification’.¹ They ask:

What if we were to treat goods marketed as 'ethnic' or 'exotic' in the UK not as texts, but as material culture? What if we were to study them not only as textual and visual reservoirs of cultural codes, but as *things in the making* and *things in use*, materially and symbolically, within as well as between contexts?²

Cook and Harrison focus mostly on how individual foodstuffs are commoditised for mass-market sale, and on the way in which whole brands are constructed, and later deconstructed, in a manner that ignores the social, historical and economic relations that structure them. They use the example of the historic marketing of Jamaican food, the dominant paradisiacal images of the Caribbean and its

¹ Ian Cook and Michelle Harrison, ‘Cross Over Food: Re-Materializing Postcolonial Geographies’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28 (2003), 296-317 (p. 299).

² *ibid.*

‘relaxed spicy lifestyles’.³ They note, though, the need for “counter-topographies” that respond to this imagery that, as bell hooks has noted, “exoticises the other”.⁴ It has not only been the *marketing* of food that has been ahistorical and dismissive biographically: the commoditisation of the knowledge of postcolonial cuisines has been equally unenlightening. Elizabeth Buettner writes of the ‘celebratory’ or ‘boutique’ multiculturalism of the curry house in Britain, where ‘multiculturalism as white consumption of “Indian” food produced to accommodate [white] tastes, enacted within the space of the restaurant, became distinct from the multiculturalism required by other everyday social interactions with Asians.’⁵ Elsewhere, we might draw upon the words of Lloyd and JanMohamed, who write of the contradictions of this cultural pluralism in the United States: ‘Such pluralism tolerates the existence of salsa, it even enjoys Mexican restaurants, but it bans Spanish as a medium of instruction in American schools.’⁶ The ubiquity of the curry house in British towns and cities has often been read, popularly at least, as a metonym of cross-cultural exchange, as though the meeting point of cultures that the restaurant introduces automatically produces a socially productive dimension. Yet, as Buettner puts it, ‘South Asian food may have become seen as integrated into the nation and its localities, but not its purveyors, who still stand accused of self-segregation.’⁷ In her essay, Buettner addresses the issue of the “Indian” food to be found in some curry houses, which has been thought of at one time or another as a poor parody of traditional South Asian cuisines – particularly in the 1980s during the proliferation of so-called Tandoori and Balti restaurants on British high streets. To an extent, the same is true today of certain restaurants whose offering is predominantly arranged around the preconceptions and tastes of white diners. Arranged along a Scovillian scale, an assortment of dishes has come to stand as for the canon of “Indian” curry house cuisine: Korma, Dupiaza, Rogan, Dhansak, Madras, Vindaloo.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ See bell hooks, ‘Eating the Other’, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London, Turnaround, 1992), pp. 21–39.

⁵ Elizabeth Buettner, “‘Going for an Indian’: South Asian Restaurants and the Limits of Multiculturalism in Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History* 80:4 (2008), 865–901 (p. 880).

⁶ Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 8.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 891.

What I am more interested in, though, is taking the debate further than the question of authenticity. Whether or not food is deemed authentic or not – that is, whether or not it is held to have a valid historical heritage – is to miss the point, for *all* foods are the product of a history; it is only that the histories of some are privileged over the histories of others. In *The Settler's Cookbook* (2010), Yasmin Alibhai-Brown retrieves the lineage of recipes passed on ancestrally and date back to figures who had voyaged from India to East Africa as labourers, before their descendants later moved to Britain. The dishes with origins in East Africa are traced to the families of indentured labourers who worked on the construction of the Uganda Railway. These recipes speak to the fact of circumstance: the limited availability of vegetables necessitates the emergence of uninspiring but now ritualistic dishes like *Khichri*, a porridge-like pulp of moong dhal, rice and butter. Alibhai-Brown writes:

The cultivation of vegetables and fruit away from the coast was yet to come. Decades later, children who were fussy eaters were asked to remember those men who built the railways, who gave their lives so we could get to the beach on the train. *Khichri* was what kept them strong and unbeaten. All kinds of properties were attributed to this simple dish. We still cook it on the first day of our new year, 21 March. It is best for baby, the old ladies say to nervous new mums eager to buy infant food in pretty glass jars. Dying folk ask for the soft mush as they prepare to depart, and sometimes this super-food revives them.⁸

Equally, we see in Meera Sodha's *Made in India* (2014) the incorporation of local produce into traditional dishes – the accompanying evolution of dishes and their histories – necessitated by circumstance. Sodha's heritage, similar to Alibhai-Brown, traces back to India through East Africa. Evicted from Uganda by the decree of Idi Amin in 1972, Sodha's mother is said to have 'reassembled our family kitchen in Lincolnshire and carried on cooking the family recipes'.⁹ Sodha continues:

At the same time, she started to use local ingredients. Indian cooking can be adapted to any place by encompassing whatever ingredients are available. As we lived in Lincolnshire, a county that abounds in local produce, she was able to use gorgeous beetroot, rhubarb and squash in her cooking, as well as fish from the nearby docks in Grimsby and local meat (including the famous Lincolnshire sausages).¹⁰

⁸ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *The Settler's Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (London: Portobello, 2012), p. 58.

⁹ Meera Sodha, *Made in India: Cooked in Britain: Recipes from an Indian Family Kitchen* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 9.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 10.

Sodha acknowledges the function of circumstance in the evolution of food. Her mother's cooking, so she suggests, is shaped by locality. If only we were able to downplay the emphasis on what we might call the *mixedness* of dishes, reading from them their convenient divisions of influence – part Indian, part East African, part British – we would see that the meanings are to be found in the respective biographies of individual dishes, and not just by reading them as cultural texts. The ingredients Sodha refers to (beetroot, rhubarb and squash) find their way into her cooking, initially at least, by way of circumstance and availability. In other words, I am warning against reading cultural mixing as an oversimplified matter of choice, and suggesting instead that biographies of dishes yield more enlightening meanings.

Now, in among the more familiar dishes on the menu of Khyber Tandoori restaurant on Leicester's Belgrave Road, are dishes that have been introduced over the past two decades in order to respond to various circumstantial changes. For example, the so-termed Chilli dishes on the menu – Chilli Paneer, Chicken, Baby Corn and King Prawns, 'fried in crispy batter and cooked with spring onions, fresh sliced garlic, black pepper, mild chillies and soy sauce' – were recipes added by the head chef, who was responding to the emerging trend of Indo-Chinese cuisine. Other dishes have evolved over time to cater to the changing tastes of customers, the price of ingredients and so on. Indeed, the increasingly high cost of sourcing poultry led directly to the inclusion on the menu of chicken wings, a dish not traditionally to be found in curry houses.

In the three cases mentioned, I am interested both by the structuring of recipes by any combination of historical, economic, social or cultural factors, and by the values assigned to each dish by diners. It is impossible to read Alibhai-Brown's *Khichri* as a cultural text without acknowledging an accompanying context of Indian indentured labour in East Africa, nor without addressing the forced removal of Indians from Uganda in 1972 and their subsequent arrival in provincial British locations. By the same token, Khyber's chicken wing dish cannot be separated from the context of the cost of poultry farming, nor its Chilli dishes from the popularisation of so-called fusion food in the last decade. Importantly, though, we must also see that those apparently poor parodies of curries to be found in certain British curry houses, as inauthentic as we might

view them, also have to be read as dishes structured by historical, economic, social and cultural factors. In this case, we might put it that, say, the Madras dish served at some provincial restaurant, for argument's sake called *A Passage to India* or *Bombay Spice*, cannot be dismissed as a valueless dish, but must instead be read in the context of – or perhaps as a direct consequence of – the popularisation, the perceived exoticism, and the rise in the commercial viability, of “Indian” cuisine in the 1970s and 1980s. Equally, in the relevant cases, our reading of these dishes must also attend to the wider context of the economic opportunism of working-class Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants in Britain, given that it has been members of these groups who have taken advantage most of favourable market conditions, played upon the enduring fascination of white British diners with “Indian” food, and ultimately become owners of their own businesses.

II • Culinary Histories

The biographical narratives of cuisines are not generated without provocation; they are deeply embedded within particularised histories and are moved along by specific factors. That we understand them as such, and that we understand that all biographies of objects, and not only a privileged few, contribute to the production of a knowledge base, is vital to the valuation of cultural capital *en masse*. When in 2013 traces of horsemeat were identified in frozen foods advertised as beef in British and Irish supermarkets, investigations eventually illuminated the complex passage of food in the global supply chain. Horses, considered something of a culinary taboo in Britain and Ireland, had been sold in many cases by Romanian farmers who seemingly knew little concerning the ultimate destination of the meat. From the rural Romanian hinterland, the horses had been transported to various locations across Western Europe where they were slaughtered and processed. Finally, the meat was passed off as beef in meals produced for apparently reputable brands – notably, Findus, a pan-European manufacturer. The same investigations revealed traces of pork DNA in other beef products marketed as being suitable to Jewish and Islamic diets.

Alarming as the findings were, what the whole scandal achieved was to retrieve the biographies of individual dishes where otherwise they would have been lost. In this particular case, it managed to join in the same chain neatly packaged products on supermarket shelves with destitute Romanian farmers who had supplied the meat for them, all via a complicated cross-continental route. In doing so, the actual value of the products at the point of sale – some of which had retailed for disturbingly low prices – illustrated the exploitation of those in the supply chain who would otherwise have remained invisible. It also illuminated the covering up of movement of items across cultural borders (read: the erasure of cultural difference), given that the disparate attitudes towards the consumption of horsemeat across the supply chain were disregarded in the grand interest of profit. The point is that, for those with a vested interest in the complexity and the historicity of the labour expended in the production of objects, adequate biographies lead to the truest possible understanding of them at their commodity phase. In the horsemeat case, the lack of a biography motivated the unethical, profit-driven decision-making of manufacturers and resulted in products purchased by consumers on the mutually dependent basis of low price and low production knowledge. Nevertheless, my original starting point here was the cultural valuation of foods, whose accompanying biographies stand to have different benefits.

As an example, take the samosa, a food item that has been written into the symbolic imagination, in Britain certainly, as a quintessential sign of Indianness – typically, as part of an alliterative triumvirate that joins it to saris and saffron. Its annexation by large-scale British producers, who have marketed the samosa often as a frozen party food, to be sold alongside spring rolls and tiny bite-sized pizzas, does much to hijack the complexity of its cultural biography (as well as the biographies of the others, too). It does so partly by overlooking the British imperial connection to Indian cuisine – that is, by suppressing the violence inherent in the events that lead ultimately to the availability of samosas on the British market – and also by overlooking the item's much larger history beyond India itself. More than that, aligning it under this moniker of a national cuisine threatens only to seize its fluidity, when in fact the numerous biographies of the samosa itself are notable for their variations. To simplify a history of movement

and adaptation, perhaps in order to suggest a straightforward transfer of an item from one culture to another, is to underestimate the complexity and the scale of the factors that structure it. By understanding these variations, we are able to more fully appreciate the cultural and social lives of the samosa, and thus better placed to understand their particular relationships to specific cultural and social groups.

The samosa is first traceable in India itself during the rule of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), a three centuries-long period of Muslim rule in the north of present-day India, meaning that its origins likely stretch back, via any number of trading routes, to various different locations across Central or Western Asia. The Middle East is largely credited with its invention. Among its earliest records is a mention in Abu'l-Fadl Bayhaqi's history of the Ghaznavid Empire, *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī*, in the eleventh century; but its history goes back further still. In terms of its ingredients and its preparation, early samosas (*sanbosag*) were commonly triangular pastries filled with minced meat, with the three-sided design the consequence of folding a circular piece of pastry inward around the filling. Later, as they moved around the region, across India and into present-day Myanmar (*samosa*), East Africa (*sambusa*), Uzbekistan (*samsa*) and so on, the samosa was adapted according to local custom and ingredients. Given the Christian influence in Portuguese India, Goan samosas (*chamuças*) were often filled with pork, where in Muslim or Hindu lands this has not been the case. Unlike the general method, samosas in Central Asia are almost always baked rather than fried, while Mauritian samosas often and unsurprisingly contain fish, given the geography of the island. The versions of samosas that arrived on British shores have been various, but a significant number have been vegetarian samosas, in line with the diets of many migrants from the Punjab and Gujarat. Much as they differ in appearance, ingredients, and names, samosas appear variously in the disparate customs of cultural groups. In Hindu birth observances in the Punjab, it is noted that samosas are given as an offering to 'avert the evil effects of Rah'.¹¹ The items are central to the folk life of Afghanistan, meanwhile, where they form part

¹¹ H.A. Rose, 'Hindu Birth Observances in the Punjab', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 37 (1907), 220-236 (p. 221).

of a ceremonial wedding breakfast of ‘fried chicken and samosas, sweet puffs, *shir māl* and tea’.¹²

More contemporaneously, we might look to the likes of M. Neelika Jayawardane, whose 2012 essay on the South Asian diaspora in South Africa illuminates not just the migration of the samosa to the tip of Africa, but its embeddedness in its modern culinary culture there. Writing of her return to South Africa after a lengthy hiatus, Jayawardane puts it that,

I was delighted to find a space in which “Indianness” was engaged in a different conversation. It was only then, almost twenty years after I first left, that I realized that it is possible to renegotiate a relationship with a place that had little patience for the nuances of difference. But that interstice—where confluences between seemingly vastly different bodies could take place—wasn’t found on the front pages and the blaring headlines.

But just by the pervasiveness of samosas along the eateries of Cape Town and the interior of the Western Cape, one knows that there had to have been Indians in these quarters for much longer than the nouveau-riches that make the front page. We don’t know exactly how the famous fried savory [*sic*] pastry got to Cape Town, but it’s firmly ensconced there, as Cape Town writer Rustum Kozain famously described in ‘You Can’t Get Lost in the Samosa Triangle’ in *Chimurenga*. One Friday afternoon, when I was looking for the right kind of hors d’oeuvres to serve with a Sri Lankan-style fish, braised in a tamarind and black peppercorn sauce, I found a version of pakoras on the corner of Strand and Rose Streets in the Bo-Kaap.

¹³

Jayawardane’s essay is helpful here because it speaks to the transfer from cultural difference to embeddedness within South African culinary culture, even if, given she does not explain the narrative of the samosa’s arrival in the Cape, it does not retrieve a biography of the sort we are looking to generate here. The language refers not to an “Indian” culinary space at the periphery of Cape culture, but one that is ‘pervasive’ within it. To be clear, I am marking out the potential of food not only to anticipate dialogue between cultural groups in a symbolic sense, but also to have retrievable from it a genuine social currency. In other words, the appearance of the samosa in Cape Town establishments might symbolise some manner of dialogue at a surface level, but getting to the bottom of its place within a mass culture provides a chance to understand its social life. Certainly, I am not radically overestimating the social potential of an individual foodstuff, but am suggesting a logic that can be extrapolated: the social life of a

¹² Ikbal Ali Shah, ‘The Folk Life of Afghanistan’, *Folklore*, 30:4 (1919), 249-281 (p. 269).

¹³ M. Neelika Jayawardane, “‘Everyone’s Got Their Indian’: The South Asian Diaspora in South Africa”, *Transition*, 107 (2012), 51-65 (p. 57).

single thing combined with that of another, and another, *ad infinitum*, creates the social life of things.

III • The Samosa in Leicester

Appadurai lays a failure at the door of anthropologists for focusing too often ‘on the things that are exchanged, rather than on forms or functions of exchange.’¹⁴ Let us proceed with that presumption. In parts of Leicester, the samosa can be considered something of a cultural artefact. On Belgrave Road, a stretch known affectionately as the Golden Mile because of its abundance of South Asian jewellers, samosas – much like sticky, orange gulab jamun and masala chai– are a mainstay. Midway up the Mile is Bobby’s, a vegetarian restaurant opened in 1976 by Mr Bhagwanjibhai and Mrs Manglaben Lakhani. Samosas here, so its manager informs me, are assembled in batches of a thousand at a time. Each is a neatly packaged, almost equilateral triangle of thin filo pastry. The filling is orange-tinted from the inclusion of garam masala. It colours the cubes of potato inside the pastry, and also one’s fingertips. The filling is slightly sweet, and the whole thing is not unlike the type of samosa one could purchase frozen from a supermarket – although this is not to discredit it. When I first approach the counter and ask for half a dozen samosas, the manager asks if I have ever eaten one before. (He is unaware, unsurprisingly, that I have consumed in the preceding fortnight, ostensibly in the name of research, more samosas than I would care to imagine.) He passes one across to me to try, and does the same when I make selections from the endless trays of sweets: countless flavours of barfi, halva, jalebi and katli. It is an exercise in food tourism; each time I ask for something I receive a thorough explanation of it, sometimes a taster. The manager’s manner with me suggests it is not nearly the first time he has given this novice’s introduction. That I refer to the samosa here as a cultural artefact, then, pertains to the fact that it forms part of a larger performance of South Asian culinary culture. This can be extrapolated to suggest that the whole of Belgrave Road, in understanding itself as the Golden Mile, can be seen to be performing a

¹⁴ Appadurai, ‘Politics of Value’, p.10.

version of South Asian culture – one that is deeply rooted in an ancestral heritage, but in a way that is distinctly marketable. As much as the area functions as a regular high street, it draws in great numbers of visitors who are drawn by the concentration of shops and food outlets. The Golden Mile attracts around thirty thousand for its annual Diwali celebrations. To an extent, it is a genuine South Asian space performing as an even more South Asian space, within which the samosa at Bobby's finds an inflated cultural dimension.

Yet the question of authenticity is raised. Elsewhere in the city, the samosa not only retails more cheaply (generally, at two thirds of the cost of those sold at Bobby's) but the ingredients are notably different. At the likes of Apna Punjab on Purley Road or Guru Nanak on St. Saviours Road, the samosas are much more easily traceable back to a historic Gujarati and Punjabi version. The pastry triangles are much less uniform; little blisters fleck their outer skins from exposure to the hot cooking oil. Inside, the fillings of both samosas are less coloured, less flavoured. Neither recipe includes garam masala. The main ingredient of both – as is customary – is boiled potato, pressed but not mashed. The Guru Nanak version is the spicier of these two versions, likely the result of a larger quantity of green chilli. There is also the inclusion of chopped coriander, which does not feature in the Apna Punjab recipe. Otherwise, both contain the same basic ingredients: potato, peas, green chilli, and *jeera*. (When in Apna Punjab I ask about the *jeera*, unsure at first of the word's translation, the server scurries off to the kitchen and returns with a handful of seeds that I take to be cumin. Still unsure, she ventures off once more, this time returning hauling a ten-kilogram sack of the seeds to show me. It is cumin, after all.) The simplicity of the flavours is complemented by the sweet spiciness of the accompanying dipping sauce, which from both shops is a deep brown liquid containing tamarind, sugar and what I guess at first to be fresh mint. When I ask, both proprietors confirm that it is mint, but not fresh. It is bottled mint sauce. Both tell me that their sauces also contain tomato ketchup.

The shops in which they are sold are unassuming. Apna Punjab sits on the corner of a residential street. When one enters, the beep of an alarm signals the arrival of a customer. The tables and chairs inside are plain, the sort bought cheaply from a Scandanivian furnishers, and dressed only with aluminium

vessels of tap water and serviettes. When an order is taken, the cashiers head off into the kitchens and one can hear the sound of the fryers and the chatter of female voices, presumably of wives, sisters and aunties. The same is true at Guru Nanak, where the bearded and turbaned proprietor relays orders to the female-run kitchen and returns minutes later with the goods packaged up ready for sale. Occasionally, a sit-in diner eats at a table in one corner and the sound of Zee Television fills the room. When the samosas are taken out of the paper bag to be eaten, they are irregularly shaped like buckled pyramids, and one can see where a seam of pastry has been pressed by hand – unlike the neat triangles at Bobby's or available from supermarket freezers. To a degree, these samosas feel more authentic, even if the dipping sauce admission might seem to tarnish that.

As I have mentioned above, I am wary about the authenticity debate. As soon as the notion of tradition becomes a factor, a distortion occurs. To value either samosa over the other on the basis of a perceived authenticity would be to overlook the infinite processes at work in the entire production of the item. It is also to privilege the view that items can be read as cultural texts. Where Meera Sodha includes a recipe in her book for beetroot and feta samosas, one might read the resultant dish as representing a dialogue between, say, South Asian and Greek cuisine. However, when Bobby's produces samosas not in keeping with a traditional recipe, one might dismiss them as being inauthentic (or, on the contrary, might mistakenly perceive a sense of authenticity). The problem is the reading of items solely as texts according to a predetermined system of value that assigns too little influence to economic or social factors. In 'Searching for Authenticity in Las Vegas', Whitney Soble critiques the idea that, in its replication of landmarks from elsewhere, Las Vegas is often deemed a city of artifice. According to Soble, social critics have at times,

launched a sustained attack on the city as a sort of black hole into which history and culture are inexorably sucked, to be regurgitated along Las Vegas Boulevard in a hodgepodge of hotels and casinos borrowing lurid, falsified images from other "real" places and epochs in a poorly-conceived effort at authenticity.¹⁵

In response, Soble suggests that this view 'belies a more complex social desire', before going on to note: 'Too many critics' arguments merely recognize

¹⁵ Whitney Soble, 'Gondolas in the Desert: Searching for Authenticity in Las Vegas', *Writing 20*, Spring (2007), 27-32 (p. 27).

authenticity and artifice as conceptual opposites, disavowing the nuanced forms that reality can assume.’¹⁶ Indeed, her presumption is that faith in the idea of authenticity is a misguided investment, and that the perennial popularity of Las Vegas itself is a sign that visitors fully acknowledge the complexity of originality; or, at the very least, are not fooled by it. ‘Visitors do not enter the Venetian expecting it to be Venice,’ Soble writes,

but to delight instead in the hotel and casino’s particular interpretation of that city. These tourists regard with satisfaction elements which Huxtable would undoubtedly consider tacky, like tiny indoor “waterfront” cafés overlooking a three-foot-deep Grand Canal and a Piazza San Marco offering Louis Vuitton and Versace boutiques. We may therefore consider such establishments not just in the context of the places they emulate, but as their own “places” with their own architectural styles, cultural references, and societal expectations. Paris Las Vegas then is aptly named, for it is not just an attempt to recreate the French capital, but to reinvent it— with a Vegas flair.

How, then, do these reflections on Las Vegas correspond with Leicester? In essence, I am pointing towards the notion of the authenticity of *all* things. In other words, where Las Vegas in Soble’s argument cannot be understood as anything but a city of “real” places, irrespective of any imitations it might stage, nor can we read any version of the samosa as anything but an authentic article whose arrival is always precipitated by multiple factors. As much as one would like to trust in an organic evolution of cultural forms, driven by some historic narrative of significant encounters, and always ultimately traceable back to an original, the routes and roots of items do not always yield magnificent histories.

I ask questions about the origins of the samosa recipe used in *Apna Punjab*, already knowing well the historical connection with northwest India. Yet the response is telling, for the general consensus arises that the samosas on sale derive from what is regarded as a “standard” recipe that no one can really illuminate. This means that, yes, there is an historical dimension to the samosa, but that this dimension is not consciously present at the moment of its daily production. There is little sentiment or sense of nostalgia to be found surrounding the production or sale of these samosas; it is all a matter of revenue. Those women in *Apna Punjab* and *Guru Nanak* are not working to evoke the culinary history of their ancestors each day when they drop pastry parcels into the deep fryer, batch after batch. And while to a degree that is exactly what

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

happens, any reading of a nostalgic historical narrative must necessarily consider the facts as they appear on the ground, too. Only a multiple lens like this is able to give rise to profitable observations on meaning and value.

A final point is crucial to make. It emerges out of a conversation I have over the counter at Bobby's, shortly after the manager realises I am not a food tourist, but something worse: an academic with questions. I comment on the neatness of the pastry and he admits to it being bought in, premade. There is a version on sale that does use hand-made pastry, he notes – a samosa whose green filling contains cashew nuts, lots of coriander and which retails at more than twice the price of its equivalents elsewhere – but the regular version is a pre-made affair. I already know the answer to the question I feel compelled to ask and the manager puts it straightforwardly. It is a matter of cost. When making samosas in such large numbers, it would make little business sense to pay out on wages to meet the necessary labour power, particularly given the laborious process involved. He claims it would not be profit-worthy to pay even the national minimum wage to cover the costs of making the pastry by hand. Besides, the production is something of an art form, I am told. The manager tries to demonstrate to me how leavened layers of the pastry are peeled away one by one. (This perhaps explains the higher retail cost of the handmade version.) Afterwards, I cannot help but think about the other two shops, where the pastry is handmade and where the retail cost of a samosa is half that of Bobby's. How is the labour affordable to the owners of Apna Punjab and Guru Nanak? Perhaps we are to presume that, while some of the difference in cost can be attributed to a difference in location, the finances of the latter two shops are arranged less rigidly than at Bobby's, where greater public visibility is likely to govern a different approach to employee ethics.

Putting together a suitable answer raises further questions. Might the issue of labour regulations not suddenly come into focus, or gender inequality, or perhaps the ethics of cash in hand work? The production of some of the samosas I have purchased and lauded for their taste, and perhaps also for the sense that I have been consuming in the process something of historical significance, might quite reasonably have been made possible all by unfavourable employment arrangements, or by a sense of subservience that persists among some South

Asian women in Britain, who view (presumably) cheap labour as their only viable employment option. What could be said then concerning the matter of a samosa's authenticity? That fifteen pence discrepancy between Bobby's and the other two shops is all at once a matter of location, prestige, the quality of ingredients, the cost of staffing, the demands of customers, the reputation of the businesses and so on. In turn, the manner in which one might consider the *cultural* value of each version – that is, the extent to which either read as a discernible cultural text – must also depend on the confluence of these same factors, and not just on the fact of the final product itself.

There is inherent sentimentalism in the reading of cultural texts that seems to encourage the reading of things only, rather than the reading what we might think of as the thingness of them. Questions of authenticity, prestige and tradition, asked only of products at the point of their consumption, veil much more important factors that would help get to the heart of those texts' respective meanings. In the case of food, rudimentary interpretations of culinary meanings and values are akin to the judging of cattle at an agricultural show. In other words, by lining up, say, a line of beef cows and rewarding the trueness of their shape, their head carriage and muscle mass, their potential profit yield, without considering for a moment the economic factors that determined their rearing, the employment arrangements of farm labourers, the living conditions of cattle and so on, one is left with a meaning that reflects only, as Appadurai notes, 'the things that are exchanged, rather than [the] forms or functions of exchange.'¹⁷

What I have described here is the need to adopt multiple lenses when reading postcolonial texts, or any text that might be read as a specific response, latent or otherwise, to an historical encounter. By which I mean that the interpretation of postcolonial novels, films, foods, and other forms must necessarily account for all that structures their postcolonial dynamic. That means paying attention to the circumstances visible in the widest possible lens, those things that indicate a thing's historic place in relation to other things, as well as the direct factors that govern the very production of that thing. The temptation to over-privilege a cultural-historical dimension, which in the process plays down social and economic factors, perhaps originates from a belief in the relatively

¹⁷ Appadurai, p. 10.

straightforward readability of things as cultural texts. When one purchases from a Leicester food outlet a samosa and duly consumes it as a text, one might draw conclusions about the item's cultural life based only on a simple understanding: the fact of the samosa's historic South Asian origin, the fact of its availability and its marketability in postcolonial Britain, and the fact of its gradual integration into a British culinary canon. Nevertheless, one would need to furnish this interpretation with details concerning the actual conditions present in the production of that single samosa. As I have already mentioned, some things make more explicit claims than others to be read as cultural texts. Apna Punjab's samosas do not clamour to be read as such; they are more unwitting cultural artefacts. (I should add as a justification for this that my visits to the shop were initially greeted with much consternation. The owner seemed dumbfounded by my academic interest in a samosa. A samosa is a samosa is a samosa, her expression seemed to say.)

A similar process can be observed in the reading of literature – a privileging of a novel's cultural-historical dimension. There is no immediate harm in this, theoretically, excepting the present risk of letting literature stand alone like history. What follows immediately hereafter is an exploration of two writers, Zakes Mda and Archie Weller, who are brought together beneath a hypothesis claiming that novels can be fixed to the points of a progressive arc, and that we might read this arc as one that anticipates the development of history.

CHAPTER TWO

The Arc of the Post-Settler-Colonial Novel

I • The Suitability of the Novel

The body of work we consider to be the canon of postcolonial literature may in due course find itself subsumed under the wider domain of World Literature. That this is a (very real) possibility is no bad thing, however, in the sense that the end of postcolonial literature could be seen to mark the closing stages of the postcolonial project. Not only is it the passing of time that does for a discipline (in the sense that, for example, one can only talk of post-war poetry as a valid designation for so long) but in the case of postcolonialism there is the added factor that as a project, if one sees it that way, the objective is ultimately to negotiate a passage beyond colonialism. And lest it be forgotten: the postcolonial project in the settler polity – the focus here – is especially sensitive because of the ongoing cohabitation of settler and indigenous populations. As such, as a literary genre, the lifespan of what one might call a post-settler-colonial literature is limited from the offset. This chapter, then, traces the arc of what we might consider to be postcolonial culture in both South Africa and Australia, from something that begins life decidedly rooted in anti-colonial or often nationalist sentiments but later appears to be something much more difficult to understand coherently. The chapter does so through an exploration of culture, and, specifically, by examining the cultural form arguably most useful to the once settler colony: the novel.

At the end of a period of struggle in which, whether formally or otherwise, colonial-era limitations have restricted the freedom of artistic culture, the novel emerges as a more favourable prospect, not just to those who have been on the receiving end of the restrictions but also to those for whom the novel has always

been an option. That this is the case requires explaining. When the production of culture is problematical to the point that it must be opportunistic and timely, the novel is not the most effective form of cultural address. In the first place, the conditions required to produce a work of such size and skill are not present. Secondly, though – and perhaps more importantly – the novel arguably cannot strike the same acerbic blows as its performance-focused counterparts: theatre, spoken word performance and music. It is the equivalent of waging an argument with an articulate speech when caustic screams will do the trick. We can see this in the exploration of Australian and South African cultural histories, in the propensity of counter-cultural producers towards forms that focus more on making a noise, so to speak, more than on how that noise sounds: in black South African theatre of the 1980s, for example, or with indigenous Australia poetry of the 1960s and 1970s, and the likes of poet-activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

Consequently, when those restrictive measures are repealed enough to render the novel a more suitable mode of address, it is the novel that is most able to assume the role of artistic culture's talisman. Culture in the post-settler order has the rather grandiose responsibility of managing the many narratives that arrive at the table, for the territories' once opposed populations are forcibly reconciled within the same polity. Narrative syncretisation, juggling, weaving, exchanging – in essence, a whole host of integrating processes – are not just necessary to the overarching task of carving out a culture that aptly represents the new dynamic of the population, but they are also inevitable and everyday processes that take place in the new order. In the newly post-apartheid South Africa, as an example, the lifting of legislation in 1990 that had quite literally prohibited culture mixing for four decades signalled the start of an era in which, theoretically, people of different racial backgrounds could conduct meaningful exchanges. In Australia, the absence of a formal shift into a postcolonial/post-settler framework has made an equivalent shift in culture less easily defined; nonetheless, the gradual (if somewhat underwhelming) empowerment of the Aboriginal population in recent decades illuminates that a significant shift in the settler/indigenous relationship has indeed occurred.

The outcome of this in term of a space's artistic culture is twofold. In the first place, the very presence of quotidian cross-cultural exchanges aids in the

creation of new narratives that are recorded by artistic culture in a broadly mimetic sense: the everyday experiences of a population once at odds but now ostensibly unified with each other provide colourful new nuances where before there was, in a word, only black and white. Dialects are modified, fashions develop at a different pace. Moreover, a more consciously creative project can begin among cultural producers who can indulge in the new cross-cultural creative conditions suddenly at their disposal. Of course, over time, this cross-cultural blending occurs more organically as exchanges between cultures become ever-more commonplace. Ultimately, I would argue, it is the novel that becomes most amenable to the postcolonial project. It is the form that can most effectively attempt to handle all of the new narratives and traditions: those narratives borne out of the new experiences of the population as its dynamic changes, and all of the cultural traditions that said population bring to the fore. Culture in the post-settler order is laden with expectation, and the novel in particular can appear to labour under the pressure of responsibility. There are few better ways to corroborate this notion than by considering a text that has been mentioned earlier, Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* (2001). It is telling that a book beginning with the ambivalent declaration that '[t]his is and is not David's story' should then conclude with the same narrator "washing her hands" of it.¹

The idea of responsibility is nothing less than complex, and it is understood differently with the passing of time. At first, in the years directly surrounding the liberationist turn, the novel is still by and large very much trapped within the anti-colonial sentiment that characterised literature in the years before the shift into the post-settler-colonial framework. As time goes by and the task facing the novel becomes more focused on the aftermath of the struggle, it can theoretically become more exploratory and experimental. In turn, it may edge ever closer to a would-be "after-colonial" novel – one that is not recognised as being part of a colonial tradition at all – but unsurprisingly the legacy is difficult to shift entirely. Nevertheless, it moves gradually but certainly through stages of bitterness and coming-to-terms before reaching experimentation. Paradoxically, it is when the post-settler-colonial novel is able to see itself as something other than itself that it is clear the postcolonial project has momentum. The novel in

¹ Zoe Wicomb, *David's Story* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), p.1; p. 213.

this respect, during this time, is like the tool making the goods rather than the goods produced. This is not to suggest that it is without value in its own right, but that in its lifespan the post-settler-colonial novel is ultimately the transitional novel, adapting all the time to the changing task at hand. The question here, then, is not as simple as asking what the post-settler-colonial novel is. Rather, it is a case of raising the issue of how it functions over time as both an independent work and as a complement to a wider postcolonial project.

II • Zakes Mda and Archie Weller

The writers whose work is under consideration here have various affiliations with colonialism, so to speak, not simply because the very term itself conjures up different ideas in the two separate locales the two men originate from, but also because the personal relationship each writer shares with colonialism is itself idiosyncratic. Archie Weller is an acclaimed West Australian poet and author and has published work sporadically since the 1980s. South African Zakes Mda is an equally acclaimed writer and a more recognisable figure internationally than Weller. There is no denying that the work of both writers belongs to a postcolonial literary tradition. Here, though, the aim is to illuminate how the passing of time in the postcolonial locale impacts on the individual writer and his output. A brief introduction to both writers is called for. Archie Weller was born in the Perth suburb of Subiaco in 1957, but grew up on a farm in Cranbrook in the rural southwest of Australia before attending boarding school back in Perth. Following a spell of different labouring jobs and a brief – and, in his own opinion, wrongful – incarceration, Weller's writing career began with the publication of *Day of the Dog* (1981), a novel that will be discussed in due course. To a certain extent, he is a controversial personality: Weller is one of several documented cases of Australian writers and artists in past few decades to lay claim to his Aboriginality. Much like fellow writer Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo), the exact details of Weller's ancestry are questionable and his relatively privileged upbringing would seem to render his Aboriginal identity anything but full-blooded. Nonetheless, whatever his standing as a debatable

figure in his homeland, Weller's writing is of supreme importance to the landscape of postcolonial Australian literature, as well as being unequivocally valuable to this chapter. South African Zakes Mda, meanwhile, was born in 1948 in the Eastern Cape village of Herschel. Growing up in a family of lawyers², Mda also turned to the profession before dropping out of law school in favour of painting. He gained an education internationally, studying in Lesotho, Switzerland and the United States, in addition to receiving a doctorate in his homeland at the University of Cape Town. Mda gained recognition during apartheid's latter years through his theatre work, and it was not until 1995 that his first novel *Ways of Dying* was published. In an interview a decade afterwards, Mda discussed his shift from theatre producer to novelist, and spoke of the way in which the novel offered something that his previous work could not:

The writing process became great joy. I actually enjoyed sitting down and interacting with my characters and with the place. I realized it is precisely because of that freedom—that for the first time in my life, I have discovered a medium that gives me total freedom to do what I want to do.³

It is a curious statement in the context of this enquiry. Mda follows this up with a further comment that gives a better understanding of the importance of the shift.

When apartheid came to an end, in the 1990s, it became possible for some of us blacks to consider the novel because we were in the process of attaining freedom. We had the freedom, the luxury, to sit down and write for months on end. The end of apartheid also freed the imaginations of black writers.⁴

It gives an indication of the esteem in which the novel was held in South Africa at this time. And Mda offers nothing more to suggest that the sense of freedom he seized in the early nineties has faded. Of course, it is a subjective comment and one would not wish to try and extrapolate beyond reason. Nevertheless, one can comment without reservation that the novel does indeed afford the writer a freedom that other forms struggle to deliver. For Mda and Weller, the novel has been an important mode in its ability to facilitate the task they have set themselves. The following section – and the primary thrust of the chapter – is

² Zakes Mda and Elly Williams, 'An Interview with Zakes Mda', *The Missouri Review*, 28:2 (2005), 62-75 (pp. 65-66).

³ Mda and Williams, p. 68.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 69.

both to explore what happens when the freedom afforded the novel comes up against the external pressures that influence its production, and to ruminate over the wider issues this raises.

III • *The Day of the Dog* (1981)

There seems to me something insipid about beginning the analysis of a novel by inspecting its opening gambit, and yet I am so struck by the first lines of Archie Weller's *The Day of the Dog* that I feel compelled to go against such a conviction. Immediately it appears to be both deeply entrenched within an Aboriginal literary tradition and profoundly attentive to stereotyping – so much so that on first reading it feels strangely familiar. 'He's been drinking all day in the park,' the narrator begins,

under the moulting trees that leave yellow tears strewn all over the scabby lawn.

The bubbly, noisy circle of nyoongahs has been visited by the police twice and the third time there will some arrests for sure, because tempers are starting to warm up now after a day's drinking. Everyone is celebrating Doug Dooligan's release from Fremantle after eighteen long, lonely months.⁵

The passage speaks so evocatively of the dilemma facing the Aboriginal population, or, more specifically, the part-Aboriginal troupe on which the novel directs its focus. From the opening image of the increasingly inebriated male under the tree, the novel's narrative gains momentum through stereotype: the 'bubbly, noisy circle of nyoongahs'⁶ and the seemingly commonplace visit by the police, the group alcohol consumption and the incarcerated, criminalised Doug are all familiar figures and occurrences, in literature and beyond.

The familiarity comes, then, from the fact that Weller's narrative, while stunningly rendered, feels unoriginal. The young, part-Aboriginal Doug, who flirts with the bottle and finds himself perilously close to a return to prison throughout the text, is a well-established literary stereotype. One need only look to the novel that is widely regarded as the first Aboriginal novel, Colin Johnson's

⁵ Archie Weller, *The Day of the Dog* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin), p. 1.

⁶ An indigenous group from Western Australia.

Wild Cat Falling (1965), to find another ‘half-breed delinquent’⁷ who is ‘filled with a dreamtime loneliness’.⁸ Weller’s novel opens, though, on something of an irony in the sense that young Doug Dooligan is propelled from prison into a version of freedom teeming with traps. His is a decidedly out-of-the-frying-pan-and-into-the-fire shift, a notion corroborated in the closing stages when all of his dreams quite literally go up in flames. Space in *The Day of the Dog* is so sharply defined and every composite part of Weller’s literary construct is so ideologically charged that the reader might very well be able to speculate very early on at Doug’s impending downfall. The urban-rural dialectic that so frequently and so unsurprisingly demarcates the boundaries between coloniser and colonised in Australian literature is maintained throughout by Weller, not simply to forge a solid sense of separation between the oppressive urban Perth and the natural beauty of rural Western Australia, but in order, it seems, to also engender the liminal nowhere-ness in which Doug’s existence is suspended. His is a being ‘not black enough to become a real part of the secret’, but neither is it ‘white enough to become a part of the busy scurrying race that rushes along like a perpetual mice plague’ (p. 59).

Weller’s Perth is a city constructed almost entirely of symbols. Rarely is a description of one of its spaces anything other than deeply laden with suggestion. The city reads as a beast, a constantly shifting creature that moves accordingly to accommodate its white inhabitants and ensnare Doug and his kind. He finds himself in a state of perpetual catch-up, caught out as he often is by the quickly changing city. On the night of his release from prison, for instance, with a stomach full of alcohol and a head full of dreams, Doug is accosted by the city:

Perth has changed. For a moment he is afraid and huddles into a corner along with the spiders and old butts and other unwanted things. [...]

Things have certainly changed since he’s been away. Where there was a traffic-bearing street, now there is a mall with seats and pot plants and a big stage in the middle. Doug climbs onto the wooden platform and does a waltz with an imaginary partner before he nearly falls off the edge. [...]

New buildings are shooting up like grey toadstools. No lights for them yet, just hard, cement husks. Old buildings in the process of being torn down stand, defiant to the last, in their dusty rubble sea.

Everything has to go sooner or later. Old buildings, old people, old hopes. (pp. 4-5)

⁷ Colin Johnson, *Wild Cat Falling* (Melbourne: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 43.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 72.

The newly pedestrian street is certainly a civic improvement for those who will benefit from it, but for Doug it has simply forced a change in the way that he sees, and moves, around the city. His only opportunity to profit from the alteration is a solitary night-time dance on the platform. While he has been locked away, the city has progressed inexorably and has, significantly, grown upwards in the form of grey, concrete monoliths that appear physically threatening. They cast new shadows over the city, producing new darkened corners. Nonetheless, they are markers of progress. And yet Perth's progress, in Doug's eyes at least, does not have positive connotations, for newness cannot accommodate the oldness he takes comfort from.

To discuss the city in this way, as some living creation, is not to bend Weller's words to our wont. The text at times does not require anything other than surface reading to gleam this sort of sentiment. 'The city has cut off their childhood,' (p. 44) the reader is informed of the new generation to which Doug belongs. His is part of a street generation, and one finds out early on that 'the streets are a cruel and bitter place in which to grow up, for they love no-one; only the lights and the spiders and the rain and the sun. The streets gather up all the rubbish and all the stories and keep them close to their stony hearts forever' (p.5). The places in the 'white man's city' (p. 89) that Doug and his kind have access to are down dead ends, in alleyways or in 'a vacant block by the railway line in East Perth, [...] a haven where Aboriginal alcoholics congregate to drink and die' (p. 89). It is no surprise, then, that after a matter of days of life back in the city after release, Doug believes that 'the future holds no prospect of pleasure' (p. 101) The consequent shift Doug undergoes as he moves from the charged urban space into the 'virginal green' (p. 132) of rural space is overwhelming. By contrast, '[t]his country is his Shangri-La,' the reader is told, 'where all things are eternally young and bountiful and beauty is everywhere' (p. 131). Soon, 'the bush, with its feathery fingers, has brushed away his thoughts about the city' (p. 141). The paradigm is well rendered, then: the city is bad while the country is good. Needless to say, the urban space is the domain of the white man and the pastoral is where the non-white man can find some form of belonging.

Nevertheless, the narrative development is paradoxically complex and somewhat predictable in that, the more bountiful the rural space is presented as being, the more likely it seems that it will play a hand in Doug's ultimate undoing. Indeed, the novel is unquestionably a commentary on the ideological nature of space, and, when Doug has undergone a convalescent period at his sister's rural home, the magnetism of the city returns. Pretty Boy shares Doug's desires and it is said that 'as soon as they save up enough money, he and Doug will leave for the delights of Perth and their two women' (p. 152). The draw of Perth is also the draw of women, and both harbour a similar danger. Doug's girlfriend Polly is, like Doug, trapped within the system, 'her life like that of a that a bumble-bee stopping to sip nectar here and there, then on again, but always ending up back in the hive' (p. 12) – a romantic analogy that nonetheless illuminates the cyclical, fruitless existence of young Aboriginal girls. Weller offers a portrayal of the dilemma facing non-white women, leaving the inclusion of a female character in the book whose function is anything other than as an object of sexual desire. Nor for that matter does it seem to be Weller's intention to challenge the general perception of collective Aboriginal existence. Instead, it appears that the task he has taken to hand is to do no more than lament the current situation. In her representative female role Polly is a character of little depth, for she features simply as the climax of male desire. She serves as a telling reflection of the novel generally in the sense that narrative appears to be unavailable. The novel's eventual outcome is governed by a preordained template in which Doug is always destined to turn to alcohol and crime before reaching Polly. She, in turn, is a woman whose place in the narrative is temporary and purely sexual. This pattern has been noted by Adam Shoemaker, who attributes its prominence in Aboriginal literature to the influence of White Australian culture: 'One steals the car or the money to impress the woman and assumes that the expected sexual reward will be forthcoming. Hence the White Australian consumer culture helps to entrap Black Australians into illegal modes of behaviour in order to live up to the image of success that it portrays.'⁹ Indeed, if one treats Shoemaker's notion with a degree of authority, it is possible to see the way in which white culture has provided Aboriginals with the means but not

⁹ Adam Shoemaker, 'Sex and Violence in the Black Australian Novel', *Westerly*, 1 (1984), 45-57 (p. 56).

ends, and all of Doug's consumerist desires ultimately lead him to the rather empty prize of a fleeting affair. Certainly, the rudimentary nature of Doug's and Polly's relationship is unsustainable for, after only one night together, 'he and she are [already] trapped in a lifestyle they can never escape. [They] might as well make the most of it while they can' (p. 16). This bleak outlook is both presented by the novel, and also plays an important role in shaping its conclusion. Doug is never likely to succeed in the environment Weller has created for the simple fact that it makes no allowances for it.

Symbolism in *Day of the Dog* supersedes narrative, and these symbols construct the oppressive world of the novel. While the Aboriginal space is dark, untidy, but ultimately accessible, the white man's space is the opposite: simple, threatening and yet impenetrable. For instance, when Doug is picked up one morning by two detectives with 'short hair, clipped moustaches, neat suits [and] shiny shoes' (p. 100) and taken to the police station, the car that transports him is 'impersonal, with [...] clean, vinyl seats and new carpets' (p. 101). The station, too, is a featureless edifice. 'Strange,' Doug thinks, 'that a building with so much glass and light is often the place of foul, dark subversion [...] as he is hurried through the back door and into a softly humming lift' (p. 101). There does not appear to be a chance of resisting authority because it is an ungraspable, characterless entity. Even white men on the street possess the same blandness, with each member of the gang who surround Doug and Jenny one morning being 'grinning, shaven-headed, big-booted white boys' (p. 34) – like symbolic representations of white men with nothing to tell one from the next. So sated is the novel with these symbolic figurations that when the text's resolution arrives it has lost the significance it could possibly have had. Doug's unsurprising downfall comes when a plan to hold up a shop before returning to Perth with the money goes badly wrong. Hatched under the weight of alcohol, one knows enough about the pitiful figure of the drunken Aboriginal by this point to predict that the plan will not bring about the desired result. The novel ends with a fatal car crash involving Doug and his gang as they try and evade police capture following the robbery. Even if the manner of the downfall is unexpected, the outcome is inevitable all the same. Doug is always destined to go down in a blaze of un-glory. A return to

Perth would surely yield only a repetition of the cycle and would end up with Doug once again behind bars, for defeat is so deeply inscribed into Weller's locale. While an ancient Aboriginal existence is presented in the text, with the veneration of the unspoilt pastoral at its heart, that existence has been subsumed within the framework of a fast-moving white Australia that lures life towards modern urban space. Therefore, while Doug, on his way from Perth to the countryside, experiences the 'soft song of homecoming' driving past 'scruffy, ravaged pines, with their dark green foliage etched against the sky' (p. 129), it is 'the black spaces and dead-end streets of the Perth he loved best' (p. 131) that demarcate his zenith.

Day of the Dog, then, is in many ways a work that continues the tradition begun by Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling*, a novel sixteen years its senior. It offers a more elegiac voice than one actively dissenting to the system. Ivor Indyk does not miss the mark totally when he detects traces of hope in Weller's later work: 'For all his focus on the destruction of Aboriginal aspirations, Weller is the most powerfully committed of all the Aboriginal writers to a pastoral vision which expresses hope and the possibility of a release from hatred, anger, and conflict.'¹⁰ Nevertheless, hope in *Day of the Dog* is visible in only a rather empty sense, and comes in the way of minor victories against white authority. Like the case of Eddie Wondonie, 'a fullblood boy from Mowanjum mission' (p. 15), who is arrested over the theft of a truck. 'At the police station,' it is said, 'they made the mistake of treating [him] like a Perth boy. The Mowanjum youth, as proud and indestructible as his country, fought off the entire lockup staff before being subdued.' (p. 15) Aboriginal success in this white man's country is reduced to fleeting displays of old-fashioned Aboriginal resilience, but which end in defeat anyway. The arc of the post-settler-colonial novel, though, can be seen to begin here with works such as Weller's, those texts unable to see further than the bleakness they depict, for the simple reason that the symbols sating them are still too invested with rigid and oppressive meanings. Even if there is palpable irony in them – the policemen, the immaculate cars, the CIB glasshouse and the shaven-headed, big booted man on the street – the novel presents a rigid and

¹⁰ Ivor Indyk, 'Pastoral and Priority: The Aboriginal in Australian Pastoral', *New Literary History*, 24:4 (1993), 837-855 (p. 853).

apparently undefeatable landscape of colonialist monoliths that show little hope of change.

IV • *Ways of Dying* (1995)

Much scholarly criticism was levelled at *Ways of Dying* in the years following its publication. Many articles discussed the relative successes and failures of the text. Grant Farred, for example, in an article that is not alone in its disappointment, comments on the way in which *Ways of Dying* 'is a flawed work that is, in part because of its shortcomings, symptomatic of the condition of postapartheid South Africa'.¹¹ That it seemed an inclination to discuss the novel in such a way – as one that did or did not meet some level of literary expectation – is a measure of where it stands contextually as a prose work. Indeed, Mda's text has been so hotly debated because it sits on the cusp of the post-apartheid designation of South African literature. Certainly, literature produced in South Africa during the immediate post-apartheid years stepped out into an atmosphere of extremely high expectation. I do not intend in this chapter to contribute an appraisal to that particular debate, but to consider the position of *Ways of Dying* on the arc of the post-settler novel. If *The Day of the Dog* is a novel that sits firmly entrenched within the politically and culturally charged ideologies of colonial-time Australia, and showed little light at the end of the tunnel, Mda's prose debut is a far more open-ended, albeit no less acerbic, affair. Set during a period of violent transition in South Africa between 1990 and 1994, between apartheid's end and the arrival of democracy, *Ways of Dying* unsurprisingly moves on from the stringency of Weller's novel. Put crudely, things are moving in the former where in the latter ostensibly they were not. The developments, though, resonate curiously in Mda's text, where one can feel that, although the colonial-era structures and attitudes have not died away, the prospect of change in the new South Africa has begun to announce its arrival. As a final point of comparison before examining the text, let it be noted that, if *The Day of the Dog* could see no light at the end of the tunnel, *Ways of Dying* can see a light, but can see also that it is not straightforwardly hopeful.

¹¹ Grant Farred, 'Mourning the Postapartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 46:1 (2000), 183-206 (p. 183).

Mda has noted in interview that his novels often start with a character and that the story itself comes later: 'I create characters without any story for them because I know that one day this character will come in handy. My stories are heavily character based. They begin with a character,' he remarks.¹² In this respect, Toloki, Mda's chosen protagonist, is the most vital aspect of the novel, a representation of what literary figure is available to the South African writer at such a sensitive moment. The story follows Toloki as he moves from his village to the city (a well-worn narrative, of course) where he experiences homelessness before finding some manner of residence at a squatter camp. In the city, he carves out a vocation for himself as a professional mourner, attending funerals around the city and providing his service of mourning the dead.¹³ The ambivalence of such a profession is at once evident, but it is worth fleshing it out nonetheless. Toloki forges a career from the suffering of others, from the many who routinely die in a country that is violently giving birth to itself. That he can do so is precisely due to the fact that, as the title and the opening line suggest, 'there are many ways of dying' (p. 7). Professional mourning, it seems, is not a particularly lucrative venture, although Toloki's hopes are optimistic:

One day he would like to have a fixed rate of fees for different levels of mourning, as in other professions. Doctors have different fees for different illnesses. Lawyers charge fees which vary according to the gravity of the case. [...] But for the time being he will accept anything he is given, because the people are not yet used to the concept of a Professional Mourner. It is a fairly new concept, and he is still the only practitioner. He would be willing to train other people though, so that when he dies the tradition will continue. Then he will live in the history books of history as the founder of a noble profession. (p. 17)

Even if he foresees a day when he can charge fixed rates, Toloki dreams not necessarily of financial recompense for mourning. Instead, his aspirations focus on the extension and the longevity of the concept itself. Moreover, what he lacks in financial reward, Toloki makes up for in the fostering of an identity that is idiosyncratic and breaks free of the rigid identity boundaries imposed under apartheid. There is no question that his vocation makes him "other" and yet Toloki is ultimately responsible for the process. In the coming of a new order that has afforded him an opportunity of sorts, Toloki focuses his attention on securing a personal and historical legacy. The contextual backdrop to *Ways of*

¹² Mda and Williams, p. 72.

¹³ Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (New York: Picador, 1995), p. 15.

Dying, indeed, sees South Africa moving towards a position where a new history is firmly up for grabs, where dividing lines are being re-negotiated. There are glimpses of this changing everyday reality in the novel itself, albeit framed in the embittered and skewed thoughts of, for example, the book's communal narrators or the restaurateurs outside whose premises Toloki loiters:

Toloki refused to move away. It was a public place, wasn't it? Didn't he have the right to be where he wanted to be? [...] "What can we do?" the restaurant owners said resignedly. 'Ever since these people began to know something about rights they have got out of hand. I tell you, politics has destroyed this country.' ' (p. 27)

Irrespective of whether changes in rights are helping or hindering the general progress of the nation, that things are moving at all is beyond question. Nor is it problematic to remark that Toloki profits from these changes, in the same way that he profits from death: where before there death was a marker of finality, there is now opportunity in it. Farred comments on the way in which 'Toloki seems more at ease in the post-apartheid moment. [He] is a man who has correctly taken the pulse of his era.'¹⁴ The idea of profiteering in these circumstances is full of contradictions, though, and Toloki's resourcefulness – if it can be labeled as such – does come at a cost. In fact, it is costly for anyone in the novel who wishes to carve themselves an opening in the changing order of things.

It does not do simply to make straightforward, blow-for-blow comparisons between Mda and Weller, but it is interesting to observe the way in which the fraught but changing spatial politics of Mda's text sit alongside Weller's rigidly blocked Perth. The restaurateurs have a point when they speak of the downfall of the country at the hands of politics: the neat dividing lines that politics can maintain are gone in *Ways of Dying*, and the transformation of the landscape is unsettling – in every sense of the word. The reader is informed well into the novel of Toloki's early days in the city, during which time he moved from home to home and between jobs. Neither accommodation nor employment could grant stability and, as quickly as Toloki finds a place to live or work, he moves on again. Everything about this section of book hints at the double-edged nature of human existence during politically volatile eras. For example, Toloki is able to

¹⁴ Farred, p. 191.

find work, is then moved on for one reason or another, before finding work again. Meanwhile, he laments the government's refusal to house black workers, with he and his friends collectively appropriating a space of their own to build on. Their new houses are knocked or burned down by 'state-paid vigilantes' (p. 121), only for the group to rebuild them. With savings that he accrues during one spell of employment, Toloki is able to establish his own street catering business, and is able to '[conduct] his trade in the central business district of the city' (p. 122). The business proves incredibly lucrative, due primarily to the fact that his is the first business of its type – the lunchtime rush leaves 'his pockets [bulging] with profits,' (p. 122) the reader is told. That Toloki can operate in this way, as a poor village boy able to exploit a niche in the centre of the city, is testament to the changing face of the nation – even if there is still death all around, and even if, eventually, Toloki's trolley is seized by council employees and crushed. It is a time of omnipresent transience: ordinary people begin to benefit from opportunities, the authorities still wield enough power to overwhelm them, more opportunities open up elsewhere. Doors close, windows open.

There is something significant in the spatial politics of Mda's novel, too. The positioning of Toloki's catering trolley in the heart of the business district disrupts structured apartheid space, as do the 'proliferation of [trolleys] in the streets of every city in the land' (p. 122) that later appear. These pop-up businesses, with their peculiar appearance, filling the air with the spicy aroma of grilled meat (p. 122), are colourful blotches on the otherwise bland cloth of the white city. Much in the same way, the makeshift camp that Toloki and the group construct amounts to the annexing of territory 'designated for white residential development' (p. 121). Space thus appears fluid and up-for-grabs in Mda's literary locale where in *The Day of Dog* it is resolutely ring-fenced.

Epitomising the pervasive sense of transition in *Ways of Dying* is the relationship between Toloki and his "homegirl" Noria, a childhood friend. Toloki's itinerant employment leads eventually to mourning, and it is at a funeral that he first eyes Noria, whose son is the life being mourned. Like Toloki, Noria has migrated to the city, where it emerges she has been involved in prostitution, although now she devotes her time to the (often orphaned) children of the squatter camp. While their exploits have brought them to this same juncture,

their respective journeys have been different. The past emerges as the source from which the future can be glimpsed in the sense that Toloki and Noria use the antiquated customs of their village past in order to move forward in the city. They embark together over the latter stages of the novel on a journey that is unique. Their relationship is one not based on orthodox foundations – it is not sexual, for one – but is a partnership of reciprocation in which both parties seek the support of each other in order to secure some sort of future together. Toloki, whose solitary, nomadic existence has made him forget the practical ways of living, benefits from Noria's care (she is always the one who orchestrates washing and cleaning routines), while she, having seemingly inherited some manner of spiritual affliction through her years of suffering, wants him 'to teach [her] how to live. And how to forgive' (p. 151). Both require each other so that they may go on living, burdened as they are by apartheid-induced maladies. Certainly, as Yogita Goyal has noted, 'both are scarred by a past too difficult to comprehend, and only by coming together and finding a way of making meaning out of their painful memories can they find some peace.'¹⁵ The dynamic of the pair's relationship is intriguing. In the first place, they are mutually reliant upon each other, with neither assuming control. Moreover, the sexual thoughts that Toloki appears to harbour for Noria are understood and quelled by the latter. It is thus not the case that Toloki is physically different from other men, but that his and Noria's relationship is one of a newfound pureness, and one liberated from regulation.

The power of the relationship is no private matter either for it is observed by Noria's acquaintance, Shadrack, who, having witnessed as Toloki works up into a creative frenzy, drawing colourful pictures while Noria's singing inspires him, remarks that theirs a 'creative partnership' (p. 200) and one that should not be spoiled. Again, the notion is brought to the surface that the two of them are able, in tandem to foster something meaningful amidst the surrounding chaos. In turn, this brings to mind arguably the most resonant section of the book. After Noria's shack is destroyed, Toloki takes it upon himself to redecorate it with magazine clippings so that 'every inch of the walls is covered with bright pictures – a wallpaper of luxury' (p. 111). The private space is decorated in such a way that,

¹⁵ Yogita Goyal, 'The Pull of the Ancestors: Slavery, Apartheid, and Memory in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and *Cion*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42:2 (2011), 147-169 (p. 151).

under the guidance of Toloki, the pair are able to wander through it as though it were a luxury mansion replete with a king-size bed, swimming pool and beautiful gardens:

Toloki takes Noria's hand, and strolls with her through the grandeur. First they go to the bedroom, and she runs and throws herself on the comfortable king-size bed. [...] They move from the bedroom to explore the kitchen. There is a beautiful peach-coloured 'kitchen scheme', with cupboards that are fully-stocked with the ingredients from making cakes of all types, and a big fridge full of cold drinks. Some cakes are baking in the oven of the electric stove. [...] The whole garden is a potpourri of colour, designed by expert landscape architects. Petals and scents drift above the pathways that twist and wind up the slope. [...] There are slashing brooks and waterfalls that cascade to a collecting pool. (p. 112-113)

One has difficulty knowing where to start discussing the significance of what is occurring here. In the first place, it may be worth passing comment on the magic realist element that the passage brings to the novel, something that Mda has discussed openly in interview:

I often hear from various critics in South Africa and elsewhere —the United States—that my work is magic realism. I have no quarrel with that particular label. But I'd like to mention that the sources of my magic realism— if you can call it that —are really in the traditional literatures of the various peoples of southern Africa. In our oral traditions, the world of the supernatural and that of objective reality exist side by side in the same context.¹⁶

The pair's dreamlike rambling can be read as a challenge to established ideas about the links between built environments and power. For while Toloki and Noria are undergoing a process of utopianism based primarily on imagining their material desires, their objective is actually, it seems, to find spiritual meaning. The tiny, ramshackle, but ultimately private space, is utilised as a portal of escape, beyond which the pair can achieve that which cannot be found anywhere in the real-life space of the novel. The question that resonates appears to pit the value of materialism against the imagination. The process is perhaps, as Goyal has suggested, a peace-seeking exercise; or, perhaps, a 'moment [that] signals a kind of healing as well as an exorcism'.¹⁷ The passage, then, is a definite lesson suggesting that the key to survival in these unsettling times in South Africa – and survival in the sense of meaningful existence, of knowing *ways of living* – is to search out spiritual, as opposed to material, welfare. By the end of the novel, Toloki and Noria have managed to salvage something from the chaos that

¹⁶ Mda and Williams, p. 71.

¹⁷ Goyal, p. 152.

surrounds them and have arrived at some manner of resolution, even if it is not the harbinger of closure, per se.

Ways of Dying is neither a despondent nor an uplifting novel, but is underwritten by a tone of charged ambiguity. Everything in Mda's text is transient and open-ended, understandably so considering its context. It speaks of the ambivalence of transition, reflecting the moment at which the firmly held control of colonialism is cracked, an instant that prompts a period of fierce negotiation. Economic systems are changing: Toloki's business ventures are not always financially sustainable, but that he is able to pursue them at all is telling. His father's friend, too, Nefolovhodwe, while generally shown in an unfavourable light throughout the novel, runs a lucrative business selling coffins to cater for the many deaths (an ambivalent business if ever there were one), and makes a seemingly permanent migration from the village to the city's upmarket suburbs. Land boundaries are constantly changing to the extent that space undergoes a perpetual cycle of acquisition and seizure in which there is no guarantee of permanence. Generally speaking, the balance of power is shifting in an inexorable but entirely unpredictable sense. Inasmuch, the novel is necessarily unpredictable, too. Scholarly criticism of *Ways of Dying* is unsurprising, particularly that which finds fault with the questions the novel raises but fails to answer. In the first place, I would note that any criticism is quite rightly outweighed by praise of Mda's rendering of the text, which pays testimony to the gradual – but very preliminary – emergence of the post-settler novel, drawing as it does so sophisticatedly on white and black South African cultural traditions. Secondly, it must be remarked that *Ways of Dying* is a work that mourns as much as it observes mourning, and the mourning process is not a simple one in literary terms. Where Freud speaks of the necessity of mourning as a process at the end of which 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again,'¹⁸ Mda undertakes the same act through the character of Toloki. Even if, as some commentators have mentioned, Toloki understands neither the causes nor the consequences of the violence that he witnesses, the actual act of witnessing itself is significant, perhaps illustrating violence as a means to a future and not an end in itself. One

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', *The Complete Psychological Works: Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1917), pp. 243-258 (p. 245).

might point to a particularly poignant remark made in the novel by Shadrack, who, having been assaulted by white supremacists travelling in a police van, lies in a hospital bed and declares that he will lay charges against the police. ‘The hell-ride is going to make me rich,’ he tells Noria (p. 143). There is hope residing in the very depths of his pain. The novel, it seems, subscribes to this same notion – the idea that there is reason to be hopeful despite the chaos of the present situation. *Ways of Dying* is no less violent than *The Day of the Dog* – in fact, it is somewhat more so – but its violence is of a different tenor, one that when worked through may give way to a more promising future.

V • *Land of the Golden Clouds* (1998)

So far, then, the arc of the post-settler novel’s development has evolved from its origins, firmly rooted in the charged ideologies of colonial discourse, into a mode that is distinctly unsettled. If Weller’s *The Day of the Dog* is overwhelmed by the binarism of late colonialism, the shortcomings of *Ways of Dying* arise in the vastness of the space opened up when that binarism is overcome. Certainly, though, circumstance is circumstance, and any novel touched by colonialism is subject to different depths of touch. In other words, (post)colonial literature can only operate in a framework it is allowed. The next point on the arc is plotted by Archie Weller’s 1998 novel, *Land of the Golden Clouds*, a text whose publication heralds a step into territory that exists beyond the postcolonial “moment”. A decade had passed since the Australian bicentenary – an important, if not definitive, threshold in settler-indigenous relations – and Weller’s novel assumes an entirely different thrust to that which seemed to propel *The Day of the Dog*. Where before Weller’s tone had been lamenting and parochial, *Land of the Golden Clouds* seems to signal a departure into a new mode of writing that is at first glance much less restrained than its predecessor. In crude terms, it is a novel that sees lamentation yield to contemplation. The battle lines drawn during the colonial period do not dissipate in the period following the “moment”, for, as has been noted previously, the task taken up by the postcolonial novel often means assessing its own recalcitrant coloniality. And yet, those lines become

transformed and obscured to the extent that they actually serve the author favourably as a creative impetus.

Weller's novel follows the odyssey of an ever increasing, 'hybrid band'¹⁹ of travellers across a harsh, post-apocalyptic Australian landscape. More broadly, though, the novel is driven by a series of foci. In the first place, the increasing miscellany of the troupe as it gradually welcomes members from conflicting and unknown groups perhaps encourages an allegorical reading, in that the conciliation between factions at odds with one another speaks of a need for reconciliation in a post-settler Australia. Yet arising most illuminatingly from the text is a subtle but ongoing commentary on the enduring nature of familiar cultural and traditional practices. Indeed, Weller's focus moves away from base-level impact of colonial oppression – such as Doug's treatment at the hands of White Perth denotes – and, instead, it sets its sights more widely on the issue of colonialism's lasting cultural and epistemological reign. The novel's locale plays an important hand in the delivery of this commentary because, set three thousand years into the future, there is obvious irony in Weller's suggestion that Western culture and tradition endures so lastingly. Of course, this is not the full extent of it: there is the suggestion that these customs have the fortitude, too, to outlive Armageddon, the endurance to survive the shift, in Weller's words, from the "Old Time" to the "New Time".

Even if three millennia have passed since Armageddon, since 'white people [...] annoyed the spirits and caused the High Ones to walk upon the earth, bringing not sustenance but destruction' (p. 5), the moment continues to shape the order of things in Weller's locale. The novel begins with an introduction to the Ilkari Nations, 'a contented race with their simple beliefs, their water, their Baba and, of course, their stories' (p. 36). More specifically, the reader is acquainted with Ilgar (later Red Mond Star Light), the clan's so-called "moon talker", a prophet-like figure who is said to hold unrivalled visionary powers. His is a prized role among his people and, certainly, the Ilkari are an organised and socially stratified race with well-bedded traditions. History (with a capital H) is an important consideration for them in that it pervades their everyday existence, the Ilkari displaying an inherent propensity towards storytelling and historicising.

¹⁹ Archie Weller, *Land of the Golden Clouds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998), p. 216.

The responsibilities held by the “Baba”, for example, ‘the clan’s historian, law maker and, more importantly, the history giver’ (p. 36), demonstrates the centrality of historiography for his clansmen and himself. The interrelation of these disparate groups is where Weller grounds his narrative, keen as he is to pass comment on the nature of culture exchange in a setting far removed from the present day. Certainly, *Land of the Golden Clouds* is an exploration of histories and cultures in contact with one another in general, more than it is one about specific people in contact with each other. The combination of three thousand years, and the passing Armageddon, provides the abstraction necessary to strip the cultures on show of the power they might previously have held. Cultures of whiteness no longer possess the historical power of whiteness, for one; that symbolic economy has been restructured. The politics of the novel are so far straightforward: cultures exist in a lateral system of exchanges where differences of custom, appearance, territory and history are acknowledged unreservedly, wherein dialogue is conducted on equal footing. The oral traditions of one group are never valued against the documented cultures of another. Likewise, barbarism is not presented as the inferior pairing of a dichotomy but as a valid characteristic in its own right. And we therefore observe cultures as self-contained entities engaging in lateral rather than hierarchical exchange. Weller’s presentation, then, is not of cultures and their manner of exerting unsubstantiated power over one another, but is the presentation of defined, rival cultures and the possibilities generated through their dialogue.

Having ventured out into unclaimed territory, Ilgar and his companions soon encounter two tribes, the Keepers of the Trees, with whom the Ilkari hold an amicable relationship based on respectful avoidance of one another, and the Nightstalkers (People of the Caves). A violent conflict takes place with the latter. Foreshadowing the novel’s latter stages, however, a member of the enemy, S’shony, comes close enough to Ilgar and seems to identify something that runs deeper than the enmity:

It was only when her cool white fingers touched his cheek and ran through his hair in pleasurable motions that he completely relaxed. Here was a sign, not of hate or anger, but, curiously, of affection. He could not know why, but only that it was so. The brief war was over. (p. 24)

Indeed, this brief exchange replaces hate and anger with affection. Ilgar's realisation comes in the heart of the battle, when his preconceptions are suddenly disproven before his eyes. Plunging a knife into one of his opponents and noticing that he has drawn blood, he thinks: 'why, they are not monsters but humans, the same as us, [...] and can die just as easily' (p. 22). Despite the fact that the battle yields casualties, and Ilgar thinks to himself that 'it had been her Race that had brought about this destruction' (p. 24), he exonerates S'shony and soon the 'strange pair' (p. 25) head back to Ilgar's clan. A sequence is set in motion from here on in whereby various cultural groups are encountered, at which point their customs are observed and an exchange is duly negotiated. This cycle forms the vast majority of the novel's action so that the importance of the narrative lies in the ongoing success of the troupe as a 'hybrid band' - and not, as one might first consider, in the eventual victory of Ilgar and the Ilkari. Each negotiating point establishes difference between the groups, but also rationalises and contextualises these disparities so that, with each encounter, the travelling caravan are enriched. For instance, S'shony's introduction into the group is eventually perceived favourably: it is seen as being 'good to have unbelievers in our midst, to question all things and keep always the truth in our eyes' (p. 53). Thereafter, when a grounded airplane introduces a contingent of West Indians into Ilgar's growing assembly, the newcomers bring with them civilising customs, technology, medicine and philosophy. Equally, the seemingly barbarous ways of the initial group become valuable to the Islanders, too. Unity flourishes as the group makes its way across the landscape and, pertinently, it is said that one night, playing music by the fireside, 'the Gypsy Flamenco, the Jamaican Reggae and the gentle trilling of Jada's flute seemed strangely to gather together into an enjoyable tune' (p. 110). Later in the journey, in the Silver City, the group encounters a people living under the mandate of a strict ruling system, and, even if their passing experience of the city is one of violence, the caravan leaves with an acquired knowledge of law and of reason.

The next member welcomed into the groups is Laelia, a prophet's wife, who introduces her own philosophies to the group. Later, the group encounter the Cricketeers, a group whose lives are shaped totally from cricket, to the extent

that their social order, their spirituality and their language derive directly from the sport. Their initial appearance to Red Mond and the group is oddly comical:

‘Well bowled, sir,’ cried one, as they came to a swishing halt. ‘Caught them in the slips. Howzat, I’d say!’

‘Out for a duck!’ grinned another.

‘There are some Maydinova’s here, Cap Tan. Shall we add them to the score board?’ a third muttered, eyeing the women lasciviously. (p. 282)

With a blend of amusement and trepidation, S’shony explains to Red Mond the basics of the cult:

These men are called the Cricketeers and they believe in a being that is a crimson ball, a shining red light. They are fanatics, believing they can find this crimson orb even in death. They come in four classes: the Keepah, who has the history of the cult in his head; the Bowlah, who is the chief warrior and organises attacks; and the Fieldahs and Battahs are the soldiers. The boys are called ‘the twelfth men’ for there can only ever be eleven. If someone dies, a boy is apprenticed to the team. (p. 287)

An old (white) cultural form has duly provided meaning to the cult, so that their life is given a higher imperative than simple survival. Further to their everyday practices, there exists a divine element to their existence, both in terms of sacred places – the Emceegee²⁰ – and their belief in cricket-derived deities: ‘Garfield Sobers, Viv Veeyan Richards, Desaynes, Jefdujon, Curt Leeambrose, My Cool Holding, Richie-Richie Arrdson, Iron Lara.’²¹ (p. 285) The group’s comical rituals and cricket-termed vernacular provide one of the more humorous episodes in the novel, but they actually epitomise the commonly held desires of the narrative’s vast cast. What the Cricketeers have constructed is a meaningful way of life through their mythologising and legend making, as a result of which they have fostered a sense of belonging to a land graced by endless groups seeking something similar. However diverse the practices are of the various groups who inhabit the novel, a desire to secure a sense of belonging appears to be the uniting thread. From this, one finds resonance in the late-nineties Australia from which Weller is writing – a multicultural,²² but often segregated, state comprised of various cultural groups whose customs are vastly different but whose goals are not.

²⁰ The Melbourne Cricket Ground, Victoria.

²¹ Misspellings of famous West Indian cricketers, Vivian Richards, Desmond Haynes, Jeff Dujon, Curtly Ambrose, Michael Holding, Richie Richardson and Brian Lara.

²² In the most literal sense of the word, meaning multiple composite cultures.

The land of the golden clouds, the evocative designation of the novel's locale, is far removed from anything familiar to readers; nevertheless, the recognisable elements that do remain are three-thousand-year-old cultural residues that even the end of the world has not been able to destroy. Weller's speculative work is driven by the reasoning that, as conscious constructs, the recognisable features of cultures harbour the inherent resilience to outlive the ideologies that may once have driven them. The book's motive, though, is not concerned solely with the depiction of speculative, quasi-familiar cultures, nor does it commend the endurance that those cultures possess. In truth, that they have not faded away over time is due most likely to the fact that they have existed in perpetual isolation from one another, within the impenetrable borders of their own making. It has thus taken three millennia for meaningful and productive cultural dialogue to arise by the time that Red Mond embarks upon the journey that will change that fact. And, in the very nature of that journey, one can observe Weller's promotion of intercultural exchange.

Indeed, where the author postulates a theory concerning the interconnected destiny of world cultures, the reader can furnish his or her own theories concerning Weller's motives for the book. It is perhaps telling that he does not favour any particular group on show in the novel, but seems willing to put forward only a decidedly speculative and open-ended view of the world. Those whose practices resemble traditionally white/colonial forms (the Cricketeers, for example) fare no differently from those whose customs seemingly resemble indigenous customs (the Ilkari, the Keepers of the Trees). Of all the groups on show in *Land of the Golden Clouds*, the narrative does not yield a victorious cultural group; it is Red Mond's diverse bunch whose survival represents a victory for interconnectedness. If the narrative to this point is plainly speculative, its conclusion resonates firmly in the real world. The depleted but diverse caravan's journey brings them into a final conflict with the so-called People of the Caves and their leader, The King of the Bats, where victory for Red Mond's troupe comes at the cost of much bloodshed. The aftermath, during which time the group conducts itself according to the respective strengths of *all* its composite parts, provides the core message at the heart of all Weller's conjecturing. The injuries sustained by members of the group are remedied by

combinations of 'Chinese ingenuity, Aboriginal bush lore and Laelia's magic' (p. 367); the West Indians make the land their home and in doing so bring 'peaceful technology to this savage, primitive world' (p. 368); a formidable partnership is struck up between the 'compassionate' Kareen and the 'savage' Leef (p. 368); Red Mond Star Light delivers the speech that reports of the coming utopia that lies beyond rehabilitation:

The time for war is over. Go forth and bring in the rest of the Nightstalkers unharmed. For the purpose of all this death and the loss of our compatriots was not to continue the killing but to end it all. [...] There are many different people, all of whom hate each other, and yet we banded together. So who can say who is an enemy? Let us embrace our enemy and all be friends and I will lead you out of our dark world. (p. 368)

And, where there are human successes, there are also territorial resolutions that bring security and commerce: 'The caves were opened up,' we are told, 'and, where before the chimneys had been places of evil and the openings to stealthy death, now they became highways of safety and trade.' (p. 369) There is an apparently straightforward lesson here. Above all, Weller is unquestionably championing the reconciliation between disparate cultures, considering that only when unity is reached in the novel does conflict dissipate. His handling of the presentation of these different groups throughout is perhaps impartial enough that our sympathy or our repugnance is never significantly piqued enough to make the narrative wholly or consistently engaging. Yet reconciliation is Weller's order of the day and this neutrality is the required means of achieving it, it seems. One would find it difficult to complete the novel without ascertaining Weller's apparent rationale: that cultures are self-contained, resilient and idiosyncratic entities; that the meetings of cultures need to be lateral and not hierarchical if they are to be productive; and that, finally, despite the often impermeable boundaries that cultures construct and maintain between one another, allowances must be made if multiple cultures are to be engaged in a dialogue that is productive.

In 1998, at the time of the novel's publication, there was a sense that the factors listed here parallel the same factors that stood in the way of full intercultural dialogue in contemporary Australia – an unwillingness in some circles to make the allowances that were crucial in the process of moving forward as an ideally multicultural state. But Weller is of course going further

than just presenting problems of intercultural exchange here. He is, one would think, hinting at the genuine prospect of a fully inclusive Australian future, even if it comes in the shape of a vision abstracted from reality respectively by three thousand years, an apocalypse and mass bloodshed. The delicate balance of hope and despair that is so palpable in *Ways of Dying* is replicated here, and, certainly, violent conflict remains a leitmotif. Importantly, however, the dynamic of the violence has shifted in the first place from *The Day of the Dog*, where it is seemingly a tool for the imposition of, or resistance against, oppression. The book moves on, too, from the violence of *Ways of Dying*, where it is widespread and tinged with only an abstract hope. In *Land of the Golden Clouds*, violence is widespread, but it is utilised – if one can put it in such terms – as Red Mond says, ‘not to continue the killing but to end it all’ (p. 378). That Weller can present such an outcome in *Land of the Golden Clouds* feels indicative of the fact that a similar outcome is available in the reality beyond the novel, where a positive resolution is no longer just hoped for, but is a realistic, albeit a challenging, possibility. *Land of the Golden Clouds* is a novel driven by the notion of intercultural dialogue rather than by violence, but violence has not yet completely abated. It is a novel that also sees Weller working with a liberty that seems to have been previously unavailable. The very texture of prose and his narrative are now less restricted and able to look beyond its erstwhile colonial-era discursivity. The arc thus takes its next turn and, in doing so, the post-settler novel gathers pace.

VI • *The Whale Caller* (2005)

If the opening of this chapter hinted broadly that the post-settler novel emerges from its anti-colonial position to resemble something much more complicated in its relationship with the postcolonial, here is the moment at which aesthetic and conceptual indeterminacy come to the fore. *The Whale Caller* is not a difficult novel; indeed, one critic’s suggestion that ‘[the novel] is primarily a love story

set in contemporary South Africa'²³, although grossly naïve, does perhaps reveal a little about the surface-level drive of the narrative. One can read Mda's text in a way that does not delve beneath this story of a courtship between two marginalised South African outcasts: the flamboyant Whale Caller and Saluni the village drunk. My recourse to such a simplistic reading, however, would be to submit that *The Whale Caller* illuminates the instant at which South Africa's post-settler reconciliatory practices collide quite spectacularly with their causal effects. Following the triumph of rainbow nation eulogising in the years after 1994, and its accompanying surge in the country's economy, came the pitfalls of rapid political change, capitalist expansion and subsequent ecological backlash. In Benita Parry's 'What is Left in Postcolonial Studies', the writer quite systematically dismisses essays by Robert Young and Dipesh Chakrabarty, and it brings Parry at one turn to flag up the latter's limited (if not absent) exploration of Leftist writing on ecology. She duly comments that Chakrabarty fails to address existing scholarship arguing that 'human history is necessarily unthinkable outside its dialectical relation to natural history, both intimately bound up with the rise of the capitalist world economy'.²⁴ While Parry's argument originates from, and indeed heads towards, positions separate from the concerns of this chapter, she remarks directly that the "human/nature nexus" is indeed a global postcolonial concern. More broadly, we can see that South Africa at a point of social, political, economical and ecological collision arises as a matter of interest. And certainly, *The Whale Caller* details the meeting point of the country's human and natural histories.²⁵

²³ Derek Barker, 'Escaping the Tyranny of Magic Realism? A Discussion of the Term in Relation to the Novels of Zakes Mda', *Postcolonial Text*, 4:2 (2008), 1-20 (p. 14).

²⁴ Benita Parry, 'What is Left in Postcolonial Studies', *New Literary History*, 43 (2012), 341-358 (p. 347).

²⁵ It seems appropriate to mention in passing a recent news article demonstrating hopefully that *The Whale Caller* is not simply a characteristically fantastical text of Mda's, but that it also engages with wider issues that threaten to cause great harm to the developing/postcolonial world. In October 2012, the British *Guardian* published a story telling of a group of Congolese insurgents (M23) who had hijacked the country's renowned gorilla tourism and were offering discounted, illegal gorilla-spotting tours to (predominantly Western) travellers who, because of the unofficial nature of the tours, were not required to purchase entry visas or permits. The revenue was said to have directly funded the rebel group. The discounts for tourists, meanwhile, were more than canceled out by financial losses to official tour operators. Moreover, significant harm to the ecology of the Virunga National Park itself is a product of both unskilled guides and the 'cyclical violence that has plagued eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo over the last 25 years'. See Pete Jones, 'Congolese rebels cash in on gorilla tourism to fund insurgency',

A sense of familiarity resonates in the opening passage of the novel. The quixotic nature of the Whale Caller, standing atop the cliffs as darkness falls and blowing on his kelp horn, longing for the return of his whale, is somewhat reminiscent of Toloki. Not only are their respective vocations similarly idiosyncratic and financially unrewarding, the imaginative potential of each character is strikingly similar. Toloki's penchant for "gardening" in *Ways of Dying*, as has been argued, appears to be his manner of escapism from the dire landscape of violence around him. Thus, when the Whale Caller, who, when 'in a happy mood [...] can see the weather-beaten fishermen shrouded in the mists of time, taking to the sea in their fleet of small boats', is said to 'not [be] in the mood to amble in the mists of the past [because] he is racked by the sadness of the present'²⁶, one might understandably foresee the parallel. Nevertheless, the past/present paradigm, so familiar to postcolonial literatures including Mda's post-*Ways of Dying* oeuvre, is re-hatched here differently. We might argue that the act of postcolonial (re)historicising is undertaken most often as a balancing act, a method of re-inscribing and re-legitimising the existence of a people – a consciously collective rather than a personal endeavour that focuses on history in its most abstract form. And yet, as *The Whale Caller* develops, it emerges that the protagonist's historical "ambling" is not a nostalgic desire for pre-colonial history, but (perhaps unknowingly) for a pre-industrial ecology.

The Whale Caller, referred to only by his vocation throughout, finds his calling by happenstance, discovering at a church service that the songs of his kelp horn attract whales. He once belonged, the reader learns, to a breakaway church – the Church of the Sacred Kelp Horn – established when his talent at playing the horn caused a rift between the church elders. At once, his vocation is thus tied up in the notion of marginalisation. Saluni is an outcast, too, both by way of her status as the village drunk and also because she is, one is told, 'a love child, conceived on a windy day by a beautiful young woman who was involved in an illicit affair with an older married man' (p. 35). Completing the marginalised trio is Sharisha, a whale who follows unorthodox migratory movements that put her at odds with the rest of her species. As the novel

Guardian, October 19 2012. Accessed at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/19/congo-rebels-gorilla-tour-insurgency>>.

²⁶ Zakes Mda, *The Whale Caller* (New York Picador, 2006), p. 3.

progresses and the three become increasingly acquainted, the reader is perhaps fooled into thinking that some manner of alliance is to be struck up. Certainly, much like Toloki and Noria in Mda's earlier novel, here too the Whale Caller and Saluni's relationship is one born from the virtue of mutuality. The years spent dedicated solely to Sharisha have caused the former to further lose touch with society, something Saluni attempts to remedy by passing on her ways of "civilised living", which includes 'a number of rituals against which his whole body rebels' (p. 70). Saluni, on the other hand, who at first spends her days stumbling from tavern to tavern in search of wine, finds herself much more settled in the company of the Whale Caller, who seeks to control Saluni's acquisition of alcohol. But the relationship is inherently complex and not the sort able to offer a long-term solution for either. By the end of the novel, the Whale Caller is alone again, Saluni having been stoned to death at the hands of the Bored Twins and Sharisha dynamited spectacularly after beaching herself. Tragically, in the words of Wendy Woodward, the Whale Caller 'takes responsibility for the faults of Western dualistic thinking onto his shoulders'.²⁷ It is not a hopeful conclusion to the novel, neither at face-value nor otherwise. The Whale Caller has failed spectacularly in his attempts to bridge the chasm between Saluni and Sharisha, which can be read equally as the failure to reconnect humans and nature. More importantly, though, the Whale Caller departs his place of work, 'turns his back on Walker Bay for the last time' (p. 230), and resigns himself to a future walking the coastline announcing: 'I am the Hermanus Penitent' (p. 230).

Critical scholarship on *The Whale Caller* – which is at the time of writing still relatively sparse – has generally leaned towards an ecological reading of the text, with discussions of a specifically postcolonial angle thin on the ground.²⁸ It is understandable that critics should read the text in such a way for its *modus operandi* is overwhelmingly a disparaging gesture towards the rapid physical transformation of the South African landscape. The desultory tone of the

²⁷ Wendy Woodward, 'Whales, Clones and Two Ecological Novels: *The Whale Caller* and Jane Rosenthal's *Souvenir*', in *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda*, eds. David Bell and J.U. Jacobs (Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg: KZN University Press, 2009), pp. 333-354 (p. 351).

²⁸ See the above essay by Woodward and Gail Fincham, "'Our Only Physical and Psychic Home": Ecology and Community in *The Whale Caller*', in *Dances of Life: The Novels of Zakes Mda in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Ohio University Press, 2012), pp. 125-146.

narrator's voice repeatedly illuminates the consequences of aggressive national development in the post-apartheid years. When, for example, it is said that 'the village had grown into a beautiful holiday resort' (p. 12), before adding that 'it had now become impossible for an ordinary person to buy property at his childhood paradise' (p. 13), the nostalgic longing for a return to a pre-tourist age is evident. As has been mentioned, the past/present nexus remains in *The Whale Caller*, but the past longed for is of a different nature, in every sense of the phrase. The novel perhaps indicates a shift into a new literary arena, where the postcoloniality of literature is becomes less conceptually or aesthetically discernible. Regardless of that, more pressing, I argue, is the need to come to terms with the refinement of Mda's literary stance, which by this point is somewhat at odds with his earlier work.

We might ask: what happens to postcolonial literature when it unavoidably encounters the wider issues that the postcolonial project itself has created? I am speaking to the sense that the energy generated in the post-apartheid years could not sustain itself. The many programmes inaugurated as pillars of national development post-1994 – a democratically elected ANC government, Black Economic Empowerment, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and burgeoning international trade agreements – could function only as triumphant starting points in a much more complicated process of South African progress. We find that, in the case of *The Whale Caller*, that initial sense of triumph has been gradually dampened by the emergence of an acute series of new problems: political corruption, uneven development, the spread of AIDS and so on. In the sense that these issues were not so easily framed in a way that placed apartheid or colonial rule at its centre, a new historical paradigm of South Africa emerged. The rationale of a postcolonial South African literature was duly altered. Melissa Myambo posed in a 2010 article a question that epitomises the nature of the postcolonial mission, which, in South Africa, is bundled up in the ideology of Rainbow Nationism. 'Was it ever intended as anything other than a beginning?'²⁹ she asked of the philosophy. In her article, poignantly entitled 'The Limits of Rainbow Nation Multiculturalism', Myambo refers to the reality that South

²⁹ Melissa Myambo, 'The Limits of Rainbow Nation Multiculturalism in the New South Africa: Spatial Configuration in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* and Jonathan Morgan's *Finding Mr. Madini*', *Research in African Literatures*, 41:4 (2010), 93-120 (p. 95).

Africa's adoption of a post-apartheid mantra with a can't-we-all-just-get-along? logic could be no more than notional. She thus asks: 'Was the multiculturalism advocated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu to end the endemic epistemological and literal racial violence of the apartheid system ever anything other than a nation conceived as ultimate abstraction?'³⁰ More than a straightforward denunciation of Tutu's (and, in turn, the post-apartheid government's) strategy for the new South Africa, Myambo's question points to the fact that the will for reconciliation – the necessary healing process in the post-settler space – inevitably opens up new sites of tension. Of course, it is not possible to discuss this as though it were a symptom of post-settler spaces generally; nevertheless, for South Africa, there is a moment at which the dust settles and the energy of the post-conflict era collides with its consequences. A new system of relationships has developed out of the old ones and the population are learning new and challenging ways of being – ways of living, perhaps. *The Whale Caller* arises from such a moment.

If a character is most often the birth child of one of Mda's novels, it is the backdrop that grounds it and gives it meaning – not necessarily in its direct contextual references but from the atmosphere that it creates. Hermanus, a tourist-friendly coastal village whose transformation into desirable holiday resort seems to be complete, is no less charged in its description than the turbulent locale of *Ways of Dying*. Here, though, violence and tumult have morphed into something less clear. Neither urban nor rural, and apparently no longer undergoing any radical post-apartheid overhaul, Hermanus is a completely modern village and a product of the new South Africa. Its mise-en-scene is filled with the ironies that the new South Africa has created, from the concrete slipways restored by 'experts from Cape Town' (p. 3) for future generations, to the international restaurants that make it an embarrassment to serve South African cuisine, to the tourists 'with floral shirts and funeral faces' (p. 16) and 'the deafening noises from the machines of motorised water sports enthusiasts' (p. 43). Indeed, tourism is the new drive and the irony is not lost on the narrator who satirises the inward flux of the new, which brings with it colour, revenue and a new instability to the village. (So goes the saying: if you want the rainbow,

³⁰ *ibid.*

you have to tolerate the rain.) The Whale Caller finds an antagonist in the shape of ‘the official whale crier of Hermanus’ (p. 40), a council-employed individual who alerts tourists to whale spotting opportunities; a ringing endorsement of the perceived need for reputation and official, commodified culture. Tourism epitomises the Rainbow Nation ideology: a friendly face concealing an inevitably murky underbelly.

Outward prosperity necessitates the opening of inward flows. In *The Whale Caller*, tourism is the outward face of a wider programme that encourages the commodification of nature. In Hermanus, the Kalfiefee festival, celebrating whale calves, brings throngs of tourists to the village, many of whom ‘have come just to watch the spectacular street performances of jugglers, mimes, banjo-strumming buskers and dancers in grotesque whale costumes’ (p. 17). Moreover, the official whale crier, whom everybody knows (‘[H]e has been seen in newspapers and on television’ [p. 90]), attracts tourists laden with camcorders and cameras who in turn leave Hermanus having *captured* their own personal experience with the whales. The tourists are thus a destabilising entity in the village, a body that fosters both a global reputation surrounding the village and also global access to it as commodity. Consequently, in tourist season, visiting South Africans from inland ‘look apologetic and seem to be more out of place than the Americans and the Japanese’ (p. 17), while in winter the lasting effects of the summer’s now-departed influx is felt in nature: ‘In the absence of tourists the dustbins are empty and the rock rabbits have been reduced to the indignities of eating unseasonable flowers.’ (p. 119) Not only is tourism a discordant force, the global reputation of Hermanus brings commercial interest in the site’s natural resources – thus revenue and instability, rainbow and rain. At one turn, the Whale Caller is enraged by the ‘loud underwater bangs produced by seismic surveys [that] interfere with the songs’ he plays for Sharisha (p. 142). Perhaps more resonantly, he and Saluni learn from a poacher that the illegal trade in abalone has been re-stratified in light of the arrival of mass Chinese trade:

He tells them how he started harvesting the rocks on the kelp beds for the precious creatures. It was for the pot. But the temptation was too great. Soon he was harvesting to sell. [...] There are established racial hierarchies in the illegal abalone trade. Coloured folk sell their harvest to white men who pay about two hundred rands a kilogram. The Chinese ship the abalone to the Far East where they get about two thousand five hundred rands a kilogram for it. (p. 192)

The evidence points to the idea that globalisation has not evinced the discussion of the postcolonial but has, rather, restructured its boundaries. Chinese trade, which one should here read as the manifestation of global capitalism, has added an extra dimension to the hierarchy of post-apartheid South Africa. Simon During's explication of the postcolonial perspective that 'colonialism in effect becomes an episode in the longer sweep of globalisation, and all events that once fell under the rubric colonialism are ripe to fall under the rubric globalization,' is particularly apt here.³¹

The nature of the developments in *The Whale Caller* would explain an understandable, lamenting call for a return to the local as a countering energy. Again, During is of use when he discusses 'globalisation's capacity not so much to preserve but to rekindle colonial struggles', and cites Stuart Hall, who, During remarks, 'regards categories like the "local" and the "ethnic" as now providing escape from or resistances to globalisation'.³² In Mda's text, though, this resistance does not come wholly to fruition and a solution is not offered by the novel's conclusion. The Whale Caller is never likely to be a remedying force to the changes that have destabilised Hermanus for he is an unknowing and unhelpful ecological hero, very much the 'wise fool' that he is labeled by Wendy Woodward.³³ He does not look to nature as a method of posing resistance, but as a consequence of his own, individual desires. In other words, his relationship with Sharisha is not ecologically, but hedonistically, minded. There are notable similarities in this respect with J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and its eponymous problem-hero, whose eco-friendly existence – which culminates with him living nocturnally and meagerly on a piece of deserted farmland – is structured by short-term survival and not long-term ecological planning. As Anthony Vital puts it, only 'physical distance from society permits K moments of enjoying a full sense of being.'³⁴ The Whale Caller's worship of Sharisha, which one might be tempted to regard for its ecological value, is ultimately what brings about her undignified death in the presence of 'police

³¹ Simon During, 'Postcolonialism and Globalisation: A Dialectical Relation After All?', *Postcolonial Studies*, 1:1 (1998), 31-47 (p. 37).

³² *ibid.*, p. 33.

³³ Woodward, p. 334.

³⁴ Antony Vital, 'Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:1 (2008), 87-121 (p. 96).

officers and bureaucrats from various governmental departments' (p. 217), 'experts from Cape Town' (p. 218) and a vast crowd of noisy, tourist voyeurs. The Whale Caller's longing for Sharisha culminates with catastrophic ramifications on nature. As Woodward would have it, in an essay that discusses *The Whale Caller* and Jane Rosenthal's *Souvenir* (2004), 'Mda and Rosenthal have not scripted folktales in which the planet can be healed. They have challenged their readers to deal with ecological realities that cannot be wished away by fictionalising them'.³⁵

What remains, then, is to interrogate the relationship between post-settler-colonial literature and its would-be successor. In real terms, South Africa's reconciliatory post-apartheid practices have sought to carefully memorialise the country's racial past in a way that, in ideal terms, paves the way for future harmony. Attempts have been made to immobilise, rather than eradicate, the past, so that it lives on symbolically emptied of its threat. South African history has been, in a word, embalmed. In the adjacent South Africa of *The Whale Caller*, it is no different. Take the *Hermanus Roll of Honour*, a stone column in the town that displays the names of South Africa's war casualties:

[E]leven names, citizens of Hermanus who died in World War One (1914-1918), and another list of twenty-eight names of those who "gave their lives for freedom" in World War Two (1939-1945). The brighter panel has only four names, citizens of Hermanus who were killed in some war that it is not mentioned. It is described only as the *Republic of South Africa Roll of Honour* (1973-1979). They dare not even whisper the name of the war, for they died on the border defending apartheid. (p. 50)

The atrocities of three conflicts are memorialised in a single, incidental structure that minimalises the animatedness of history. The fleeting mention of the monument (it is barely mentioned elsewhere) is a measure of history's concretisation in *The Whale Caller*, and perhaps serves as a commentary on the way in which colonial and apartheid history are to be treated in South Africa. In light of this treatment of history, *The Whale Caller* moves on to locate new sites of victimhood. Where one oppressive system yields to emancipate its victims, oppression is so deeply inscribed into collective consciousness that it seems certain to arise elsewhere. Thus, if the old injustices of apartheid are rendered in

³⁵ Woodward, p. 351.

a predominantly symbolic fashion in the text, new injustices are more fully engaged with. Mda probes new conflicts of power, clashes that are (quite literally) less black and white and more economically and ecologically minded. The victors in the exchanges are not those innately positioned as such, as had often been the case with apartheid (and apartheid-era literature). Instead those who enter into the prevailing spirit of capitalist expansion are the ones rewarded. Lunga Tubu, a decidedly marginal character would fall inescapably into social marginality if it were not for his sense of enterprise. Young, black and uneducated, he takes to busking outside of the new tourist-filled restaurants in Hermanus, thus attaining a degree of social standing, room for promotion and the benefits of the new system. Inasmuch, he acquiesces to the new conditions where, as During writes, ‘money is becoming the oxygen of culture everywhere (with the corollary: we are all materialists today)’.³⁶ We might posit that if apartheid-era oppression was structured by the difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, here, the contest pits those who will and can against those who cannot or will not. The Whale Caller is part of the latter designation, a figure that resists entrance into the capitalist system – although, he is as much problem-victim as he is problem-hero. In essence, the once-victimised are no longer resigned to victimhood and, therefore, Mda turns to nature, where “those who cannot” reside. For him, they are the new victims. As we have seen, the cave-dwelling rock rabbits are the ones who suffer the indignity of scavenging rubbish from bins filled by tourists. Sharisha, meanwhile, is also inscribed into the text as victim, particularly so at the novel’s conclusion.

The whale dies in the same way that she has lived, under the privileged gaze of unfeeling onlookers. Beached on the shoreline of Walker Bay, visitors arrive not to offer care, but to partake in the spectacle, for, in their words, ‘*This one belongs to Hermanus*’ (p. 223):

Politicians arrive: city fathers and mothers; mayors and Members of parliament from rival political parties; hacks and hangers-on. They all want a photo opportunity with the whale. Cameras click away. Television crews interview the politicians instead of the emergency workers and scientists who have spent the night trying to rescue the whale. Politicians make better sound bites and will not mess up the news programmes with facts. (p. 221)

³⁶ During, p. 33.

Again it is the prospect of a photograph (a takeaway commodity) that draws a crowd. That it is the media who are given the responsibility of producing the 'sound bites', rather than the rescuers, is a reflection of an inclination to favour performance over reality. Consequently, when plans are hatched to use explosives to kill the whale, the politicians are 'more concerned about South Africa's image in the international community' (p. 223). Worries are predominantly of an economic nature: 'The rand will go down if we stand here and do nothing,' one person comments before another adds that, 'someone one farts in Bolivia and the rand comes tumbling down.' (p. 223) Ultimately, then, the novel's conclusion presents the overwhelming dominance of a global capitalist system, which replaces colonialism as the chief oppressive force in South Africa and becomes Mda's new prime concern. *The Whale Caller* is at times an unequivocally comical text, its eponymous protagonist's whimsical mannerisms and Wendy House dwelling making him a clown-like character. The novel's conclusion, though, is perhaps the least hopeful of all of Mda's fictional works with the Whale Caller turning his back, companionless, on his erstwhile home under the weight of his guilt. It is difficult not to read the ending as an allegory of South Africa's impending defeat at the hands of its own post-apartheid project.

Finally, then, if one considers *The Whale Caller* as a novel that emerges out of a postcolonial literary tradition, the designation "post-settler-colonial novel" by now appears to be something of a misnomer. Yet much like the *Hermanus Roll of Honour* memorial, which quietly and perpetually keeps the unspeakable apartheid past close to the surface, the settler past and the literary impulses it has spurned are quietly and enduringly stitched into the fabric of the novel. Mda's postcolonial concerns metamorphose into something new, while at the same time retaining many of the same urges. Still he is drawn to the notion of victimhood and the facelessness of oppressive forces; still he seems compelled towards the conflict between natural and the artificial, the sanctity of individual flamboyance as an anti-normative discursive device. In short, he will not relinquish the leitmotifs carried over from earlier incarnations of the postcolonial novel. Nevertheless, *The Whale Caller* does not necessarily go back and address the colonial and instead seeks to critique the postcolonial itself. Times have moved

on: 'Ten years is a second in the life of a nation,' (p. 17) the reader is told. The novel thus points towards the awkwardly expressed idea of pre-post-settler ecologies. The novel is a complaint against the capitalist and industrial expansion that accompanied (perhaps energised) the reconciliatory programmes of the post-apartheid years. Then again, an appellation this ungainly perhaps demarcates a need instead for something entirely new. The settler process is self-effacing, after all.

VII • The End of the Arc

I have claimed already that the production of a novel is the production of a commodity, the product of a writer's labour. Allow me to recap. At a fundamental level, Marx offers the notion that commodities 'in which equal quantities of labour are embodied, or which can be produced in the same time, have the same value'.³⁷ However, he writes that the value of a commodity changes in relation to the 'productiveness of labour' – that being, circumstances including 'the average amount of skill of the workmen, the state of science, and the degree of its practical application, the social organisation of production, the extent and capabilities of the means of production, and by physical conditions'.³⁸ Valuing literary commodities involves a more nuanced undertaking, where value is calculated against upheld standards of, say, taste or authenticity or aesthetic. Pascale Casanova's literary marketplace, her so-called World Republic of Letters, is a 'non-economic economy'.³⁹ Casanova illuminates the unequal power structuring of the world literary space:

At the pole of greatest autonomy—that is, freest from political, national or economic constraints—stand the oldest spaces, those most endowed with literary heritage and resources. These are generally European spaces, the first to enter into transnational literary competition, with large accumulated resources. At the pole of greatest heteronomy, where political, national and commercial criteria hold strongest sway, stand the newcomers, the spaces most lacking in literary resources; and the zones within the oldest regions that are most subordinate to commercial criteria. *Each national space, meanwhile, is itself polarized by the same structure.*⁴⁰

³⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* p. 28

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as a World', *New Left Review*, 31 (2005), 71-90 (p. 83).

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, (emphasis added).

In short, the value of literature is not realised through *quantity* of labour; it is valued according to a preordained (read ‘generally European’) *qualifying* of labour. True, this is a generalisation and does not account for the fact that texts produced in ‘spaces lacking in literary resources’ can be perceived as valueless not out of any sense of inequality, but simply because they are seen to be of lesser worth on the individual basis of taste. In other words, the evaluation of a novel can take place in numerous ways, including on the rather unscientific basis of an individual reader’s subjective opinion. Nevertheless, the salient point is that the world literary space (and, in turn, the national literary space) operates and unequal but widely acknowledged system of valuation.

The discussion of literature at the outset of the previous section suggested that post-settler novel might be perceived as having responsibility as an intermediary: some might see that, as a would-be cultural artefact, it must oversee the transition from literature of an overwhelmingly anti-colonial disposition to a literature that is less preoccupied by such rhetoric. In a Casanovan dimension, then, the post-settler novel over time is perhaps tasked with untangling itself from the political, national and commercial facts of colonialism and its aftermath – an obligatory undertaking that might steer it towards the accumulation of literary value. Of course, the novel’s liberation from national and political encumbrances in particular is (hopefully) a measure of a more general sense of deliverance beyond the literature. Consequently, in a post-settler polity, the growing value of its literary space in relation to the ‘pole of greatest autonomy’ would, generally speaking, accompany the ameliorating international reputation of the post-settler space. In the cases of Australia and South Africa, the so-called newcomers to the literary competition are understandably the once non-literary, and almost always non-European, cultural practitioners. Their entry into the literary competition is necessary if they are to achieve what would appear to be an autonomous cultural valuation. Non-literary cultural commodities, by contrast, hold no value whatsoever in the literary space for the simple reason that they do not adhere to the same process of valuation. (It is very much like trying to enter a biggest vegetable competition with a giant apple: in its own right it has value, but that value is not transferrable.)

At the base of the arc of the post-settler novel I placed Archie Weller's *Day of the Dog*, a text whose literary value seems limited because of its thorough immersion in, and preoccupation with, an oppressive discourse. Despite the *a priori* debate concerning Weller as a refutably Aboriginal writer, I treat his assumed persona as credible here, and duly consider his novel as a once non-literary cultural producer's entry into the literary space. My argument follows, then, that *Day of the Dog* assumes a low value on the basis that it is held back by its anti-colonial politics, but is important in the simple respect that it is a literary commodity at all. Further along the arc is Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, which, even if no less acerbic in its presentation of violence (this time in South Africa), gains value in its attempt to create its own literary aesthetic; resisting emulation, the novel seeks its own individual response to the cultural plurality of its South African setting. Moreover, it rises to the challenge of probing the rigid ideologies that Weller's text is overwhelmed by. Next, the Australian writer's *Land of the Golden Clouds* moves the arc along again. If *Day of the Dog* diagnoses the symptoms of colonial oppression while offering little resistance, and if *Ways of Dying* seeks ways of living with those symptoms of oppression, Weller's post-apocalyptic epic offers the first glimpse of an afterlife. Even in a novel that is at times hugely violent, it negotiates the freedom to imagine new social landscapes and workable cross-cultural relationships. Importantly, too, the novel demonstrates a further step away from the issue-driven aesthetic that had previously appeared inescapable and a move towards a literature driven by a different impetus. Indeed, this notion of stimulus is significant, for it develops in accordance with the changing responsibilities of the writer. Initially, an anti-colonial writer has the added responsibilities akin to those of a prophet and a politician. Later, he or she is freer to write literature on different foundations. Thus, Mda's *The Whale Caller* marks a further point on the arc, moving the debate on once more so that colonial/postcolonial issue retreats further from the foreground. In its place, Mda engages with concerns that emerged as the new major subjects of debate. The novel is, as has been discussed, arguably more of a call for ecological action than a post-settler commentary. Let us conclude this exploration of the post-settler novel, then, by exploring the writers' most recent publications in relation to the arc. In doing so, let us observe the quite

indisputable fact that both texts – for their own individual reasons – sit uncomfortably against the thesis that this chapter has so far advocated.

VIII • *Black Diamond* (2009)

In mid-2010 *The Economist* ran a special report on South Africa. A full-scale overview would be extraneous here, but the supplement's chapter titles aptly confirm an overriding sentiment prevalent in the country: 'The case for optimism – and its many caveats'; 'Hold your nose: the smell of corruption', 'Colour me South African: Learning to live in a rainbow society'; 'A new kind of inequality: Black Economic Empowerment has had unintended consequences'.⁴¹ Sixteen years into democracy, the delicate divide between success and failure was blurry; there was hope weighed down, dark clouds and silver linings. Nothing better encapsulates the ambivalent spirit of the post-apartheid years more than the atmosphere surrounding the BEE initiative. As an economic scheme with long-term social objectives, BEE succeeded in creating a black middle-class and increasing black equity in South African business, but failed to ameliorate living conditions of the vast majority of the impoverished black masses. By the mid-2000s, it was clear that the social mobilisation envisaged by the BEE project had reached a moment of inertia. The evidence of its shortcomings came in the shape of the so-called Black Diamonds, 'moguls [who] developed luxurious lifestyles and took large sums out of the business', as R.W. Johnson puts it.⁴² That Zakes Mda would find himself drawn to the issue, as he does in his novel *Black Diamond*, is understandable. In the first place, appealing to the author's propensity towards hazy, colourful characters, the aspirant Black Diamond is an easily caricatured figure. More resonantly, though, the subject matter indicates that political and economic crises were back on Mda's and South Africa's radar.

One might recall Casanova and her idea that peripheral literatures are often preoccupied or overawed by the historical factors that structure their position, and one might in turn find that *Black Diamond* indeed finds itself doing just that.

⁴¹ 'A Special Report on South Africa', *Economist*, 5-11 June 2010.

⁴² R.W. Johnson, *South Africa's Brave New World: The Beloved Country Since the End of Apartheid* (New York: Overlook Press, 2010), p. 388.

Put simply, the novel is formally and thematically problematic and, as such, its reception has been understandably mixed. Nothing is disagreeable with the plot itself: it manages to contain its sizeable cast of characters and the gradual development towards a climactic conclusion is unproblematic. And so, while reviews of the novel have praised its fast pace, its satire and its comical stereotyping, scholarly critiques have ultimately deemed it substandard in comparison with its author's earlier work. As Gail Fincham has argued, '*Black Diamond* differs from Mda's previous fiction in that it erases the possibilities of either meaningful community or effective agency'.⁴³ Fincham also suggests that the novel suffers from 'a lack of interpretative challenges offered to the reader'⁴⁴ and that 'the performative dimension usually so central'⁴⁵ to Mda's work is absent. While my own contention is more or less in line with Fincham's, it is necessary to interrogate such a stance. The failing of the book – if one can term it as such – is not the result of the writer's sudden fall from grace, but perhaps the consequence of South Africa's noticeably stuttering convalescence from its apartheid woes, which has compelled Mda towards a change of direction – a regressive change of direction that has him tangled up once more in the melee of South African socio-political matter.

Fincham's comment on community is significant, for *Black Diamond* is indeed lacking in workable, sustainable relationships. One need only look at the gradual disintegration of Don and Tumi's relationship at the heart of the novel to see that materialism has become strong enough to overpower spiritualism. Their relationship, which starts life in the township, loses its sense of spiritualism. With it goes the relationship's stability, namely due to the fact that its health becomes, for them, defined in material terms. Don is wary of Tumi's wish to break away from their past, wanting instead to keep alive their township memories; but his nostalgia has not the power to compete with her materialist desires. Certainly, despite Don's heroic military past as part of the apartheid struggle, it is now Tumi who dictates his actions: 'Tumi believes that if Don plays his cards well he can take over [as the new chief executive of his

⁴³ Gail Fincham, *Dance of Life: The Novels of Zakes Mda in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2011), p. 156.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.158.

company]’⁴⁶. She ‘believes there is nothing more degrading than having Don act as [a] bodyguard’ (p. 10); she hates Don cooking because ‘it is not in keeping with the status of a Black Diamond’ (p. 28); she intimates that ‘Don needs to take up golf and associate with fellow black Diamonds who will throw lucrative deals his way’ (p. 30). Finally, it is Tumi who orders Don to wear designer suits, drive flashy cars and give away his beloved cat. Don’s nostalgia for Soweto, its food, and its music scene reflect his longing for a community that is no longer accessible.

Black Diamond depicts a generation of Johannesburgers cutting ties with the past, who find that a hollowed out history is not the same as a history completely eradicated. Magistrate Kristin Uys, who by the end of the novel has forged a relationship with Don, condemns the ‘moral decay that has overcome the city’ (p. 56), and thus draws attention to a South Africa with an entirely transformed moral landscape. The new battles waged are no longer characterised by stoutly political and racial ends; here they are overwhelmingly corporate and commercial. The reader is told that ‘today we see platoons of cadres fighting a new war of accumulation and the trenches are the boardrooms of South Africa’ (pp. 66-67). The military lexicon is telling, too, for it points to the notion that an apartheid-era consciousness remains in perpetuity, even if its deeper meaning has been overhauled. Such is the landscape of the novel, where the BEE movement and its implications have, it would appear, contributed to the re-inscription of race in South African society. And yet, the nature of its reintroduction – that is, re-racialisation at a time of supposedly political non-racialism⁴⁷ – means that the question of race seems decoupled from its roots. A passage involving Kristin Uys’s arch-enemy, Stevo Visagie, and his mixed race maid, Aunt Magda, is telling in its mutual usage of now-hollowed out racial terms:

‘Leave the poor *bushie* alone,’ Stevo says. ‘She’s just having fun.’

Although *bushie* is a derogatory word for the coloured people of South Africa, when they use it among themselves it is acceptable. Although Stevo himself is not coloured but a *boetjie*, as Aunt Magda used to call him, he has always called her a *bushie*, and both of them accepted *boetjie* and *bushie* as terms of endearment. (p. 97)

⁴⁶ Zakes Mda, *Black Diamond* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 9.

⁴⁷ Whether or not the reality suggests otherwise, Jacob Zuma during his time in office has insisted, rhetorically at least, on a non-racial future for South Africa.

The passage shows how the novel foregrounds racial taxonomies still in everyday circulation but diluted to the extent that they are, paradoxically, both important and obsolete. Race seems to be the medium through which Mda can most effectively illuminate the rapidly transformed furniture of South Africa. As an example, Kristin routinely prepares food for the homeless in the local park. 'When [she] started bringing food to the park three years ago only black hoboos could be seen,' the reader is told. 'Now there are an increasing number of whites.' (p. 35) The homeless are both peripheral to the story and peripheral to South African society. This is not a racial line as such, but a sardonic statement concerning the unintended outcomes of democracy. *Black Diamond* operates most effectively at moments such as this, when it offers glimpses of satirical social commentary. The novel suffers in narrative terms, though, in the sense that the real tragedy of the novel – the breakdown of Don and Tumi's relationship – is seemingly overlooked in favour of a focus on the bright suits and fast cars of rampant capitalist expansion. Inasmuch, the significance of the growing relationship between Kristin and Don lies not in its non-racialism but because of its resistance to materialism.

In essence, the plot itself feels almost superfluous. As far as literary discussions are concerned, *Black Diamond's* conclusion is rendered virtually insignificant in light of the hollowness of its narrative. As a film plot (the idea was originally conceived as a cinema piece) it certainly reaches a climactic ending with Stevo Visagie finally getting an opportunity to avenge his treatment at the hands of Kirstin. And yet, such a climax is really only so because of its sensationalism. One critic's conviction that the novel is 'a sort of Starsky and Hutch detective drama with a little inter-racial romance to spice things up'⁴⁸ is not entirely ungrounded. Nonetheless, what remains to consider is the real issue driving *Black Diamond*: Mda's evident concerns about the unequal growth characterising the post-apartheid years. The capitalist expansion of the BEE era has, as the *Economist* article suggests, 'had unintended consequences'. One might point to the burgeoning black middle class as a spanner in the works of democracy, and as a moment that highly problematises the socio-economic

⁴⁸ David Ker, 'Writing for which reader in Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* and *Black Diamond*', <<http://kanyimbe.ethnolinks.com/2011/09/writing-for-which-reader-in-zakes-mdas-the-whale-caller-and-black-diamond/>> [accessed 13 February 2013].

development of South Africa. There is an argument to suggest that the same causes have complicated the relative shape of the country's literature more generally. Something poignant arises in Mda's subject focus in *Black Diamond*, which all but cuts ties with the impoverished black masses – somewhat similarly to the way in which Tumi does. Victimhood, which has so often been fundamental to Mda's oeuvre, is visible only in the boardroom trenches, only among the losers in the capitalist game.

While Mda cannot be made representative of South Africa's literary output, it follows also that *Black Diamond* should not come to reflect its author's standing. Nevertheless, the novel is problematic in a way that previous works were not. Where some critics may have noted Mda's close attention to history before⁴⁹, here it is discarded almost entirely. Save for the infrequent, nostalgic description of Soweto, there is little narrative trace of the past responsible for the contemporary state of national affairs. Without doubt, *Black Diamond* is somewhat weakened because of this lack of engagement, for it does not bridge the historical gap that it creates for itself. As an example, the white homeless in the park would seem to represent the ironies of the new disposition, but their presence is inexplicable – they are not rooted in any historical framework and float around in an indistinct present. Arguably more than any other of Mda's novels, this one is so tied up in its own production that it is to the detriment of its overall project.

What seems clear in all of this is that the new must emerge out of the old, and not simply replace it. That was not the aim of the BEE project, nor the broader goals of empowerment that became the mainstay of the post-apartheid years; but that is what the so-called Black Diamonds pay testimony to – a generation of those who have sought to flee the past rather than working through it. R.W. Johnson puts it that, 'if you accept the colonial legacy and build on it you can go beyond it. If you attempt to destroy it or reverse it, you end up with a failed state'.⁵⁰ In *South Africa's Brave New World* Johnson also discusses the 'blaming culture' of the early post-apartheid era, pervasive in the ANC, and which grew out of the victimhood that had been default for non-white South Africans during

⁴⁹ See Andrew Offenburger, 'Duplicity and Plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:3 (2008), 164-199.

⁵⁰ Johnson, 2010, p. 579.

the years of white rule. ‘The result [of this growing blame culture],’ he remarks, ‘was that no one, not the President, nor his ministers, ever took responsibility for failures; it was always the fault of apartheid.’⁵¹ If Johnson sees these as the political symptoms of a failing state, more threatening would be the subsequent phase in which apartheid is put completely out of sight simply because of the rapid material gains of black empowerment.

There is a real risk of consigning a majority into subalternity if the development of some is taken to stand for the development of all. The situation in South Africa is not necessarily the fault of the post-settler dynamic, which strove towards reconciliation, but rapid development inevitably leaves the weak behind. *Black Diamond* is a text that both speaks of the ironies of fast growth and is distracted by them at the same time; it is a victim of exactly that which it bemoans. The flash cars and bright suits of the new order are a distraction and the novel cannot be blamed for that. Perhaps it is Mda’s intention to show that the Black Diamonds, and the whole culture from which they sprung, are a distraction from the reality of everyday life for the South African masses. It must be concluded, then, that the legacy of settler history does not disappear when the black middle classes take up residence in the suburbs and posts in once-white positions of employment. It has been suggested throughout that the post-settler project aims for the gradual neutralising of the settler past, in politics as in cultural production. What the South African example teaches is that a staged and triumphant negotiation of that past disrupts the whole project. In such a scenario, history remains in a latent form and thus remains, so to speak, unsettled.

IX • *The Window Seat* (2009)

Unlike South Africa, where huge expectations were borne out of a post-settler “moment” that changed the direction and the dynamic of the country’s history, race relations in Australia have stuttered along without such an occurrence. In *The History Wars* (2003), Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark assert that ‘it is hardly surprising that Australian history should have been so political [in recent

⁵¹ *ibid.*

times] since it deals with events whose consequences are still with us'.⁵² Their charge points towards the reality that Australia has never successfully managed to take hold of its history and confront it in a way that, say, an immediately post-apartheid South Africa was more inclined to do. One might offer notable (albeit unconvincing) attempts by government figures, historians and cultural producers to do so; but one finds ultimately that such efforts have really only amounted to wilful acts of forgetting. It is too parochial and unproductive to discuss the consequence of this forgetting as only the continued marginalisation of Aboriginal Australians. It also needs to be recognised that the (mis)handling of settler-indigenous history since the late 1980s has been the cause of a general crisis for Australian identity, broadly pertaining to what Jon Stratton has called the issue of "everyday racism".⁵³ There is a simple cause and effect thesis here, and one that has yielded concrete manifestations. Unproductive cross-cultural discourse, which has been symptomatic of Australian multiculturalism in practice, inevitably leads to habitual processes of "othering" (which, in turn, lead to unavoidable attitudes of insularity and paranoia.) Should a person or group fail over time to develop a working relationship through which an understanding of difference is established, those differences remain unbreached and, ultimately, become sharpened. Peta Stephenson, discussing Australia, quite aptly points out that 'fragmented societies reconcile because they want to'.⁵⁴ The country's embedded crisis of identity has meant that an opportunity at reconciliation has remained not impossible, but unlikely.

To use somewhat clichéd terms, the un-remedied grievances of the settler past have made for an unsettled present. Be sure that the discussion here is not restricted to the heights of official circles. Like Stratton's contention, these attitudes are enacted in the routine customs of day-to-day Australian life. The Cronulla riots of 2005 – wherein riots between white and Lebanese Australians were whipped up at a frenzied pace – reflect the ease with which riotousness has been mobilised among white Australians. They also reflect the thinly disguised

⁵² Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *History Wars*, (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2003), p. 218.

⁵³ Jon Stratton, *Uncertain Lives: Culture, Race and Neoliberalism in Australia* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 38.

⁵⁴ Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), p. 189.

wariness of non-white populations among white Australians. That noted, white Australians are not solely accountable and it is not a simple case of racism. More likely is a countrywide consciousness of separatism between racial and ethnic groups, which has structured a lasting and mutual attitude of us-and-themness. In rather generalising terms white Australians have been historically more open to the gradual inflow of newcomers than to indigenes – the threat of the outsider is perhaps less than the equivalent threat from within one's own ranks. That old expression, "The Aboriginal Problem", has new implications in present-day Australia, where a two-century-old antagonistic relationship has maintained, rather than overcome, difference. On the one hand, settler-indigenous relations remain in an awkward stalemate, in which the issue of reconciliation would appear to be a long-term struggle. On the other hand, Australia generally has suffered jointly from a lack of meaningful expressions of its cultural plurality, and from too little an engagement by its peoples in multicultural discourses, *in a way that includes people of Aboriginal descent*.

The issue is taken up in the title story of Archie Weller's *The Window Seat*, a tale in which the ignorance of a white Australian man towards an old Aboriginal woman results in her (perhaps avoidable) death. Implicitly, though, it appears to point towards the wider social pitfalls of settler-indigenous silence. An allegorical narrative that poignantly illuminates the consequences of continued intercultural non-communication, 'The Window Seat' also marks a return to a less hopeful narrative than *Land of the Golden Clouds*, where at least a racially reconciled future is posited. By contrast, the prevailing sentiment here is antithetical to hope. On an overnight coach journey across Western Australia, Jim Cassidy, who seemingly represents a white Australian everyman, finds his seat taken by Nancy Eaton, a similarly archetypal figure – a sagacious Aborigine woman. While Jim inwardly bemoans the situation for the duration of the journey, uncouthly labelling her 'black and lumpy' and 'Lady Muck'⁵⁵, his outward response is simply to 'avoid any unpleasantness and sit in the aisle seat', even if he does so 'with obvious bad humour, throwing his bags around and jabbing her accidentally on purpose with his elbow' (p. 298). He does not think to engage in a conversation that would perhaps remedy the matter, and resigns

⁵⁵ Archie Weller, *The Window Seat* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2009), p. 297; p. 302.

himself instead to an anger-fuelled stalemate. Jim will not consider a productive conversation, nor any contact at all. For Nancy's part, she makes no move to acknowledge his presence either, although her feelings are made less clear; indeed, the story privileges the internal narrative of Jim.

That 'The Window Seat' recounts a journey is important both literally and for the way in which it can be read metaphorically. At surface level, the story presents the sort of daily interaction in which all parties of a culturally pluralised space come together, making it unremarkable that Nancy and Jim sit side-by-side in the manner that they do. Nor is the demographic make-up of this journeying space extraordinary, populated as the coach is by Swedish and Japanese backpackers and later by a group of young Aborigines, who add to and complicate a simple settler-indigenous axis. Weller's moving locale provides the reader with a globalised Australian space in flux – a constantly changing world-space that is modified with each set down and pick up. Characters are distinctly caricatured and overtly clichéd, from photo-snapping Japanese tourists to 'the stereotypical blonde-haired, pert-breasted' (p. 302) Swedes. Certainly, though, as night falls outside the passengers are said to be travelling 'in their own little world' (p. 302) on a bus that moves along 'the asphalt of a never-ending highway' (p. 303). Even the film that is played on board, 'an American comedy that is mildly amusing' (p. 302), enhances the worldliness of the locale, bringing a smile even to the lips of Nancy, much to the wonderment of Jim, who ignorantly believes that she probably does not understand the content.

At a deeper level, Jim acts overwhelmingly as the lens of (an albeit equally pigeonholed) white Australian paranoia. His vocation as a customs officer, a job in which 'he felt he could play his part in the defence of Australia, just as his father had done' (p. 301), could not be a more unsubtle allusion. Jim's stance is hereditarily imposed, his father having 'instilled in his children a smouldering hatred towards the Nips' (p. 298), a feeling that is evoked when Jim discerns the nationality of the Japanese backpackers. The signs that his views are roundly representative of his kind, so to speak, are alluded to throughout and illuminate an almost total fear of territorial dispossession. I quote at length the moments following the recognition of the backpackers' identity with the aim of demonstrating how small cues give to much grander concerns:

He felt anger towards their grinning faces and excited chatter... In the Cassidy household there was nothing 'Made in Japan' – and there never would be. But here were the descendants of those who had tortured his dad [who had worked on the Burma railway], killed his dad's mates, laughing and joking in barbarous language and walking happily in his country as though they owned it.

Perhaps, he thought, they did. The Chinese certainly looked like owning it soon enough. Everything you bought nowadays came from China. Good Australian companies employing honest Australians were going under as cheaper and better – even he had to grudgingly admit – goods came on the market.

Companies were employing Filipinos and other foreigners over local lads. Every week another boatload of refugees washed up on Australia's shores or another boat was captured stealing Australia's fish. The Indonesian President and the Malaysian President were running around telling Australia what to do. Had the Malaysians forgotten the crisis in the 1960s with the Communists when Australian troops had come to their aid? Now, it wasn't the Communists but the Muslims and they were becoming a regular pain in the arse, Jim Cassidy thought. (pp. 298-299)

The discourse is not Jim's alone, certainly, and speaks instead to a widespread Australian xenophobia apparent in incidents such as Cronulla, or in government policies like the Pacific Solution.⁵⁶ Weller's is a sophisticated rendering of reality, then, highlighting the inflatedness of a misguided settler narrative of possession, with its roots way back in the *Terra Nullius* myth.⁵⁷

Notably, while this diatribe occupies Jim's mind along the way, he fails to notice two important things, first among which is that of all the bus's passengers he is the only white Australian, thus undermining the very narrative he tries to suggest. Secondly, Jim overlooks the fact that 'the old lady, known among the North-west Aborigines as Auntie Nancy Eaton, had died in her sleep' (p. 304). An allegorical reading would have us discern something profound from Jim's failure to notice both occurrences: the "Aussie bloke's" ignorance of the fact that his country has changed around him and his obliviousness to the reality that his attentiveness may have saved an Aboriginal life. 'The Window Seat,' then, is full of the irony that Stephenson claims is required to engage that cohort of paranoid white Australians in a meaningful debate about settler-indigenous relations. Here, though, it is bittersweet and serves simply to draw attention to Jim's insensitivity. That said, the story does more than just expose the ironies of Jim's stance. In other words, it is not a narrative detailing only the white man's folly.

⁵⁶ A controversial Australian governmental policy that transported potential asylum seekers to various island locations in the Pacific Ocean, rather than allowing the migrants onto mainland Australian soil.

⁵⁷ A Latin phrase meaning 'nobody's land' that was used by European settlers arriving in Australia in 1788. The declaration duly overlooked the erstwhile presence of indigenous populations and gave rise to a mythological Australian settler history in which the Europeans had sole claim to the territory.

Nancy, too, demonstrates that she is out of touch with the modern-day way of things. Having checked herself out of hospital prematurely in order that she make the trip, her motive is said to be that ‘she had not wanted to die in a strange place surrounded by strangers’ (p. 304). And yet, that is the precise reality of her death: she passes away in this travelling world-space where everyone knows of her presence – the Japanese tourists even asking at one turn for a photograph with her – but no one engages her in a dialogue of any sort.

The story’s deepest significance lies in Weller’s interrogation of the myths and realities of an increasingly global Australia. Jim’s ideas are the ones most obviously antiquated. If the passage quoted above demonstrated that his misgivings of the so-called “Asian invasion” date back to the 1960s, elsewhere the story yields further evidence. His contention that ‘the South Africans had a good idea, with their apartheid’ (p. 304), as he continues to grumble about his occupied seat, displays a quite parochial and unsustainable appraisal of Australia’s demographic make-up. More importantly, though, his outright refusal to see the story’s Aborigines as anything other than stereotypes and perennial “others” is only matched by an equally stubborn resistance to engage in a dialogue from the Aborigines themselves. In the first place, Nancy will not entertain the thought of opening an exchange with Jim and, later, a group of Aborigines who are present as news emerges of her death, mourn privately, as detailed in a telling conclusion:

As for Nancy Eaton, her spirit lingered after her body departed. The other Aborigines gathered in a little knot sensed it and held whispered conversations. Soon all the North-west Nyoongahs would know of her passing. But they would know she was happy, that she died at peace, for this truly *was* her land. (p. 305)

That the group gather in this isolated way to mourn Nancy’s passing is a measure no doubt of the likelihood that her life was lived in much the same way. ‘The Window Seat’ thus closes with a final irony in a passage beset by ambiguity. A hopeful interpretation would honour the Northwest communities’ belief that Nancy died happily in her own land. Yet the reader knows very well that she dies alone surrounded by strangers in a place that, as the final words suggest, ‘truly *was* her land’ (p. 305), but perhaps no longer is. Weller explores the reality that eighteenth century settler mythologising still has repercussions in an Australia whose inhabitants’ lives are still plagued by questions of ownership.

For all its reliance on stereotyped representations in order to furnish its self-contained world-view, the story runs far deeper than a narrative of a death caused by non-communication. More than that, it outlines the long-term social and ontological pitfalls of un-reconciled narratives of ownership in Australia. If fragmented peoples reconcile only when they are willing to, as Stephenson would have it, here is a projection of what happens when they are not. Weller points towards the notion that the disparate and unreconciled narratives of belonging maintained by settlers and Aborigines is more than just unproductive; it is toxic. That the writer is drawn once more to issues of ownership, not just in 'The Window Seat', but in a number of stories in the collection⁵⁸, a decade after *Land of the Golden Clouds* sought to develop new paradigms of belonging in Australia, is reflective of the unrelenting centrality of the debates in Australian life. Long has the ownership question dictated the direction of the country's literature, and Weller is in good company with other Australian writers who have long felt the overwhelming compulsion to publish new stories about old stories.

In real terms, we might suggest that what is required is meaningful societal action, at both official and grassroots levels, which directly engages in a settler-indigenous narrative of reconciliation and does not balk at the social difficulty of the task. Only this type of practice will bring about the detoxification of the ownership debate and will, in turn, hopefully help move away from an oppositional settler-indigenous consciousness. From a literature perspective, these steps are vital if the country is to avoid flirting with a condition of literary *Terra Nullius*. This is a genuine risk of old stories continuing to call the shots of new Australian writing.

X • Conclusion

Patrick Wolfe claims that settler colonisation is based on structure rather than event. Wolfe discusses the first settlers' construction of a 'conveniently mythical indigeneity that displaces that of the natives'.⁵⁹ In the first place, the difference

⁵⁸ See 'Confessions of a Headhunter' and '67 Yagan Way', in *The Window Seat*.

⁵⁹ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 208.

between structure and event cannot be read simply as the difference between a singular moment and the enforcement of regulation. One must instead consider structure as the systematic overhaul of space *and* time in a particular locale. It takes control not just of people and place, but also the interrelation of the two, which is to note by extension that it thoroughly dismantles the indigenous right to culture. The depth of the settlers' impact, ultimately, is not straightforwardly remedied in a post-settler polity. There is, inevitably, a *destructuring* process required that is as intricate as its predecessor. Let us add something supplementary to Wolfe's initial charge: that the structure is less akin to something physical than to something chemical in strength. When it is undone, the process must be skilfully, rather than aggressively, destructive. Lorenzo Veracini is pertinent in this debate and his comments below, substantiated by Iris Marion Young, suggest that this destructuring process is distinctly epistemological: 'the decolonisation of settler colonial forms needs to be imagined before it is practiced. This has proved especially challenging, and, as Young has remarked, an "institutional imagination" of an entirely new character has to be developed.'⁶⁰ In the final sum, while the world changes, and even as settler-indigenous relations ameliorate over time, old structures do not simply fade into obsolescence.

This chapter has sought to highlight the enduring nature of settler histories and how they remain a key concern long after the given space has changed dramatically. The two writers studied here are, of course, representative neither of settler spaces generally nor of their respective nations; yet both writers have found that their work has continually flirted with issues that are the most acute preoccupations of settler polities: ownership, territory, history and mythology. If the writing of Archie Weller and Zakes Mda has become less stringently political as the writers' careers have developed, that quadruplet above has continued to preoccupy it. Certainly, it is not a trope difficult to get to the bottom of, given the prominence of these themes in the everyday life of the settler space; nor would it be unsurprising to find this true of any writer in a once-settler space. One must see that these questions are closest to the hearts and minds of the settler space's denizens. The trajectory of the arc of the novel that has been hypothesised here

⁶⁰ Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 108.

reflects, beyond the page, a broader move away from the oppositional politics of the colonial period into an entirely new and unfamiliar framework. *Black Diamond* and *The Window Seat*, though, indicate something important about the long-term figuration of the settler colonial dynamic: the post-settler arc requires perpetual momentum, and requires it because the latent threat of an unsettled settler history remains a very real one, capable of turning the arc back on itself. In literature, the concern is that new stories will become only the reproduction of old stories, for the simple reason that those questions of ownership, territory and history return to plague writers. Nevertheless, the real world threat is of graver concern. Where the likes of Cronulla riots of 2005, in which racial violence poured onto the streets of the Sydney suburb, demonstrated the ease with which a white Australian paranoia could be whipped up, South Africa's ongoing difficulty to keep at bay right-wing groups on either side of an otherwise (ostensibly) disintegrating colour divide is another case in point. How close to the surface memories of the past run. Indeed, at the time of writing – in spring 2012 – a story (among several) emerged in the international press of an attempted bomb plot by a right-wing white extremist group at the ANC's five-yearly conference in Bloemfontein. True, in both settings, Cronulla and Bloemfontein, these feelings have belonged to minorities; nonetheless, as small as they may be, these minorities have shown that they have the ability to create new stories that feel like old ones. Without question, the cycle is a vicious one, for, if old stories re-appear in life, old stories will inevitably return to the page.

The novel has in the last half-century come to be a popular vessel for the articulation of postcolonial experience and for the retrieval of postcolonial histories. Perhaps more visibly in South Africa than in Australia, the novel has also been a prevalent form through which to give literary expression to non-literary cultures. That noted, the distinction between the suitability of form and the suitability of content warrants further study, particularly given that postcolonial writing has relied upon the retention of an activist dimension that is not guaranteed in perpetuity. As much as the novel itself may have proved its worth as a suitable postcolonial cultural form, and as much as it might continue to do so, the very act of *writing the postcolonial*, as we may be inclined to put it,

requires revamping. This is due to the fact that the tenor of postcolonial writing, if it is to remain socially, culturally and politically significant, cannot be left to stagnate. That the notion of the arc holds water at all perhaps already suggests a weakening of the novel's ability to operate as a serious revolutionary artefact, of course. That is, particularly given the postcolonial novel's allegiance with solid histories and struggles, it seems telling to witness, even on a small and selective scale, a shift in the novel towards predominantly ideological and textual concerns.

As in South Africa, the novel in India has been exported internationally to the extent the two nations hold canonical positions when it comes to Anglophone postcolonial writing. However, the novel in India has been joined in recent years by an emerging literary counterpart: the non-fictional text. It is to the Asian subcontinent that this thesis now turns. Writing India, as it were – particularly considering the rapid and uneven development of the country and its impact on the coherence of a national culture – has necessitated the development of new literary lenses. Non-fiction has been central to this. More importantly, this division of writing has preoccupied itself with the swiftness of the passing of time in modern India, the consequent limitations this has placed on representation, and the ultimate impact it has had on the value of the written word. As the following section seeks to demonstrate, the literary representation of postcolonial space has begun with the revaluing of the written word – and it has begun most prominently in the Indian city.

INTERLUDE
Writing Space: The City, The Image of the City

I • Lynch's Imageable City

Let us begin here with the idea of the wholesale projection of space via images, the notion of space written into being visually. In *Image of the City* (1960), Kevin Lynch writes that, 'we have the opportunity of forming our new city worlds into an imageable landscape: visible, coherent, and clear'.¹ Lynch is writing of the visible city in very straightforward terms. Of Florence, he notes the city's physical geography – its place within a bowl of surrounding peaks – which makes the two features, city and hills, at any one time 'inter-visible'.² In the centre of the city, through which from west to east cuts the Arno river, the terracotta Duomo di Firenze rises above all else to take its symbolic place in Florence's public imagination. Noting the bond struck up between place and populace, Lynch writes:

To these clear and differentiated forms people have made strong attachments, whether of past history or of their own experience. Every scene is instantly recognizable, and brings to mind a flood of associations. Part fits into part. The visual environment becomes an integral piece of its inhabitants' lives. The city is by no means perfect, even in the limited sense of imageability; nor does all of the city's visual success lie in this one quality. But there seems to be a simple and automatic pleasure, a feeling of satisfaction, presence, and tightness, which arises from the mere sight of the city, or the chance to walk through its streets.³

The writer, then, delights in his ability to view the city in an unhindered manner. That is, he notes the enjoyment to be taken from the human eye's surveillance of the landscape before it, both outwardly from the city and inwardly from the hills.

¹ David Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T Press, 1990; 1960), p. 91.

² *ibid.*, p. 92.

³ *ibid.*

And yet, finding Florence an anomaly – the truly visible city being something of a rarity, he contends – Lynch notes that, ‘nowhere in the world is there a metropolitan area with any strong visual character, any evident structure. The famous cities all suffer from the same faceless sprawl at the periphery’.⁴ Half a century later, is it not possible to take these two of Lynch’s sentences and modify their thrust slightly, so that the latter sentence remains largely intact but the former is turned almost squarely on its head? In other words, can one not suggest, albeit problematically, that many of the world’s most known cities are now indeed defined in strongly visual terms? Which is to contest that geographical space is given as much of its character by projections cast in its name than by the manifest space itself. Put simply, one can gain a more coherent picture of a given city from the neatened projection of it in images than from the first-hand experience of being there. This is precisely because of the nature of the contemporaneous bond between image and knowledge, which operates on the rather vulgar basis that *seeing is knowing*.⁵

Revamping Lynch’s words requires an acknowledgment that the seeing human eye has been replaced in an updated version by a mechanical optical

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵ To offer a simple example, I think back to the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London, and the engineered topography of the city that the event conjured up. Often perceived to be drawn-out and not entirely entertaining, the opening ceremony of a global event is always a spatially minded affair, a projection of the host territory in unashamedly celebratory terms. Yet away from the concentrated British history, geography and culture that was created in the stadium itself (via Danny Boyle’s famous choreographing of an on-screen rural-idyll-cum-industrial-superpower-cum-cultural-heartland), the topography of London made visible in the footage shot away from the Olympic Park was telling. One significant segment of footage featured a flyby tour of London (starring Daniel Craig in his guise as James Bond and the Queen, as herself) from Buckingham Palace eastward to the stadium at Stratford. The footage, which is almost exclusively shot from the elevated perspective offered by the helicopter the two travel in, recreates London by its monuments alone, so that the route between the two points, as far as the viewer is concerned, is a simple and straightforward journey punctuated by knowable landmarks. Observing the sequence, one is taken from the palace straight along The Mall to Trafalgar Square, hurriedly whisked to the Thames (for there is apparently nothing of note between the two), along the river toward Tower Bridge, making only a brief diversion to see suited businessmen on a rooftop in the City, and then, miraculously, one arrives at the threshold of the park. The five-mile stretch of the would-be journey from Tower Bridge to Stratford – ultimately spanning the full width of the borough of Tower Hamlets – is missing. Perhaps it is understandable: after all, this region of London is arguably less visually striking from the air. But there is something to be said about the fact that Tower Hamlets is one of the most ethnically diverse and intricately populated boroughs in the United Kingdom. The explanation is simple, of course. *This* London (for one should see that rendering the city in such a way as the ceremony does creates multiple Londons) is not nearly so imageable; the ordinary exchanges of Londoners on Whitechapel Road, which are numerous, varied and perhaps demonstrative of a truer demographic perspective of the city, are not so easily captured as spectacle and are thus left unacknowledged.

apparatus. Nonetheless, this later eye – which we might call for now the image-making eye of the camera, the screen and so on – has assumed a powerful monopoly in the stakes of representing space. In *The Autograph Man* (2002), Zadie Smith writes:

Here goes the city. Here it goes. There it is. On television. In a magazine. Written on a towel. In a photograph that hangs above the bed in moody black and white, as you sit indoors in this Technicolor city. There it is again. On channel nine, on twenty-three, briefly on seven, in cartoon form on fourteen and always on number one, which is the channel of the city. And it is also out that window, or so you hear.⁶

I have written elsewhere⁷ that the Indian Premier League cricketing tournament is an example of this type of spatial representation, a watertight package of images projecting an Indian space on screen. I want to revisit a moment from that particular chapter, in which I discussed Pepsi-Cola's sequestering of India captain M.S. Dhoni's helicopter shot⁸ in its sponsorship of the IPL competition. In one of its television adverts, Dhoni can be observed in an idealised rural Indian setting where he is put to work on a piece of antiquated agricultural machinery that he masters for the simple reason that operating the machine utilises the exact same motion as the helicopter shot. My initial critique examined the way in which Pepsi ultimately annexed the artistry of Dhoni's shot, obscuring its artistry. One might also observe the way in which, in staging this idyllic pastoral, the advert lays down a spatial claim on rural India, doing so in a way that is both unreflective and seductive. For during the twenty-eight seconds of the piece that is set against the backdrop of some rural Indian idyll, the space is shown to be aesthetically simple (a single spinning wheel, greenery, a muscular and modest labourer) and culturally straightforward (simply: manual labour in the countryside begets success elsewhere). Rural India is reduced to a half-minute frame, but one cogent in its presentation. I write this not as though one is to be easily fooled into equating authentically rural India with the narrow framed world of an advert, nor that it upholds any manner of discursive authority. Instead, I am casting the judgment that, increasingly, we are lacking the necessary tools with which to overthrow, or at least to compete with, the

⁶ Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man* (London: QPD, 2002), p. 301.

⁷ See Appendix One.

⁸ Dhoni has become known for the shot, which uses a last-minute, rotating swipe of the bat resembling a turning propeller, and which often manages to dispatch the ball at wonderfully unusual angles.

inflated value assigned to what is made visible. (One need only think of something like, say, the epistemological purgatory experienced by the viewer who watches the performance of a magic trick, who knows very well that a carefully managed illusion is at work, but requires the knowledge concerning the sleight of hand employed – knowledge that is not granted – in order to discount it totally.) When Fredric Jameson makes the remark that one symptom of late capitalism and postmodernity (boiled down here somewhat, of course) is ‘depth ... replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces’,⁹ he is striking a chord that resonates more widely. Jameson, who writes these words actually on the subject of painting, then moves the discussion forward to the architecture of downtown Los Angeles, putting it that,

If this new multinational downtown (to which we will return later in another context) effectively abolished the older ruined city fabric which it violently replaced, cannot something similar be said about the way in which this strange new surface in its own peremptory way renders our older systems of perception of the city somehow archaic and aimless, *without offering another in their place?*¹⁰ (my emphasis)

What I am getting at here pushes the debate slightly further on than Jameson’s notion of postmodern fixation with surface, homing in instead to extrapolate this final remark of his, which alludes to the disorienting effect of the surface itself. I do not wish to suggest that, by whatever means it has come to assume such a lofty position, the image has gazumped the value of any other representational form to the extent that it has become a *primus inter pares*. Rather, following Jameson, there is a sense that the visible (the image) has come to trump the un-visible (primarily, the word) in a way that both diminishes and also obscures the erstwhile authority of the latter; thus, as the American puts it, ‘rendering older systems of perception archaic and aimless, without offering another in their place.’ In a word, the discussion is one concerning the modern-day production of knowledge and, again, the idea that the hierarchy of knowledge itself is obscured by the high station held by the visible. In sum, the visible has granted itself (albeit often unjustifiably) the ability to pass itself off, unvetted, as purified knowledge.

⁹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 53-92 (p. 62).

¹⁰ *ibid.*

The title of Lynch's tome, torn somewhat from its original meaning, provides a useful frame for the direction of the chapter hereafter. If so far it has been suggested, firstly, that the modern eye has been coaxed into equating knowledge with image and, secondly, that the modern city space is accordingly constructed through the broadcasting of images, then what follows will seek to explore how one might work to breach the smooth surfaces of the images. The inquiry will ponder the question of Indian space and, namely, recent literary responses to its reductive visual rendering. Inasmuch, it poses the question: to what extent can literary accounts of Indian space work to resist the seductive appeal of the Indian space cast by the image? Or: if the likes of the IPL, or any other spatially disfiguring visual parade similar to it, can assemble a cogent vision of India, how is the writer on a necessarily much smaller scale able to challenge it? That the setting for this inquiry is to be based predominantly in the Indian city is not to suggest that it is necessarily home to the most representative Indian life (for did not Gandhi inform us that the village was the *truly* Indian space?), but because overwhelmingly it is the most visible Indian space.

Only two decades after *Image of the City*, Michel de Certeau had made the leap from Lynch's human eye, contentedly devouring the sight of Florence before it, to a more ominously positioned lens. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), De Certeau stands atop the now-fallen World Trade Centre tower in Manhattan and takes issue with the view of New York that the near-1400 foot edifice has afforded him. It allows him, he writes, 'to read it, to be a Solar-eye, looking down like a god.'¹¹ This totalising view of the city is for him problematic, for it 'makes the complexity of [it] readable, and immobilises its opaque mobility in a transparent text'.¹² Where Florence sits pleasantly within its natural basin, for De Certeau New York's is an oppressive geography. If he can see the city as a whole from his lofty height, it is a view that carries a corollary: the loss of connection with the human life at ground level. 'An Icarus flying above these waters,' he writes, 'can ignore the devices of Dedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far

¹¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984), p. 92.

¹² De Certeau, p. 92.

below. His elevation transforms him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance.’¹³ (As an aside, one thinks of a camera-brandishing visitor to New York, venturing out perhaps to the Hudson’s west bank, standing at the Paulus Hook ferry terminal and taking a photograph, facing back across the water, of the city skyline – for it is only from this distance that New York yields an imageable frame to the photographer. In essence, our visitor has been forced from the life of the city in order to see it in an intelligible way.) There is certainly a thread that spans De Certeau to Jameson here, particularly if one considers the glass exterior of the World Trade Centre towers, which drew in the whole vista of New York City into their reflective surfaces so that the human eye sees, above all else, only the reflection of itself. Jameson, of course, writes somewhat similarly of the Crocker Bank Center (now the Wells Fargo Tower) in Los Angeles: ‘This great sheet of windows, with its gravity-defying two-dimensionality, momentarily transforms the solid ground on which we climb into the contents of a stereopticon, pasteboard shapes profiling themselves here and there around us.’¹⁴ And it is certainly worth pushing further forward with this idea concerning the illusory power of glass. In Monica Ali’s debut novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), Nazneen, the young protagonist who, as a result of an arranged marriage, moves from Bangladesh to east London, ventures out for the first time from her small flat and makes the short walk to the city’s financial district. There, she is struck by the illusory appearance of what the reader presumes to be Norman Foster’s 30 St Mary Axe (the Gherkin):

She looked up at a building as she passed. It was constructed almost entirely of glass, with a few thin rivets of steel holding it together. The entrance was like a glass fan, rotating slowly, sucking people in, wafting others out. Nazneen craned her head back and saw that the glass above became dark as a night pond. The building was without end.¹⁵

Mark the way in which the rotating doors appear to draw people inside unconsensually. Observe the narrator’s remark that the tower seems not to have an end, which one reads both as a comment on its size and also perhaps a remark on its unintelligibility. Finally, note the manner of Nazneen’s gaze – the neck craned – and consider what effect this act of looking upwards has on her view of

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Jameson, p. 62.

¹⁵ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, 2004; 2003), p. 56.

the rest of the city that remains beneath her eye line, at once removing it from our of her gaze. Like Nazneen, the inhabitant of any modern city is prey to the very same urge: an urge to look up, to be lost in the reflective surfaces of its furniture, to necessarily turn his or her eyes away from the rest of it. It is only fitting, of course, that the glass tower reflects something more, and one must see that this fascination with shimmer, reflectivity, curved steel and so on stands to represent all that has come to signify modernity-made-visible. This requires explanation. I am writing not just of large, glass-fronted buildings, but of anything which draws attention to itself – by the very seduction offered by its surface – as a marker of progress and newness. In the true spirit of our inclination towards spectacle, invariably these things are always, to once again use Lynch's terms, imageable.

II • Seeing the Postcolonial City

For obvious reasons, Indian space cannot be neatly discussed among the foundations laid down by the troika of Lynch, Jameson and De Certeau. Yet there is much that may be carried over, particularly the conflated idea that the modern metropolis sprawls to an effectively characterless periphery and draws attention to its own striking centrepieces. If there is nothing new in this, one should see that such a dynamic in the Indian city especially stands to have alarming consequences. After all, the developing metropolis masquerading as a fully modern city does so at its own peril. This, of course, brings us close to the crux of the issue. In what should read like a true tenet of uneven development, knowledge of India cannot be gathered only by looking at its markers of modernity (as can be said of any nation, of course, but with particular vigour here). If ones stands looking at the Bombay skyline from across the Mahim Bay and duly gleans from the given vista a view of India as a modern nation – that is, beguiled as one might be by the glowing lights of Worli's waterside towers – it is only like one inferring exactly the same from global GDP figures, which place India in the top clutch of the world's countries. But just as Bombay is not a truly modern city on the basis that the seductive images it makes visible (its

centrepieces) offer only a fragment of the larger narrative of the city space, nor is India a modern nation, at least not by the western model.

At this juncture, then, it is worth making a qualification concerning the company that India and the Indian city are seen to be keeping. There is nothing untoward in writing of India as a postcolony, or, by extension, writing of its cities as postcolonial cities. But these should not be seen as taxonomies in their own right, and the narrative of postcolonial India should not be regarded as one that runs along neatly historical lines. In every sense, there is no time for epochalism. In her as yet unpublished PhD thesis, Emma Bird (following Rashmi Varma, to whom I will turn in a moment) notes that, ‘the [postcolonial] city... has been over-determined and materially effaced by postmodern, post-structuralist readings.’¹⁶ The thrust of Bird’s thesis, which uses a vocabulary that has particular resonance here, speaks of the need for ‘a new lens through which to consider the representational terrain of Bombay’.¹⁷ The problem with any narrative of the postcolonial city arises when rigidly narrativial ideas are employed to interpret it. It is an inclination that perhaps chimes with the wider desire for the image of which I have already written: that being the will to see history in straightforward (read: visible) terms. There have been those who have taken the postcolonial city to be simply the lagging, post-independence urban project of a western counterpart, with a few adornments. Equally unbecoming, though, is the classification of postcolonial cities – and here once-colonial megacities such as Lagos and Johannesburg are called to mind alongside other sprawling cities of Southeast Asia and South America – as sites of neat dichotomies. By which I mean, as much as there lays a danger in being duped by signs of (western-style) progress in the postcolonial city and mistaking it as something unproblematically “modern”, it is similarly unhelpful to frame the postcolonial city’s apparent markers of modernity squarely against abject lives eked out amidst the same urban fabric (in the slum or the favela, for example). By extension, it is amiss to consider that the megacity can be defined by a simple, Manichean dynamic, for it does not go far enough to categorise the postcolonial city as one defined by polarities. That this sort of process is a

¹⁶ Emma Bird, ‘Reimagining Bombay: Postcolonial Poetry and Urban Space’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2012), p. 77.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

genuine risk perhaps originates in the fact that the slum in particular, which is arguably the most material reminder that the city is *not yet* modern, is so easily committed to image. How often Bombay's not-yet-modernness is emphasised by an elevated shot of Dharavi, Nairobi's by one of Kibera, Manila's by one of Tondo, Rio de Janeiro's by one of Rocinha, and so on.

Combatting such vulgar and insufficient readings, Rashmi Varma suggests that we would be better to think of the postcolonial city as a 'conjunctural space that produces a critical combination of historical events, material bodies, structural forces and representational economies.'¹⁸ Later, she writes: 'The postcolonial city is thus precisely the site where the universality of global capitalist development comes up against the specific cities of colonial history and postcolonial politics.'¹⁹ On such a basis, Bird's call for a new, much needed representational lens (which, incidentally, she locates in Bombay poetry) is both fitting, and very much taken up here. For me, a key figure in this adjustment to new modes of writing and understanding city space is an historically well-known one: the wanderer. Here I intend to discuss this vocation and its contribution to the vocation of literary archiving.

III • Writing (in) the city

How was Charles Dickens able to challenge the general consensus that nineteenth century London was overwhelmingly an imperial city of prestige, gentility and grandeur? By writing at night from its shadowy byways, when the city was besmirched by darkness. He writes:

The streets of London, to be beheld in the very height of their glory, should be seen on a dark, dull, murky winter's night, when there is just enough damp gently stealing down to make the pavement greasy, without cleansing it of any of its impurities; and when the heavy lazy mist, which hangs over every object, makes the gas-lamps look brighter, and the brilliantly-lighted shops more splendid, from the contrast they present to the darkness around. All the people who are at home on such a night as this, seem disposed to make themselves as snug and comfortable as possible; and the passengers in the streets have excellent reason to envy the fortunate individuals who are seated by their own firesides.²⁰

¹⁸ Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁰ Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (London: Penguin Books, 1995; 1839), p. 432.

Not only does Dickens attend to these hidden aspects of London, but inverts an assumed logic so that it is precisely these minute aspects of city life that stand to mark the height of its glory. By extension, then, how does the modern-day writer offer a challenge to spaces being written from elsewhere? While the answers could be numerous, there is certainly an emerging cohort of contemporary city writing that follows a logic similar to Dickens: that of writing (in) the space at, or beyond, the threshold of the city's representational reach. Dickens is seemingly offering a small-scale retort here to the master narrative of London, suggesting that the true spirit of the city is to be found on gloomy evenings when people have retired to their houses. He records details otherwise unknown and unseen. His, of course, is a different manner of riposte to that made sixty years later at the turn of the century by Joseph Conrad who, in *Heart of Darkness*, turns the narrative of London as a centre of civilisation on its head somewhat, suggesting that *it* is a space of darkness. The contemporary trend in city writing that I am hinting at here emerges out of this earlier mould, not just finding, but inhabiting and duly writing, cracks in the glaze of urban space.

I identify something of a change of tack in the craft of the city writer over the last two decades or so, necessarily modifying the scope of his or her work in recognition of a number of important circumstantial shifts. Among them, one might cite the rapidly evolving methods of mapping urban space, and also the somewhat interconnected fact of the written word's gradually diminishing authority (to which I will return). It is a century since Georg Simmel wrote of the metropolis and its overwhelming bearing on the senses, noting that,

The most significant aspect of the metropolis lies in this functional magnitude beyond its actual physical boundaries and this effectiveness reacts upon the latter and gives to it life, weight, importance and responsibility. A person does not end with the limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanate from him temporally and spatially. In the same way the city exists only in the totality of the effects which transcend their immediate sphere.²¹

For Simmel, the metropolis was best understood not in terms of its literal assemblage of concrete structures but as medium, as a site of metaphysical activities and encounters. The modern-day metropolis only intensifies this logic.

²¹ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), pp.11-19 (p. 12).

Among the many factors to be considered in this regard, the spatially mystifying effects of the Internet and mass migration make it more difficult than ever to consider the city space holistically. Take, as a rudimentary example, a branch of any multinational coffee company in a city, the specific geography of which matters little. When one considers that the business behind the franchise is based elsewhere, its accounts registered somewhere different still, its workforce multinational, its raw materials gathered from all corners of the globe, and its branding aesthetic universal (so that its appearance is instantly recognisable), how then is one to understand the physical, singular concrete space it occupies? It has a spatially mystifying effect, one that cannot be explained away in straightforward terms as only a *consequence of globalisation*. Not only this, we must see that the effect is not only imposed upon the given space itself (that is, within the confines of the coffee shop) but – more grandiosely – upon all space. For, much like the glass panels of the skyscraper drawing other spaces into it through its reflection, sites like this have a similar impact so that other spaces, seemingly imperceptible to the impact of the former, must be considered relatively to it. By that token, the development of Bombay's international airport adjacent to the city's Annawadi slum, for instance, does not only have the effect of drawing into sharp relief the disparities between the two; the development has the effect, like pinching the centre of a sheet between the fingertips and pulling it upwards, of interfering with the lie of the fabric at large, so that even the periphery is altered.

In sum, what one must acknowledge is that the modern-day city space cannot be understood holistically and that, with the earlier part of this chapter in mind, there is a need to resist attempts to do so. And these attempts are numerous, for it is in the interests of local authorities, national bodies and transnational businesses to project the city in such complete terms. To varying degrees, Bird and Lynch attest to this very reasoning. Writing of Bombay's over-privileging as a postcolonial city, Bird writes: 'It has often been depicted as a space of undifferentiated hybridity, a globalized and almost unreal city.'²² Lynch, meanwhile, writing in 1960 of course, wonders, 'if a consistently imageable

²² Bird, p. 79.

metropolis (or even a city) is in fact possible, and whether it would be appreciated if it did exist'.²³

IV • Literary Archiving

How possible is it to map spaces like these in literary terms? I have mentioned already the dwindling value of the written word in its own right. In the writer's hands the word must attain a flexibility that reflects the fluidity of the space it responds to. This manner of mapping is alluded to notably in the likes of Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992), a book comprised variously of French, Mulatto French and Creole, and noted for its opacity and its 'multivoicedness, collage, and foreign smatterings'.²⁴ In it, the long and complicated genealogy of Texaco (a settlement at the periphery of the Martiniquais capital, Fort-de-France) is recuperated from myriad sources – notebooks, archival material and conversations. Nevertheless, it is the gradually shifting attitude of a visiting urban planner to the district that leaves a distinct impression on the reader about how one should begin to imagine a space like this. With a mandate to record the physical territory of the settlement, the planner steadily becomes attuned to Texaco's rhythms, discovering that the methods best suited to understanding the space involve not only changing the erstwhile tools he uses, but starting again from scratch. 'I suddenly got the feeling,' the planner notes, 'that Texaco came from the deepest reaches of ourselves and that I had to learn everything. And even: to relearn everything.'²⁵ As much as he notes that the discrepancies between the adjacent city and Texaco lie in relatively solid contradiction, such as between the physicality of the former against the spirituality of the latter, it is the planner's thoughts on the interdependence of the two that are most helpful here. He writes:

She taught me to reread our Creole city's two spaces: the historical center living on the new demands of consumption; the suburban crowns of grassroots occupations, rich with the depth of our stories. *Humanity throbs between these two places*. In the center, memory subsides in

²³ Lynch, p. 94.

²⁴ Rose-Myriam Réjouis, 'Afterword', in Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, trans. Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokurov (London: Granta, 1998; 1992), p. 395.

²⁵ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, p. 165.

the face of renovation, before the cities which the Occident inspires. Here, on the outskirts, one survives on memory. In the center, all dissolves in the modern world; but here people bring very old roots, not deep and rigid, but diffuse, profuse, spread over time with the lightness of speech. *These two poles, linked by social forces, mold the faces of the city with their push-and-pull.*²⁶ (emphasis added)

For the planner, the surge of humanity between the two locations is the best marker of their connection. Later, pushing a comparison between Texaco and a mangrove, the planner notes:

[The mangrove] seems to belong to neither land nor sea, somewhat like Texaco is neither City nor country. Yet city draws strength from Texaco's urban mangroves, as it does from those of other quarters, exactly like the sea repeoples itself with that vital tongue which ties itself to the mangrove's chemistry. Swamps need the regular caress of the waves; to reach its potential and its function of renaissance, Texaco needs City to caress it, meaning: *it needs consideration.*²⁷

The acknowledgement of a symbiotic relationship between the city and Texaco confirms its interdependence, the one always requiring the presence of the other. This final phrase, too, noting ultimately that the periphery demands the 'consideration' of the centre – and *vice versa* – pays testimony to the idea that the difference between disparate spaces need not be understood in concrete terms. Instead, it is suggested that difference should be held not as something prohibitive but as a space that is cogently, even if not cartographically, mappable. The urban planner's coming to terms with new ways of mapping space follows a trajectory required elsewhere, particularly in relation to writing the space of the postcolony. Chamoiseau's planner's gradual deployment of new sensory tools with which to map chaotic space is important, as is his acknowledgement of the loss of the myth of spatial order. He begins to receive the city experientially, rather than responding to its solid furniture.

'The characteristic traits [of a city] are truly temporal and rhythmic, not visual,'²⁸ writes Henri Lefebvre. Indeed, in Chamoiseau's urban planner there are definite echoes of Lefebvre, notably as the philosopher looks out from his balcony opposite the Pompidou Centre, Paris, listening to the passing of cars and footsteps, the complex harmony of both, and declaring: 'Noise. Noises.

²⁶ Chamoiseau, p. 170.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space Time and Everyday Life*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004; 1992), p. 32.

Murmurs. When lives are lived and hence mixed, they distinguish themselves badly from one another. Noise, chaotic, has no rhythm. However, the attentive ear begins to separate out, to distinguish the sources, to bring them back together by perceiving interactions.’²⁹ And then:

In order to grasp and analyse rhythms, it is necessary to get outside them, but not completely... A certain exteriority enables the analytic intellect to function. However, to grasp a rhythm, it is necessary to have been grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration. Like in music and the learning of a language.³⁰

Lefebvre is overwhelming in his conviction that the space before him is best processed rhythmically, something that we witness over and over in *Texaco*. What is more, Lefebvre is adamant that the rhythm cannot be captured visibly, writing as he does that, ‘no camera, no image or series of images can show these rhythms. It requires equally attentive eyes and ears, a head and a memory and a heart’.³¹ Note in passing – for I will return to this later – the truly subjective position from which Lefebvre is writing, as someone whose experience of the Parisian setting is intimate and unequivocally personal. He does not overplay his own authority.

If Lefebvre and Chamoiseau’s urban planner advocate the rhythmic interpretation of city space, the city writer has the arduous task of committing those rhythms to word. As I have already hinted, such a process requires a shift in the outlook and the ambition of the writer, for the act of writing itself comes to appear less authoritative than it does ephemeral. The postcolonial city is especially ripe for this manner of fluid literary mapping, for one should see that there is a particular pressure to avoid attempts at neatly separating out historical legacies from urban spaces like tangled threads. The melting pot metaphor is certainly a helpful, if clichéd, point of comparison, given that cities such as Bombay are held up as models of mixing; but the link only proves useful if, to further the metaphor, the resultant broth is judged on taste rather than its original ingredients. Indeed, the city writer is mindful of a need to move away from a grand aim of redressing the balance of the city’s history, a restorative task that at one time seemed to frequent the postcolonial writer’s work. Instead there

²⁹ Lefebvre, p. 27.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 36.

emerges a logic wherein the writer frees himself or herself from the irresistible allure of the past and commits to the present moment. This is the work of the literary archivist.

A word should go to recent work by anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao, whose article, 'Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive', helps give body to the work that the literary archivist undertakes. Essentially issuing a call for a shifting manner of urban pedagogy, Rao sets aside the preservationist model of material archiving in favour of seeing the city itself 'as an archive in the making'³² – or: the "city-as-archive". She writes: '[T]he archive becomes an emergent notion, a principle of ordering stimuli upon which future transactions are imagined and made present rather than a given notion of the past that has been deemed significant and marked for preservation.'³³ Rao takes issue most directly with the 'a priori' significance of the information gathered within the formal archive, usually considered to reflect something else, something that is less tangible such as cultural genius or a higher truth.'³⁴ It is, of course, something of a thorn in the side of an antiquated western archival tradition of preservation, which Rao finds insufficient to reflect the 'messy archives'³⁵ of modern-day cities. Important here is this shift that Rao proposes, from seeing the archive as a backwards-facing conceptual tool to one that is distinctly anticipatory. 'We [should] use the notion of the archive as a way of navigating the voids of the present,' she suggests, 'as a practice of intervening into and reading the urban fabrics created by these voids.'³⁶ Rao affirms the importance of the city's demographic profile, its human infrastructure, which, she believes, 'seen through the lens of the city-as-archive, foregrounds information that has a bearing on the future rather than [acting only as] information that merely has to be reorganized or purged.'³⁷

Might we see how Rao's attitude toward archiving can be integrated formally into the work of the postcolonial city writer? If he or she is able to somehow record the 'voids of the present', as Rao terms them, by at the very least literarily

³² Vyjayanthi Rao, 'Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive', *New Literary History*, 40:2 (2009), 371-383 (p. 374).

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 377.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 371.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 381

³⁷ *ibid.*

bringing into being the workings of the city as an archive, there is scope for the vulgar projections of city space to be challenged. A straightforward epistemological thesis is at work by Rao's reckoning in which what constitutes the knowledge around urban space is every single thing that happens (and has happened, is likely to happen) there. Thus, the city writer is the figure who becomes attuned to these occurrences, who writes them into being, and who in doing so begins to address, hopefully, the imbalance that has occurred as a result of over-privileging grand-scale representations of the city. The figure inserts himself or herself into space both as an extra body amidst the living archive and as a proxy recipient of other archival material. An example is useful. A work such as Ivan Vladislavic's *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006) is one that engages in this very practice. Its composition of 138 separate, rearrangeable entries (alternative "itineraries" are offered in the book's back matter) record the writer's movements across the city and give rise to questions about right to space in the postcolonial metropolis. A constant retort not to the death of the physical city, but to the dying away of meaning in Johannesburg against a backdrop of, broadly speaking, globalisation, private security culture and post-apartheid politicking, *Portrait With Keys* is a text anchored in moments of minute discovery. 'Johannesburg is a frontier city, a place of contested boundaries,'³⁸ Vladislavic writes, before focusing in on the spaces at which these borderlands meet. Two of the book's most notable passages involve the finding of ruptures in the city fabric. The first sees Vladislavic noticing a futile metal post (that he calls "the tomason") in the earth between two walls near to his house, which he claims never to have seen before, and which he then becomes obsessed with, seemingly unable to relinquish the idea that it has become an item of his own. The second moment, similarly, witnesses the writer instinctively removing a toy figurine from the recess of a wall, taking it home, returning it soon afterwards because of the apparent guilt he feels at having disturbed the order of things, only to then remove it a second time. Vladislavic appears to be a writer conscious of his hand in the mapping of Johannesburgian space, apparently aware that his recording of people and things – including himself – is a knowledge-producing act.

³⁸ Ivan Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (London: Portobello Books, 2007), p. 173.

In sum, I am talking broadly here of writers whose literary responsibilities might be seen to chime with the enterprises of various figures familiar to urban theory. Indeed, there are of course echoes of Lefebvre's rhythm analyst apparent in Vladislavic's concentration on particularised itineraries through parts of Johannesburg. When one reads of the South African's daily tracing and retracing of journeys, noting the nuances they throw up *en route*, it is difficult not to give a thought to Lefebvre on his Paris balcony attuning himself to the rhythms of the street below. De Certeau, too, descending to ground level from the peak of the Manhattan tower, writes of the walker – 'the ordinary practitioner of the city'³⁹ – as a valuable challenger to totalising visions of urban space, claiming that 'walking is a space of enunciation'.⁴⁰ Subsequently discussing the inevitable protuberances that emerge within the city fabric despite the totalising aims of the urbanistic project, De Certeau remarks of the manner in which the walker can offer resistance to the literal cartography of the space, writing that,

it is true that the operations of walking can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by.⁴¹

Once more, one can find evidence of Vladislavic responding to this very lack when he explicitly records acts of passing by in what are, ultimately, moments of opportunistic archiving. There are also traces of Walter Benjamin, of course in terms of the flâneur figure, but also in the form of the collector encountered in Benjamin's essay, 'Unpacking My Library'. Benjamin, noting the almost childlike delight experienced by the collector upon the purchase of a book, writes of the 'thrill of acquisition'.⁴² The value of each book in real terms is far surpassed by the inflated value it is subsequently invested with in the hands of the collector. Benjamin writes of collecting as a 'mode of renewal'⁴³, as though the manifest book is transformed into something almost priceless at the point of its acquisition. This logic carries over to the literary figure being conjured up here, namely in the sense that, for him or her, too – just as with Vladislavic's

³⁹ De Certeau, p. 93.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁴² Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library', in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 61-69 (p. 62).

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 63.

discovery of the tomason – the injection of value into the otherwise inconsequential object stands to have significant spatial ramifications. Let us not forget what has been written concerning the false economy of contemporary knowledge production, wherein values are obscured. Fanciful as the statement reads, the tomason is an important node of resistance against the perhaps totalitarian will to govern city space in its entirety.

These conflated deliberations, taken from seminal urban theorising, provide the bones of a figure whose work is of import to the ongoing knowledge of urban space. The figure is one whom we might well consider by any number of terms – the archivist, the activist, the analyst or, from the French, *l'inventoriste*⁴⁴ – a figure whose work concerns writing small-scale challenges to totalising visions of city space. The postcolony provides fertile ground for this manner of writing, for here the multiple legacies of the past risk being engulfed by grossly reductive narratives issued in the name of, say, globalisation. Indeed, these visions are especially deleterious to those sites with experience of recent historical upheaval, for the reason that one blanket view is only replaced with another. In such settings, of course, history is particularly vulnerable to historiographical reimaginings. That the postcolony (alongside other developing nations) is at particular risk of this, perhaps more than elsewhere in the developed world, is in no small part because of the continued (albeit somewhat illusory) investment in ideas of western-style capitalism and democracy.

V • The Indian City Writer

And so to the writer of the Indian metropolis. What follows hereafter is an exploration of three contemporary accounts of Indian cities: Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Bombay Slum* (2012), Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) and Amit Chaudhuri's *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). Each text is a record of the respective writer's real-time immersion in the text's eponymous metropolis. In each case, attention is paid to the minutiae of the city, as though to confirm that

⁴⁴ Meaning, literally, one who produces an inventory.

holistic perspectives are untenable. Chaudhuri's motivation for a book about Calcutta in 2013 came accompanied by an explanation given at the time of its publication. In a *Guardian* article, he writes:

I'd written three novels which had Calcutta as their setting, and my agent probably saw me as the ideal candidate for producing a non-fiction work on the city. The mid-2000s was a time of complete immersion in the present – a characteristic of free-market capitalism – so that things that had happened 15, 10, or even five years ago felt remote, and the frequent "all-time-best" lists in newspapers covered a span of, at most, 20 years. From the perspective of this compressed view of eternity, my novels about Calcutta might almost have inhabited another era. Perhaps it was time to write a new book about the city.⁴⁵

It is not that Calcutta has been overnight transformed into an unruly beast, unrecognisable from its erstwhile appearance, but that the relationship between time and space itself has intensified virtually beyond recognition. One might well take up the Heraclitean edict about man never stepping twice into the same river and suggest that, by Chaudhuri's reckoning, mid-2000s Calcutta witnesses a river flowing harder and more quickly than ever before. If the 'immersion in the present' was (and has been) a symptom of the age, a similar immersion in the city by Chaudhuri is seemingly a necessity. It is a thesis that can be extended to Boo and Mehta respectively, in the sense that they too throw themselves into the chaos of the present. Indian space has not become suddenly beyond the reach of writing. It is only that the perception of space itself has changed. In the postcolony, what follows the oppressive colonial myth of order is a period in which space is for a time put back on the market, so to speak, commercially and discursively. This has had both liberatory and oppressive outcomes.

Sara Upstone has written of "post-space", noting that,

The deconstruction of colonial space ... is a return to that fluidity overwhelmed by the colonial project, the diversity of all space which means that its ordering into mapped, defined locations and 'natural' territories is always an imposition. Returning to [pre-colonial] multiplicity is a positive removal of colonial authority. *As it reprivileges a vision of space as chaotic and fluid, it does not exoticise the colonised as 'Other' in its turn towards a chaotic vision of reality.* Instead, in exposing colonial spatial ordering as myth, it opens up the possibility to identify sites of intervention, spaces in which the colonial codification ultimately breaks down and reveals its unreality.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Amit Chaudhuri, 'My Calcutta', *Guardian: Review*, 2 February 2012, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 11-12. (Emphasis in original.)

Upstone's thrust in *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* (2009) lauds the creation of new spatial parameters. But to balance the celebratory potential of Upstone's post-space, I wrap up here with a final warning. The reimagining of space in writing is not unproblematic; it is a necessary and ongoing mode of challenge to new encroachments on postcolonial space. Inasmuch, just as sites of challenge can be identified that intervene in colonial-era myths of spatial order, so too must they be made – over and over, *ad infinitum* – to resist the glossy modern-day myth of spatial order.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing the Indian City

I • Bombay

On the surface of it, understanding the city space of Bombay is made easier because of its iconic establishment in popular imagination. While some of the world's most renowned cities (that familiar trinity, for example: London, New York and Paris) are perhaps recognised above all else for their manifest furniture (Big Ben, the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower respectively), globally, Bombay is a metropolis understood in less concrete terms. It is best known for the consternation it evokes at its sheer extraordinariness of scale and for its bewildering array of discrepant lives. Along with Delhi, too, it could be said to exist almost universally (in the developed world, at least) as a paradigm of slum living. A recent example or two of the furnishing of this popular image would be helpful. Danny Boyle's rendering of the city in *Slumdog Millionaire*, the director's 2008 adaptation of Vikas Swarup's novel *Q&A*, contributes to the common understanding of Bombay as an ultra-competitive space (or spaces) of acute unevenness. Consider the opening sequence of the film, in which the young lead, Jamal, along with his friends, is hotly pursued over a cricket square-cum-airport runway by angry guards into the settlement that lies adjacent to it. The young boys, at first hotfooting their way across a steep pile of waste, then scurry across ramshackle tin roofs and through passages ultimately too narrow and labyrinthine for their stalkers to navigate. Everything about the arrangement – the low-angle shots of darting bare feet; the lopsided, disorienting shots (one high, one low) of the boys snaking through the alleyways; the flustered and

increasingly perspiring guards, losing both their bearings and their targets – gives a view of the slum as a space that exists beyond the governance of the city authorities. By association, it is shown to be a space largely impervious to the benefits of the adjacent (rapidly modernising) space: the runway, after all, does not for the slum dwellers provide anything more than a transient, and illegal, leisure space. One might also look towards two of the literary texts under discussion here, and in doing so observe a similar practice of representation taking place. Momentarily setting aside the cautionary axiom that one is best not to judge a book by its cover, take the book sleeves of Mehta's *Maximum City* and Boo's *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*. The former, a high-angle monochrome image of two urban trains, stretching the long span of a station platform and flanked on all sides deep into the background by a toing-and-froing mass of blurred bodies (an act of photographic trickery making each member of the mass a faceless grey swoosh), substantiates the well-known image of an overcrowded, pulsating Bombay. Somewhat by contrast, the cover image of Boo's text, an at-heel, low-angle shot (again blurred) of a barefoot and bare-chested young slum dweller dashing down a narrow passage, limbs sprawling towards the proverbial and literal light at the cover's top, could well be a nod towards the sort of rags-to-riches narrative of Boyle's film. And, like Boyle (and, by the same token, Swarup), the cover, in its placing centre-page the large-scale body of a slum inhabitant, ostensibly broaches the issue of documenting one of Bombay's most under-represented lives.

Indeed, one can with a fair degree of authority stake the claim that Bombay's standing in the global imaginary is motivated more by the magnitude of its present conditions – images of a speedily globalising metropolis and its fetid underbelly – than by the legacy of its past, colonial or otherwise. In turn, a great deal of the artistic attention paid to the city in recent times has focused on its social landscape. At one extreme, focus has fallen on the burgeoning middle classes and their increasingly decadent lifestyles while, at the other, there has been something of a fascination with the Bombayites consigned to its slums, and to a life of uncertainty. Certainly, publications such as Mehta's and Boo's quite neatly fall within a trajectory that has become commonly referred to as an "anthropological turn" in literature, a phenomenon by no means particular to

India, but ostensibly more prevalent in settings like it – places prone to mis- or under-representation. ‘Anthropology and literature have become mutually interdependent in hitherto unknown ways,’¹ writes Jürgen Schläeger in his introduction to *The Anthropological Turn in Literary Studies* (1996). And then: ‘Literature is a kind of anthropology, and anthropology that excludes literature as part of the basic needs and capacities of humans will always remain only a torso.’² I contend here, though, that the undertakings of Mehta and Boo conform to a more nuanced anthropological charge that is not unconscious of (and at times even embraces) the shortcomings of neutral observation, opting to firmly embed the presence of the writer within the narrative. True, this results in an arguably much less authoritative anthropological account (of which the writers are aware) but which nevertheless contributes something to the Indian literary archive.³

There remains a little theoretical housekeeping to be taken care of. Debates have long been waged over the efficacy and the ethics of anthropological work, including examples such as the dispute between V.Y. Mudimbe and Peter Rigby, the former taking issue with the latter over the issue of participant observation.⁴ Similarly, so too has there been protracted dialogue concerning the (in)ability of the academic – the novelist, the social scientist or otherwise – to recover, and to speak on behalf of, the subaltern subject. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak poses the questions: ‘How can we touch the consciousness of people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?’⁵ While Spivak’s seminal essay is roundly dismissive of the intellectual’s capability in this regard – ‘to confront them is not to represent them but to learn to represent ourselves,’⁶ she suggests – there appears to be a different

¹ Jürgen Schläeger, ‘Introduction’, in *The Anthropological Turn in Literary Studies* (Tübingen, Germany: G. Narr, 1996), p.xii.

² *ibid.*

³ Indian non-fiction was to be the new fiction,’ Amit Chaudhuri’s agent suggests to the novelist during the discussion that resulted in the commissioning of *Two Years in the City*.

⁴ See V.Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality and Politics in Central Africa* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); and Peter Rigby, *Persistent Pastoralists: Nomadic Societies in Transition* (London: Zed Books, 1984). In the former text, in an otherwise generally collected essay, Mudimbe asks of Rigby: ‘How can one dare to write even a paper on the basis of such limited experience?’ (p. 167).

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 66-111 (p. 80).

⁶ Spivak, p. 84.

responsibility adopted. For Boo, that assignment is humanitarian in nature; Mehta, meanwhile, adopts the duty of providing a brand of indiscriminate social observation. And for both writers, Spivak's comment that attempts to represent the subaltern subject yield only lessons on self-representation, if credible, would seem actually to be beneficial. After all, their respective texts serve the twofold purpose of both illuminating untold Bombay narratives and helping their authors discover a place for themselves in the spiritual fabric of the city. That is to suggest, too, that neither text is over-encumbered by a responsibility to serve social, political (or, for that matter, postcolonial) ends. Rather, it would seem both are content it to contribute minutely but valuably to that same spiritual fabric.

II • *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012)

It is important to acknowledge first off that *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* reads like a novel. It begins:

Midnight was closing in, the one-legged woman was grievously burned, and the Mumbai police were coming for Abdul and his father. In a slum hut by the international airport, Abdul's parents came to a decision with an uncharacteristic economy of words. The father, a sick man, would wait inside the trash-strewn, tin-roofed shack where the family of eleven resided. He'd go quietly when arrested. Abdul, the household earner, was the one who had to flee. (p. ix)

One might read the text entirely on its merits as a work of fiction, then, and find that the narrative is suitably and entertainingly marked by all of the idiosyncrasies of slum life as one may already have understood it. From its beginnings here, with Abdul desperately trying to avoid arrest following the death of a neighbour (an incident he is not responsible for, but for which he is charged), to its would-be conclusion, which finds Abdul still waiting, 'in a suspended state between guilt and innocence' (p. 240), for the resolution to his case, the reader is carried through moments of injustice and corruption, enterprise and social peril. That the narrative ultimately arrives at something of an impasse at its closure – Abdul still consigned to a life of purgatory – is pertinent on two counts. In the first place, it provides confirmation that the text is

not the celebratory, rags-to-riches narrative that the cover might have us believe. More importantly, the irresolution (as the reader discovers in the pages that follow the closure of the text proper) is a precise reflection of the real-life events that have given rise to the narrative. For the book is not a work of fiction: it is, as Boo reveals in her post-script, a blow-by-blow account based on the three years she spent in Annawadi. Her explanation is straightforward: 'The events recounted in the preceding pages are real, as are all the names. From the day in November 2007 that I walked into Annawadi ... until March 2011, when I completed my reporting, I documented the experiences of the residents with written notes, video recordings, audio tapes and photographs.' (p. 249) And, as though to corroborate not only her first-hand experiences, but also the larger factuality of the book's events (such as those surrounding Abdul's prosecution), she explains: 'I also used more than three thousand public records many of them obtained after years of petitioning government agencies under India's landmark Right to Information act.' (p. 250)

Nevertheless, with a mind towards the issue at stake in the grand scheme of this chapter, one is faced with a series of challenges. What can *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* contribute to anthropological work on the Indian slum when it is presented in its guise of a narrative that, in terms of the text proper, hides the narrator's presence? By the same token, to what extent is its literariness detracted from by one's knowledge of its production? Certainly, these are not issues only of academic concern. 'You wonder, intermittently, about the book's omniscient narrator,' writes Pankaj Mishra in his review of the book in *The New York Times*:

Perhaps wisely, Boo has absented herself from her narrative. The story of how a white American journalist overcame the suspicion of her subjects (and the outright hostility of the police), or dealt with the many ethical conundrums created by close contact between the first and fourth worlds, belongs to another book.⁷

One might respond to these posed questions by firstly considering more of Boo's framing remarks, and with her apparent motivation for writing the book. She writes:

⁷ Pankaj Mishra, 'Fighting for Scraps: Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* Explores a Mumbai Slum', *New York Times*, February 9, 2012. Accessed at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/books/review/katherine-boos-behind-the-beautiful-forevers-explores-a-mumbai-slum.html>>.

I grew impatient with poignant snapshots of Indian squalor: the ribby children with flies in their eyes and other emblems of abjectness that one can't help but see within five minutes of walking into a slum. For me – and, I would argue, for the parents of most impoverished children, in any country – the more important line of inquiry is something that takes longer to discern. What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society? Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government's economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered? By what means might that ribby child grow up to be less poor? (pp. 247-248)

Boo, then, laments the lack of variety when it comes to narratives about India. More generally, she bemoans this same lack elsewhere. 'What was unfolding in Mumbai was unfolding elsewhere, too,' (p. 237) she notes. But, if she is justified in her grievances – and I strongly contend that she is – one needs to seek out the origin of this present reality.

It does not go too far to suggest that far outweighing Boo's concern over the very existence of poverty is a personal animosity that comes from the writer's perceived sense that poverty itself has been commoditised. In other words, in the would-be democratic but aggressive world of liberal capitalism, the poorest of the poor cannot even lay claim to their own impoverishment. Representation of this impoverishment belongs to a higher power. At fault, as I would put it, is the continued and widespread belief, held both in the West and in the rapidly developing world, in the profitability (economically, but also socially and culturally) of Western models of modernity – and particularly in capitalist materialism. This requires elaboration. In states such as India (but one might well also include other such states: Brazil, Nigeria or Indonesia, for example), rapid development witnesses the creation of a new bourgeois class often magnetised by the acquisitive spirit of Western-style liberal capitalism – its fashionable apparel, its culinary trends and its seemed need for uninhibited gratification. What a spectacle this provides, then, for Western eyes as these new replica classes emerge; what intrigue is stirred up when the familiar commercial logos of the Western world are seen in images of Indian or Nigerian streets, or when sleek shopping centres are shown to have popped up to create entire Western enclaves; and what curiosity is roused when items of Western dress (three-striped sports jackets or crocodile emblazoned shirts perhaps⁸) are seen adorning brown bodies. And yet so too is the corollary of this model – a left-behind and deprived underclass – a source of fascination also.

⁸ For clarity, it might be made clear that I am referring here to the branding techniques of sportswear manufacturers, Adidas, and Lacoste, the widely recognised French fashion house.

Over time, then, these developing spaces become defined by narratives of polarity that mark off the powerful from the powerless, the rich from the poor and the decadent from the destitute. But not only has the glossy structure of the West long held a monopoly in just this sense. More than that, perhaps due in part to the global reach and influence of its artistic culture in the likes of Hollywood, for example, it has also something of a hold over the world's available narratives. Willing consumers of Western modernity's over-the-counter commodities (of whom there are many) are increasingly receptive to the narrowing repository of familiar narratives, to which the rags-to-riches plot ostensibly belongs. They might be captivated, too, by the narrative of the irretrievably destitute group in need of Western intervention (and one might consider also this particular narrative's appeal beyond the confines of artistic culture). Boo takes issue with the reductive rendering of poverty replete with, as she points out, its own emblems: ribby children with flies in their eyes. It follows that these portrayals of abjection conceal as much as they make visible. Perhaps this helps one begin to better understand Boo's tack. When considering texts like *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, there would seem to emerge a need to move away from the narrative seeking to *give voice*, with all the problems it poses to questions of representation. Instead, the idea of *occupying space* again becomes important. And it is this an undertaking of this nature that I credit here to Boo. In the same review mentioned above, Mishra remarks of the book 'fully inhabiting India's troubled present',⁹ a pertinent appraisal of the author's project.

For the rules of the game have changed, as far as both postcolonial writing is concerned and writing more generally. Let me address these points in turn. Firstly, it goes largely without mentioning that one would find it problematic to discuss Katherine Boo as a postcolonial writer, in the sense that questions of origin, education and so on give rise to obvious quarrels. Equally, speaking to the plight of a much larger, non-nationally aligned underclass, we might make the claim that Boo's work is at odds with the postcolony as a national space. Such has been the development of India after independence, such has been the growth

⁹ Mishra, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/12/books/review/katherine-boos-behind-the-beautiful-forevers-explores-a-mumbai-slum.html>>.

of the country into a recognisable, largely functional entity,¹⁰ that the national narrative continues apace regardless of the huge number it leaves behind. This sub-stratum of subaltern subjects, aligned not with their respective nations but connected to each other as a united body of subaltern subjects, is the untethered by-product of aggressive development in the liberal capitalist mould. But, in the interests of taking action and offering a genuine challenge, it is of no use to level the blame at such an abstract monolith as, say, the West, or global capitalism. Thus, following Upstone's call for operating within microstructures, Boo occupies (quite literally in her case) a space virtually microscopic by global standards. From here she can begin to appreciate, and to represent, the minutiae of Annawadi life. That is, the small-scale trade formations, the political power structures, the sub-social hierarchy, the second-hand energy of development creeping in from the adjacent city. True, her narrative suggests that what happens there in Annawadi 'happens elsewhere, too'; tellingly, though, it does not take up the mantle of giving voice to those other spaces. It settles, instead, on this singular space in which her immersion in the territory is influential in every sense. We can see this in Boo's comments that, in trying at great length to corroborate some of the accounts she writes, by requesting access to public records, she learned 'the means by which government corruption and indifference erase from the public record the experience of poor citizens' (p. 250). As much as possible, Boo makes herself a part *of* the space, not just existing in it.

I mentioned above that the rules of writing more generally have been altered, although this perhaps is less profound a statement given the rapid and utterly unavoidable development of communication technologies in the last two decades or so. If one is to suggest a single, overarching effect of, say, the Internet on the word (written or typed) – that is, the capacity for mass and instant dissemination of text – it would be that, like a failing currency, the word has become seriously devalued. It is a simple logic: the speed with which information travels has accelerated, the widespread delivery of that information has been made duly easier and (in theory) more horizontal, and thus its dissemination has been multiplied interminably. Nevertheless, perhaps a little paradoxically, the apparent

¹⁰ World Bank statistics pertaining to India's development show largely positive trends in indicators such as, say, life expectancy, poverty eradication, economic growth and so on.

uniformity of the value of the word (with the advent of social media, more and more non-state sponsored broadcasting channels and ever greater publication platforms) has had the unprecedented outcome of actually reducing the word's capacity to act as a tool of representation, in that it leads to the dual threat of over-representation or, graver still, a new manner of monopolisation at the hands of those best able to wrest control. (At the highest level, one need only think of major online enterprises whose *modus operandi* has been to, in one way or another, remotely manage the worldwide flow of information; and, by the same token, one might consider the countering forces whose countering objective has been to offer resistance to that control, in the form of the strategic leaking of information.) But let us not lose sight of the issue at hand. The upshot is that the devaluation of the word is particularly detrimental to the grand-scale potential of literary narratives, and in particular to what one might think of as *resistance literatures*. By which I am referring to writing with an inclination towards, say, protest, revolution, or humanitarianism. For where once the printed word was ostensibly the arena in which the exercising of ideological power was most powerfully enforced, now that platform has been somewhat engulfed, and to a certain extent marginalised, by larger and more hegemonic platforms of representation. (One wonders, for example, if the anti-colonial resistance offered up by the likes of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* could be replicated in the modern-day literary climate.) For Boo, then, and her contemporaries, the publication of a text like *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* is all the more important, in part because its small-scale occupation of space – literarily and literally – is a necessary challenge to the homogenising sweep of global communication flows. Its dedication to the very ordinary and enclosed space of Annawadi might have meant that, by archaic standards, it could not confidently speak for the larger Indian context. Yet Boo does not strive for such grand aims (although not through not wanting to do so, but out of recognition at the impracticality of the task). In the new circumstances, though, amidst the heedless national pursuit of global repute concurrent with the ongoing representational paucity of the Indian subaltern, the full immersion in the context enables Boo to validly stake a claim to the space she inhabits, not as a way of giving voice to its entire populace, but simply as an act of resistance against the encroachment of a blanketing global

non-space. For the very nature of the text is important. While anthropologically it cannot necessarily stake much of a claim as a text of authority (nor as a fully-fledged work of fiction, for obvious reasons), its existence contributes valuably to contemporary understanding of Indian space. Fortunate though it may be that what Boo witnesses in order for her to write the book is translated into a compelling literary narrative, the presence of a text such as this at all, written about a microstructure but also an active product of it, recognises the need for new ways of thinking about literary space.

That Abdul's wait for acquittal outlasts the end of the book, that the reader is left to ponder the likely-to-remain volatility of the family's situation, and that the hope of the Annawadi inhabitants does not come to fruition, are all testament to the fact that *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* represents the symptoms of, rather than the remedy to, a problem. Against the grain of a despondent narrative telling of the downtrodden oppressed, or a celebratory narrative of the would-be liberated, Boo's text, inclined towards neither, is mindful only of the need to focus on wholly occupying the present moment. In doing so, and in recounting the ordinary (but equally quite extraordinary) events of one Bombay slum, it keeps that space – and others like it – from being representationally overwhelmed.

III • *Maximum City* (2004)

Suketu Mehta's given motive for writing *Maximum City* requires a little unpacking. Outlining his pendular migration¹¹ between the country of his birth and the United States early in the book, Mehta explains his two-year sojourn in Bombay after a two-decade absence:

Somewhere, buried beneath the wreck of [Bombay's] current condition –one of urban catastrophe – is the city that has a tight claim on my heart, a beautiful city by the sea, and island-state of hope in a very old country. I went back to look for that city with a simple question: can you go home again? (p. 3)

¹¹ Mehta writes of his many movements between the US and India.

Of course, the necessary unpacking pertains to the complexity of the question posed at this passage's end. While the book's opening gambit, detailing Mehta's transitory life¹², leaves one speculating as to where exactly 'home' might be for the émigré writer, the question itself is indicative of his understanding of Bombay as a modern metropolis. He might well have asked: is it possible to be integrated back into the city's fold after spending so long away from it? Or: does the Bombay of my childhood bear enough resemblance to its present-day incarnation for me still to conceive of it as home? The Heraclitean dimension to Mehta's concerns – the idea that no man can step into the same river twice¹³ – is telling. For him, Bombay, rather than envisioned as concrete space, is more of a fluvial entity. Throughout, the text the city is personified, rendered corporeal. 'Cities like Bombay live at night,' (p. 289) Mehta suggests; 'Bombay is a city humming, throbbing, with sexual energy,' he notes later (p. 345). Later still, he suggests with a slightly different emphasis that, 'Bombay is a mass dream of the peoples of India.' (p. 463). This final example, while different in nature to the earlier couple, refers to the city's unparalleled place in the national imaginary through of its association with the Indian film industry. So reads the full passage: 'It is not accident that the Hindi film industry is based in Marathi-dominated Bombay rather than Hindi-dominated Delhi, because film is not about language. It is fundamentally a mass dream of the audience, and *Bombay is a mass dream of the peoples of India*' (p. 463, emphasis added). Let us expand upon this, too. In the first place, the phrase substantiates my reckoning that, for Mehta, Bombay can be understood in an ethereal dimension. It is a dreamlike entity, made up not just of the manifest space that comprises it, but of the myriad dreams of its populace – and a broader, non-resident population, too. 'The reason a human being can live in a Bombay slum and not lose his sanity,' Mehta suggests, 'is that his dream life is bigger than his squalid quarters.' (p. 589) The city has the distinction, in a manner that echoes Georg Simmel's metaphysical postulating, of being formed by imagined spaces far greater than their physical counterparts. Secondly, the cinematic aspect is significant to the discussion. I think here of the words of Gyan Prakash in his essay, 'The Idea of Bombay' (2006), when he

¹² The writer grew up initially in Calcutta, before moving to Bombay and then on to New York.

¹³ The Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus remarked of the constant flux of existence that it is impossible to step twice into the same river, for it is always a different river and always, too, a different man.

recounts his childhood in the north-eastern province of Bihar and of the way in which Bombay was impressed upon his imagination. I quote him at length here:

Cities often live in our imaginations, their physical and social architecture exercising real power by conjuring up fictions and myths. This is how Bombay entered my life early and artlessly. The Island City lodged itself deep into my childhood consciousness and opened the world around me to the enchantment of its imaginations, inviting many, like myself, to live its fictions and make its pleasures and torments our own. Bombay was an idea, a figure of myth and desire.¹⁴

Much like Mehta and his personification of Bombay, Prakash finds equal recourse to write of the city in similar terms, as though it were dream-space. 'Stored in words, images, and interpretations,' he goes on, 'Bombay dug deep roots in my consciousness.'¹⁵ There is, of course, empirical evidence to substantiate the idea that the 'tug'¹⁶ towards Bombay that Prakash felt along with other fellow Biharis¹⁷ was, and is, reflective of a much broader national phenomenon. Indeed, while the city's lure in Indian writing has been written of above with the example of Desai, Mehta has in interview put Bombay's draw in more demonstrative terms:

Greater Bombay adds about one million new people every year. These migrants essentially come together to form villages in the city. They are drawn by the hope of economic opportunity and also by something called freedom – which, in a city like Bombay, means it is possible to marry someone who is not of your caste or for a woman to dine alone in a restaurant or possibly bump into a Bollywood star on the sidewalk. So the call of the city is about money, freedom and glamour.¹⁸

Let it be made clear, though, that the reality greeting migrants upon arrival in Bombay is often in stark contrast to the powerful myths conjured up in the imagination by the likes of Bollywood. Data published on the city is frequently damning and directly at odds with the dreamlike imaginings. As an example, *The Mumbai Human Development Report* (2009) gave the trivial, but disturbing statistic that in some Mumbai slums there are believed to be eighty-one people to

¹⁴ Gyan Prakash, 'The Idea of Bombay', *The American Scholar*, 72:6 (2006), 88-99. Accessed at: <http://olion.chadwyck.co.uk.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/searchFulltext.do?id=R03822320&divLevel=0&area=abell&forward=critref_ft>.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ '[O]ur fascination with Bombay was the desire for modern life', he writes. 'We spoke of Bombay with signs and gestures, with wistful looks and sighs acknowledging deprived pleasures.'

¹⁸ Piali Roy, 'In Conversation with Suketu Mehta: The City Speaks', *Cities of Migration Online*, May 19, 2011. Accessed at: <http://citiesofmigration.ca/ezine_stories/in-conversation-with-suketu-mehta/>.

each available toilet seat.¹⁹ Nevertheless, that such large numbers continue to migrate to Bombay from across India is testament to the esteem in which the city continues to be held as a mythic space of opportunity, aided in no small part by the popularity of Bollywood. Even in films the potential of the city is not problematic, and Prakash suggests the depiction of Bombay ‘usually as corrupt and soulless in contrast to the simplicity and warmth of the village’.²⁰ Nevertheless, it endures as a powerful symbol.

In sum, Bombay operates as a sort of defective utopia (which is not the same as a dystopia), a space combining two opposing strata: the hopeful symbolic and the problematic material. Mark the words of Upstone, who notes that ‘the city is inherently tied to utopian discourses: to urban space not as lived, material reality, but as dream. Despite various representations of the horrors of the industrialised city, the city has also been *at the same time* a space of projection: of personal desires and communal hopes’.²¹ Yet, for Mehta, while Bombay has been a space projection – ‘I existed in New York, but I lived in Bombay, taking little memory trains,’ (p. 9) he notes early on his account – it is only his full immersion in the very material reality of the city that can reconcile him with it. Through an act of something like self-sacrifice, giving himself over to the rhythms of the city, in Upstone’s terms that city then ‘becomes an enemy, the riddle that must be solved’.²² Yet one might remark that, as much as Bombay does indeed take on the appearance of a riddle-to-be-solved, it is not labyrinthine in a resolvable Daedalian sense but, in the true spirit of chaotic space, unplanned and unpredictable. Recall the words of Vyjayanthi Rao: the city *of risk* becomes the city *at risk*.

Mehta’s return to Bombay does not follow an itinerary driven by a desire for re-acquaintance with a past he left behind. He does not embark upon some manner of Odyssean return to the setting of his childhood. Very early on Mehta discloses that, ‘Any nostalgia I felt about my childhood has been erased. Given the chance to live again in the territory of childhood, I am coming to detest it. Why do I put

¹⁹ Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, *The Mumbai Human Development Report* (Oxford; New Dehli: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. iv.

²⁰ Prakash, ‘The Idea of Bombay’.

²¹ Upstone, p. 85.

²² *ibid.*, p. 94.

myself through this?’ (p. 33) Indeed, one might question the very nature of the project and question through what means Mehta might come to a conclusion as to the success of his project of integration. I am reminded here of a passage from Sam Miller’s *Delhi: Adventures in a Megacity* (2010), a book whose prefacing remarks see the writer deliberating over his ‘perfect geometric method for exploring a city on foot’.²³ In other words, Miller is, like Mehta, conscious of the need to find how best to undergo his urban experience. After discounting several potential methods – an ‘S’ or a ‘W’ shape marked upon a map are reckoned to ‘leave out too much’,²⁴ as are the figure-of-eight or the symbol for infinity (∞) on the same basis – Miller settles upon the Jacob Bernoulli’s *spira mirabilis*.²⁵ ‘I had found both my device and metaphor. A spiral through Delhi would give me a loose framework for my wanderings, always forcing me away gently from places I had already visited. Eventually, I would reach beyond the city,’ Miller writes.²⁶ And so the author’s eponymous ‘adventures’ are duly spatio-temporally measured, in contrast to the unplanned urban wandering of a figure such as the flâneur, who, in Walter Benjamin’s words, is ‘led through a vanished time’.²⁷ One might suggest that the manner of Mehta’s journeying is somewhere in between these two. For Miller is always conspicuously the outsider in Delhi and it cannot be otherwise, despite his efforts to speak Hindi; his spiral is as prohibitive as it is helpful. The flâneur, meanwhile, is by and large but a casual observer, a man who, like Baudelaire’s painter of modern life, ‘watches the river of life flow past him in all its splendour and majesty’ and passively ‘gazes upon the landscape of the great city’.²⁸ Mehta, though, is an active participant in the landscape of Bombay and, to once more evoke the river metaphor, gives himself to the flow of the river than letting it pass him by. The comparison with Miller’s prescribed spiral, meanwhile, is twofold. On the one hand, Mehta’s Bombay dwelling also has a logical conclusion, in the shape of a definitive response to his prefacing question. Secondly, though, the spiral motif itself is fitting. ‘Ask an adult to draw

²³ Miller, *Delhi*, p. 11.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Meaning a ‘miraculous spiral’, Benoulli’s *spira mirabilis* is otherwise known as a logarithmic spiral, characterised by its increasingly spaced spiral turns, like that of a snail shell, for example.

²⁶ Miller, p. 12.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Boston, MA; London: Harvard UP, 2002), p. 879.

²⁸ Baudelaire, p. 11; p. 11.

a spiral – and a good half of them will draw ... an approximation to a spiral staircase,’²⁹ Miller writes, pointing to the helical interpretation, a vertical coil whose (usually descending) course is often associated with a loss of control. It follows that Mehta’s movement across Bombay shows a similarly spiral movement – not in the geometric and lateral manner of Miller, though, but in a less-than-controlled descent into the city’s subterranean landscape.

I argue firstly that the intimacy of Mehta’s underworld experience in *Maximum City* – his frequent encounters with Bombay’s network of religio-criminal cartels, sex workers, hawkers and the like – is not the *modus operandi* of the book. Put differently, Mehta appears not to actively search out the apparently subterranean spaces he often finds himself in. It is, one feels, a product of his laissez-faire approach to exploring the city. The beginnings of his stay are unremarkable enough. Mehta and his family move into an apartment in the Versova neighbourhood, Western Bombay, and the writer’s immediate concerns are ordinary (and predominantly domestic): ‘For the month after my family arrives,’ he notes, ‘I chase plumbers, electricians, and carpenters like Werther chased Lotte.’ (p. 24) But already the city machine has actively influenced his course. His uncle, more acquainted with Bombay’s workings, even before the move takes place prophesies the location in which the family will end up: ‘Look everywhere but, I guarantee you, you will be living in Dariya Mahal,’ he predicts (p. 20).³⁰ Mehta explains: ‘I feel as though I could never live anywhere else in Bombay. The universe is teleological. I grew up in the third building of the palace. My grandfather lived in the first. Now I have come back to live in the second, completing the trilogy.’ (p. 20)

There exists a Manichean postulation regarding the city that is challenged in *Maximum City*. The polarities of good/bad, power/powerless, public/private, opportunity/danger, even male/female are uncertain in Mehta’s Bombay. And the writer’s itinerary, which is a broad sweep through the subheadings ‘Power’, ‘Pleasure’ and ‘Passage’, soon finds him drawn toward the would-be fringe spaces of the city’s so-called underbelly, but which in reality are seen to be its archetypal urban locations. (Indeed, to discuss these spaces such terms as ‘underbelly’, ‘underworld’ and ‘subterranean’ is perhaps a little misleading. One

²⁹ Miller, *Bombay*, p. 12.

³⁰ A building in the middle-class coastal area of Versova.

might be better to think of these not as sub-spaces but as Foucauldian heterotopias³¹, elsewhere spaces that preclude stable knowledge of the city topography. Jonathan Shapiro Anjara has called these sorts of settings ‘ordinary spaces of negotiation’,³² in an article that ‘moves beyond the often-repeated narrative of a conflict between the urban poor and the globalizing city to instead explore how marginal populations navigate and secure claims within a fraught urban landscape’.³³ Anjara points towards the centrality of hawkers to Bombay’s social fabric, for instance, noting the diverse clientele (service workers, the middle classes and the elite) that these itinerant street traders serve. Their claim on a space to work in the city, though, has long been regarded municipally as an aberration, with the criminalisation of hawking dating back to the colonial era. Nevertheless, the hawkers’ continued presence owes much, it seems, to the occurrence of what the writer calls ‘ordinary corruption’, the everyday practice of extortion payments that, according to him, the Bombay police do not wish to cease collecting. I regard with particular interest here Anjara’s views concerning the spatial repercussions of hawkers’ prominence in Bombay:

Firstly, because hawkers make a living on the street—already a morally compromised space in India—they are understood to defy categorical distinctions, which animates hostility toward their occupation regardless of its formal legal status. Secondly, by sitting on the side of the road, hawkers often symbolize the failure of modernist urbanism to take root in Mumbai.³⁴

Indeed, by occupying, and thus compromising, the public street space, the hawkers unravel the myth of spatial order and control that their permanent removal seeks to achieve. As Anjara suggests, such a loss of control symbolises a rupture in the narrative of Bombay’s project of modernist urbanism. So too does

³¹ In ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, Foucault writes: ‘There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror.’ In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. by Neil Leach. (New York: Routledge. 1997), pp.330-336 (p. 333).

³² Jonathan Shapiro Anjara, ‘Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai’, *American Ethnologist*, 38:1 (2011), 58-72 (p. 58).

³³ *ibid.*, p. 59.

³⁴ Shapiro Anjara, p. 61.

ordinary corruption signify a fissure in the law/lawless paradigm. Hawking is one example, but the modernist scheme of ordering Indian city space³⁵ is more generally made untenable by myriad other things. I have already mentioned the illegalised-but-valuable informal waste systems of the Indian metropolis, and one might also include dance bars or the vast number of unlicensed rickshaw wallas who service the city's inhabitants. In the eyes of the authorities, these disruptions to the narrative of order are blotches on the landscape. But while they do indeed serve a disrupting effect in their elusiveness to order, these entities are legitimate and typical features of the Bombay social fabric. And it is evidenced by the fact that Mehta's exploits, as shall be explored hereafter, often lead inevitably to such ambivalent places, apparently not by choice but because he is irrepressibly drawn there.

Mehta's movements around Bombay are curious. It is not long after settling into his apartment that he, acquainting himself more and more with the city, begins to find it 'increasingly difficult' (p. 100) to work in the Versova residence. Securing an office in the coastal neighbourhood of Bandra, Mehta is better equipped to undertake the sort of assignment his vocation requires of him. Conducting interviews with the likes of the late Shiv Sena founder, Bal Thackeray, noted policeman Ajay Lal and D-Company leader Dawood Ibrahim³⁶, Mehta is gradually introduced to a whole host of figures, in whose company he explores many of the city's liminal spaces: hotel rooms, dancing bars and anterooms. Importantly, he is guided not by any sense of urgency, not as far as the text's completion is concerned at least. His engagement with the city is both participatory and somewhat passive, in the sense that on most occasions he is intentionally acquiescent to the wishes of those around him. Nonetheless, doing

³⁵ See Gidwani and Chaturvedi (2011), who write: 'Since the 1990s, the "efficient management" of Delhi has emerged as a major concern of its three municipalities and of the government of Delhi state. It has also been a growing concern of its residents, although differently enabled sections of the population harbour different ideals of efficiency. The wealthy, for example, have been vocal in demanding a more reliable supply of electricity, water, unclogged roads and a clean environment. The poor too want reliable access to drinking water; but they also want reliable public transportation. Against this backdrop, "waste" in its figurative and literal sense has come to mark both, the excessive and the expendable, but also the productive and the profitable in present-day urban India.' (p. 58).

³⁶ D-Company is a well-known Indian organised crime syndicate responsible for various serious offences, including insurance fraud and alleged spot-fixing in the Indian Premier League. Ibrahim Dawood is D-Company's leader, and has featured highly on *Forbes*'s Most Wanted list in recent years.

so occasionally finds him in uncomfortable positions, at one turn leaving him in a hotel room with a gun in his hand (p. 242), and later 'in possession of dangerous information' (p. 273). Indeed, vacillating between institutions of the law and lawlessness, Mehta's position after a year becomes untenable and he promptly 'quits his research into the underworld' (p. 273). That I have highlighted the nature of Mehta's retreat from the criminal underworld – quitting, rather than, say, completing his research – is because it raises an important issue concerning the writer's navigation of space. It seems to follow the conventions of a video game: Upstone's riddle-to-be-solved. One's understanding of this might be buttressed further by the fact that, only a page or so before Mehta takes his leave, having worked his way up to a conversation with a gang boss (a sequence of events which alone echoes gameplay narratives), the boss lays an offer down on the table: 'Any trouble you have in Bombay. One work free.' (p. 271) Mehta has earned himself an extra life, it seems.

The video-gaming comparison is actually rather pertinent, particularly if one considers the gaming industry development (made possible by radically improved technology) of "realistic" social-based games such as the controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series, in which the player's avatar is commonly an individual whose success is necessitated by violence and lawlessness. Popular debates aside, though, the landscapes of *Grand Theft Auto*'s game worlds are vast urban/rural spaces whose skilful negotiation is required to succeed. At length I cite here the words of Soraya Murray, who explains the nature of the game's imaginary space:

Electronic games re-present "living" spaces in which a digital proxy interacts with other agents, providing staging grounds upon which to play. In this imagined space, the conventional social contract is suspended; however, this is not to say that what results is a lawless space. Rather, games such as *Grand Theft Auto* represent rule-based, problem-solving environments that require creative solutions within a defined set of parameters. Consider the value of a virtual metropolis as both an environment in which designers may represent hopes and fears regarding societal issues and a place where it is possible for a player to perform his/her relationship to these ideas in a not-quite-constituted site, a liminal space that fluctuates in the imaginary and in ideology.³⁷

What one might add to Murray's remarks is to note the hyper-textual fabric of the games. As much as one is inclined to undertake the prescribed tasks that

³⁷ Soraya Murray, 'High Art/Low Life: The Art of Playing "Grand Theft Auto"', *A Journal of Performance and Art*, 27:2 (2005), 91-98 (p. 97).

drive the game narrative, the player is equally able to indulge in free-play³⁸: navigating the spaces by foot or by car, shopping, eating, socialising, all structured by the game's temporal cycle (one second is equal to one minute in game world). What I am hinting at here are the parallels between this particular manner of gameplay/gamespace and Mehta's equivalent behaviour in Bombay. When Murray comments of *Grand Theft Auto* spaces that 'they constitute nuanced sites for an exploration of a new kind of liminal reality',³⁹ there are echoes of Mehta's similarly liminal reality in *Maximum City*. Likewise, when Murray notes that the story of the main character of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 'becomes one of learning how to circumnavigate the hostile environment and rise up in a world in which he must strategically move between both the law and the lawless',⁴⁰ here, too, are resounding similarities with Mehta. More than the likenesses in content between the two texts, though, with both overwhelmingly preoccupied by violence and sex, it is the analogies in the respective individual-to-space relationships that I find most striking. That is, the manner in which Mehta's exploration of the space around him combines what, in the game, one would think of as freeplay and gameplay, but here as freeplay and reportage. For, as much as the book is concerned with the writer's nagging question as to whether one is able ever to return home, it is also a vast compendium of Bombay life, documenting its history, politics, customs, notable figures, landmarks and topography. Yet the manner of Mehta's negotiation of the city, enabled by his apparent willingness to enter its liminal spaces, is testament to the idea that he acknowledges the way in which modern city writing must be undertaken. So too, meanwhile, does this approach challenge the myth of literary master narratives. Writing the city space in such a personal and consciously subjective manner has the effect issuing a call for others to follow suit, by authoring infinite micro-narratives.

The latter two sections of *Maximum City* largely follow the pattern of the first. Mehta follows the avenues and vaults the hurdles that are necessary to his task, which at turns includes relocating his residence once more, for a time all but cohabiting with an exotic dancer and infiltrating the Indian film industry.

³⁸ A more straightforward meaning than the Derridean freeplay: literally, able to roam around at will.

³⁹ Murray, p. 97.

⁴⁰ Murray, p. 96.

Through this progression he is able to secure a framework for the final appearance of the book so that, for the reader, the text oscillates constantly between Mehta's personal actions, the stories of the Bombayites he meets and, finally, the broader urban/social/national contexts they evoke. For example, Mehta's acquaintance with Monalisa and Honey, one a dancer-cum-prostitute and the other a transgender dancer, begins with the writer visiting a bar with an editor of Russian *Playboy* magazine. Drawn once more into a marginal space, Mehta freeplays in the role of an active participant, foisting upon Monalisa the customary banknotes in order that he can later conduct the necessary research of this next level of the riddle: 'Pleasure'. In turn, through getting to know the dancer, Mehta, just like in 'Power', finds himself in possession of insider information: 'The whole idea of the bar line, she explains, is to make the client fall in love with her and to make him think she loves him too... She tells me her techniques, the courtesan's secrets.' (p. 301) A greater amount of time spent with her, time far more intimate than a simple interview would allow, provides Mehta with the necessary knowledge to make broader, more profound observations: 'The personal history of bar dancers is written on their arms,' he remarks (p. 357). That he arrives at such statements can be credited both to his commitment to the playing the game and to immersing himself in the gamespace.

Popular interpretations of the city crowd deem it an anonymous entity. It is something of a paradox: the larger the number of faces within it, the more faceless it becomes. Such explains, perhaps, the exuberant reaction of Edgar Allen Poe's observing narrator in 'The Man in the Crowd' (1840), when, after a time spent neatly cataloguing a passing corpus of humanity from his view through a window onto the London street, he is animated at the sudden sight of distinction: 'How wild a history... is written on that bosom!'⁴¹ What arrests the onlooker is the 'absolute idiosyncrasy of [the man's] expression'⁴² amidst the uniformity of the crowd. This popular understanding of the urban crowd does have an empirical footing; how often one hears, for example, accounts making reference to the featurelessness of the London's commuting masses. As I have

⁴¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Man of the Crowd', in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Thomas Ollive Mabbot (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 506-518 (p. 511).

⁴² *ibid.*

suggested above, such an idea is to be found on *Maximum City*'s sleeve. 'The Battle of Bombay is the battle of the self against the crowd,' Mehta suggests at the book's end. 'In a city of fourteen million people, how much value is associated with number one? The battle is Man against the Metropolis.' (p. 589) Yet, unlike the faceless crowd of popular imagination, Mehta's Bombay crowd have/has (I do not disambiguate here intentionally) the distinction of being, in his oxymoronic terms, 'individually multiple, severally alone' (p. 589). Successfully negotiating Bombay has required of Mehta that he come to terms with that perplexing logic.

The book, then, reveals something profound about the Indian city space: that it is an incarnation of the the chaotic, carnivalesque literary space suggested by Upstone. Indeed, in a statement that overwhelmingly corroborates such a diagnosis, Mehta remarks that 'Bombay itself is reaching its own extremity' (p. 588). Nevertheless, just as Upstone argues that chaotic space, contrary to its literal connotation, does not function as the 'complete breakdown of all stability, but rather as a removal of the fixed',⁴³ so too should one consider the city at risk diagnosis not as a pronouncement of the actual city's impending death, but as the imminent demise of urban space as we know it. In other words, the city as a manifest space is not at risk *per se*, but one's ability to understand it is. Bombay's survival as a knowable city, Mehta reckons, relies on the perpetuation of 'the mass dream of the crowd' (p. 589). At the tipping point at the absolute edge of Bombay's extremeness is a scenario in which that mass dream, stretched to its limit, can no longer be upheld. In such a scenario, the sheer volume of discrepant people and spaces will no longer allow for it. And while the manifest city would go on living regardless, its composite spaces become so besieged by paradoxes that its capacity to produce knowledge would be exhausted. In such a situation, Mehta's suggestion that 'each Bombayite inhabits his own Bombay' is no longer a novel interpretation of the city's spatial formation. It becomes a reality.

One need only look towards the way in which Mehta's Bombay sojourn unfolds to observe categorically that Bombay's extremeness is always very much at risk of being surpassed, with the corollary that understanding its space is

⁴³ Upstone, p. 13.

becoming impossible. It is, as the title suggests, a “maximum city”. Indeed, one could point to the fact that while the project is undertaken in the name of returning home, virtually the entire book takes place in what might be thought of as non-spaces. For the spaces Mehta inhabits are all, in their own ways, heterotopic. The offices, bars, hotel rooms, apartments and even the family residences are emptied of their original meanings, to be converted into spaces of transaction simply in order that the writer be able fulfil his task (an undertaking, incidentally, which is made empty in the process, for these spaces are unequivocally detached from Mehta’s so-called home). The book’s conclusion, a telling announcement on the unravelling of the relationship between space and place, suggests that as much as Bombay is Mehta’s home, it is now always an elsewhere, too. His trip Bombay is but the simulation of a return, hence his ability to leave again so straightforwardly:

It’s a good enough reason to go back: because your family misses you. It’s the reason I’ve gone back, been pulled back again and again. Family is there – not just parents, but grandparents, aunts, cousins – and family is what little children need, more than culture, more than country. So just when we finally get comfortable in Bombay, we prepare to move again – back to New York. But it’s all right, because, after two and a half years, my question has been answered. You can go home again; *and you can also leave again*. (p. 586, emphasis added)

IV • Amit Chaudhuri and Calcutta

In *The Weekenders: Adventures in Calcutta* (2004), Sam Miller, this time writing of the Bengali capital, contributes something extremely pertinent to one’s understanding of the eponymous city. ‘The shopping malls, the bowling alley, the amusement parks, the cinema multiplex: one might wonder if Calcutta is in the process of becoming everywhere else,’⁴⁴ he writes, noting what he observes to be the unequivocally global turn in the city’s furniture. Many charges have been laid against Calcutta, and Miller’s speculation on the city’s apparent homogenisation is, as the writer himself acknowledges, but one in a line of seemingly derogatory and well-known reports. Among them, Günter Grass’s

⁴⁴ Sam Miller, ‘Going Underground’, in *The Weekenders: Adventures in Calcutta*, ed. by Andrew O’ Hagan (London: Ebury Press, 2004), pp. 227-240 (p. 244).

scathing assessment that 'Calcutta is a pile of shit that God dropped'⁴⁵ and Rajiv Gandhi's famed 1985 line that it was a 'dying city'. But while Gandhi's critique spoke to Calcutta's undeniable socio-political deterioration through the 1970s and 1980s, Miller and Grass speak to the plurality of Calcutta's defining identity – the distinct sense that its appearance is misleading. Both writers go on to hold the city in affectionate esteem. To discuss the West Bengali capital in such elegiac terms, as Miller and Grass occasionally do, is not entirely unfounded because gradually, particularly since the relocation of India's administrative centre to New Delhi in 1911, Calcutta has endured a decline in political and cultural fortunes. As though to underscore the city's fall from prominence, Amit Chaudhuri notes in *Two Years in the City*, reflecting on the journey between his term-time home in Norwich and Calcutta, of 'how it made flying hard work'.⁴⁶ That is, where direct flights to Europe now depart twice daily from New Delhi and Bombay, Chaudhuri writes, the connecting plane he often catches from Calcutta to Dubai possesses 'a dimly lit provincialism' (p. 122).

Throughout Chaudhuri's text, which roughly covers a two-year period the author spends in Calcutta from 2009 onwards, in what is by all accounts his adopted home, the writer's most pressing preoccupation concerns one's ability to inhabit a city spiritually, as well as physically. Chaudhuri's spiritual engagement with Calcutta would seem to hinge on his capacity to tap into an exclusionary spiritual and intellectual life that appears no longer to exist. The book often leaves the reader with the sense that perhaps it never did. Chaudhuri's mapping of Calcutta never loses sight of the notion that city space is unquantifiable and is subject to constant and unpredictable revisions. For one, its topographical boundaries contract as much as they inevitably expand with the outward sprawl of the city as it grows. Indeed, Chaudhuri notes in the text that, '[w]hen people refer to "Calcutta" or "Kolkata" today ... they mean the south, and have meant it for some decades, as urban life flowed and shifted in that direction, and, from the mid-nineties, the merciless property boom extended deeper and deeper southward' (p. 288). The suggestion is offered, then, that the city is measured not by Cartesian coordinates but as an epistemologically formed knowledge product. By extension, one must accordingly take into account when contemplating

⁴⁵ Günter Grass, *The Founder* (London: Minerva, 1997; 1977).

⁴⁶ Chaudhuri, *Calcutta*, p. 124.

Chaudhuri's hypothesis – that the contours of the city are shaped intellectually – the factor of his relative privilege. His Calcutta is a space pieced together through the dual filters of Bengali high culture and western thought⁴⁷, as well as the obvious ramifications of his frequent Indo-European travel and his decidedly middle-class Indian upbringing, replete with domestic workers and regular holidays. What I am suggesting is that the shifts Chaudhuri registers in modern-day Calcutta are factors compatible only with the author's privileged view of history.

In an historical sense, Chaudhuri attributes the waning influence of Bengali culture to the modern-day characterisation of Calcutta as predominantly 'an imaginary city' (p. 125). He notes that the Bengali language, 'in its books, its poems, songs, stories, cinema, brought the city into being in the imagination' (p. 125). Throughout, too, the text remains loyal to the thesis that Calcutta is one always inevitably passed through the lens of Chaudhuri's childhood memory, given that his experience of the city is defined by his school-age vacations. He refers back to these earlier visits (and thus implies something similar of his later engagement with Calcutta) as 'interruptions' (p. 294), as 'a break from knowing' (p. 295). The author is continually struck – perturbed, one might put it – by what he sees as the inevitable and discomfiting sweep of globalisation, which appears to his mind to warp one's (his) perception of space. Yet what removes Chaudhuri from the Calcutta of his childhood is not only the distance instated by the passing of time – a lost sense of juvenile innocence – but also the fact of Chaudhuri's adult privileges: his social standing as a middle-class, travelling academic whose place in the city landscape is governed largely by his own choices, and whose access to space is largely unregulated. Globalisation, meanwhile, much as it appears couched in a boisterous and omnipotent façade, is experienced most profoundly by those more fully acquainted with its scope – in this case, by the consumer figure. When Chaudhuri writes of the banality of global Calcutta, then, it is a very inequitable banality.

None of the observations laid out here are intended to detract from the writer's account. They point, rather, to the fact that the text provides an acutely

⁴⁷ Among others, Chaudhuri references Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Nirad. C Chaudhuri, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Paul Cézanne, and Henri Cartier-Bresson.

partial view of Calcutta arising not from an absence of rigour, but due to a lack of *social* access to certain parts of the city. (This is not Cartesian space, after all, and ‘access’ is not only to be understood literally.) At its heart, the book reads as a restorative undertaking, whose project is seemingly the retrieval of a sense of Bengali modernity, and, in turn, the positing of an alternative Bengali history. This perhaps explains Chaudhuri’s decision, early in the book, to salvage a series of French-style windows that are stacked beside a suburban house in Ekdalia and appear ready to be thrown away, but which the author deems indispensable. They are, for him, ‘indivisible from what Calcutta and Bengalianness mean’ (p. 11). Why? ‘The windows were foreign,’ Chaudhuri explains, ‘yet part of *my* conception of Bengalianness.’ (p. 10, my emphasis) Thus we see that the lineage of the author’s Calcutta can be traced back to very particular events in the city’s history – events, though, which are accessed primarily through his position of intellectual privilege. Late in the book, underscoring its commitment as a restorative project, Chaudhuri stakes the claim for a nineteenth century Bengali Renaissance, albeit a renaissance relatively ‘short-lived’ (p. 292) and all but unmarked by historical signposts. He writes:

This renaissance wasn’t the renaissance of an empire, but of a home-grown bourgeoisie largely unacknowledged by the imperial sovereign; so its theme and subject isn’t grandeur, as often seems to be the case in the European Renaissance, in the resplendent, glowing paintings of Titian, in Michelangelo’s gigantic, looming, perfectly buttocked David, but the everyday and the desultory, such as you see in the films of Ritwik Ghatak and Satyajit Ray. *This* renaissance is, in many ways, a refutation of that earlier, better-known one, with its epic pretension. Its protagonist isn’t the soldier on horseback, or the gods, or the regent in the hall or garden; it is really the loiterer. (p. 292)

One must ask: what (and where, when) is Chaudhuri’s Calcutta? I mentioned above the notion that the author is prohibited full social access to the city. Indeed, as a readymade caveat to his Bengal Renaissance claims made above, the author acknowledges fierce Marxist disavowal in the 1960s and 1970s of any such idea. ‘It was hardly a genuine renaissance, [the Marxists] said; to call it one would be an act of hubris. Their main quarrel was with its *bhadralok*⁴⁸ context; its exclusion of the poor and the minorities – a charge that couldn’t be ignored.’ (p. 290) Indeed it still cannot be ignored. By extension, Chaudhuri’s high cultural postulations about Calcutta do not – cannot – tally with the livelihoods of the

⁴⁸ Generally used as a reference to Bengal’s educated middle classes, who emerged during the British Raj. Meaning, in Bengali, ‘gentlefolk’.

city's poor inhabitants. The writer is a conspicuous presence in parts of the city he encounters. He is marked out as an outsider, even in what is ultimately his own city, as it were, and he cannot fathom what seem to be the 'everyday and the desultory' (p. 292) aspects of life that for him mark the essence of Bengalianness. When he asks questions of a man peeling potatoes in an outside space beside a hotel, Chaudhuri is met with wariness. 'He didn't hugely mind answering my questions,' we are told, 'but wanted to know *why* I was asking them. Indeed, my hovering presence there was mysterious, if not a downright nuisance.' (p. 36) That same outing, around the Park Street area of the city, gives rise to further questions concerning Chaudhuri's ability to read certain spaces socially. When he encounters a food stall close to the Chandan Hotel, the author is struck by its unfamiliar rules regarding dining and payment. 'What seems certain,' we are told,

is that Ramayan Shah's eatery is not an eating place in the way we middle-class people understand that entity; that is, you don't actually have to partake of the food to while away hours over there, or to even go to sleep on the furniture. On the other hand, I've occasionally noticed ... people freely access food without paying for it, even when the proprietor is away – which, observation tells me is a great deal of the time. I'm assuming there's some local system of scrupulousness and credit to keep this trade alive for so many years. (p. 35)

It is curious to observe Chaudhuri's sense of discomfort when it comes to understanding the logic of the stall's system of exchange. His allusion to 'we middle-class people' is, of course, a conscious signposting of the detachment felt between literate, capitalist consumers and the stall's customers with their informal monetary arrangement.

A little later, Chaudhuri encounters a 'plain-looking and reticent' (p. 47) woman who asks him to buy medicine for her. The woman, relinquishing the details of her story, informs Chaudhuri of her occupation as a domestic help, of her earnings, of the pain she is experiencing, and of her husband. It is the sort of conversation Chaudhuri seems to want to seek out in order to propel his written ruminations. Yet he is inevitably held at a distance from her. In the most direct sense, he becomes as a result of this exchange a philanthropist, and she the mere recipient of a handout; it is an exchange monetarily valued. Equally, Chaudhuri's original perception of the woman confirms his detachment: 'I had thought the woman was Bengali – she fitted perfectly with my childhood notion of the

Bengali woman: pretty, intelligent-looking, fairly small, an embodiment of puritan dignity ... but she was, to my surprise, originally from Bihar.’ (p. 48) Noting the large-scale labour migration movements of poor, rural Biharis into Bengal, does Chaudhuri’s comment not, with a touch of liberal reading, speak demonstratively of his childhood – of his limited contact with manifest Bengali social conditions? (Perhaps his preconception has been structured by Chaudhuri’s knowledge of his own domestic helpers). We know that, just as his understanding of Bengali women is drawn from an earlier time, Bihar is likewise a ‘world the Indian child knows from comic books’ (p. 49) Does it not, to a degree, seem to mark out his historical position as a member of the literate middle-classes, socially separated from his working-class counterparts? Chaudhuri, for his part, does not downplay the influence of childhood on his adulthood perception of Calcutta, and is open about how his earlier memories cloud his view of the present city. I am reflecting on the fact that he is simultaneously embroiled in, and detached from, the Calcutta of the text. In any case, when Chaudhuri and the Bihari woman go looking for a pharmacy to obtain the promised medicine, the author momentarily feels pressed for time: ‘I was thinking that there was something else I was supposed to be doing, which I was being kept from, and my stride became more urgent,’ he writes, ‘and then I realised that this – whatever I was doing now on Free School Street – was exactly what I’d set out to do.’ (p. 49) Certainly, this mid-sentence clause warrants examination: what might “this” be that Chaudhuri feels he is doing? Perhaps he sees this as the social responsibility of a Calcutta custodian. There is a clue given a little later when the author notes of a further encounter, with a certain air of disingenuousness: ‘Since sociological rigour is essential when you’re writing of a city, I asked the man dicing vegetables who he was and, intrusively, what his earnings were like.’ (p. 58) Now, presuming Chaudhuri is not being slightly glib, we would surely draw the conclusion that enquiring about someone’s name and earnings is not particularly rigorous. And this example does not stand alone: many of his surveys of Calcutta denizens are of this straightforward, incomprehensive nature. The Calcutta that he encounters on these occasions – on Park Street, or during a conversation with a melon vendor beneath a new bypass, or in the southeastern suburb of Bantala – is a city elusive

to his sensibilities. In the last of these examples, in Bantala, venturing out during the 2009 election campaign to the city's southernmost reaches, Chaudhuri seems unable to reconcile the people he meets there with figures he has gleaned from elsewhere, in literature, on film. The passage warrants quoting at length:

There was something resistant about these figures: they weren't peasantry, and neither were they wholly urban – poverty had made them small and wiry. They didn't belong to Satyajit Ray's world, or Bibhutibushan Banerjee's, but to a political dispensation under which even the vegetation looked stunted, and the greenery, once you took the 'highway' departing Calcutta, grew black with soot and dust. The village Bengal of books and films, a version of which I'd seen in my childhood on the road from the airport to the city, had been made sickly in the last twenty-five years – although its naturally bountiful colours still looked lush from the aeroplane window. These people were of, and like, that landscape, economically unviable but politically alive – they were what was left of that pastoral.

Were this people from Calcutta, though? Strictly speaking, I was still in the city. But throughout the day, during which I moved from the more far-flung southern reaches back to middle-class Ballygunge, voting in the afternoon with R, dropping her home at Sunny Park, and then being driven by Mahinder into the narrow lanes of Dum Dum-Rajarhat in the north, just as the elections were winding down after four o'clock, I felt the presence of a new city come up where the old had been. To be *in* it was not to be any closer to comprehending it than when I'd studied it from the aeroplane window a few days ago, with its once-magical clusters of plantain and palm trees and small terraced houses. Mamata Banerjee fits in well here, having emerged, like this tentative city itself, and the people I'd met on election day, without a past, and without that enervating legacy of humanism and high culture. (pp. 145-146)

Let us start off by considering the idea that Chaudhuri finds the people he encounters 'resistant'. Resistant to what, though? Presumably, as his later reference to filmmaker Ray makes clear, these Calcuttans challenge Chaudhuri's cinematic knowledge of the city's reaches, falling beyond the focus of his existing frames of reference. Which, crudely speaking, is to put it accordingly: where the author lacks empirical knowledge of this apparently peripheral Calcutta, the lacuna has been plugged until now by a knowledge *written* into being – in this case, through the films of Ray and the novels of Banerjee. That this knowledge seems no longer to hold perhaps speaks to the long-term repercussions of globalisation and uneven development, in a material sense, certainly, but also in an acutely discursive dimension. It may not be the outright alterity of this peripheral space that is so perturbing to Chaudhuri, the epistemological exhaustion of the ideas that could once have explained it. He is lacking, or at least appears to grasp for, a language that could write this outlying space into the written fabric of Calcutta, which for the writer is clearly a pressing concern. The point is that out of the physical changes to the city, be it its rapid urbanisation, its concomitant swallowing of land or the penetration of new roads

through the countryside, there has not emerged a language capable of reflecting the changes. That this backwater Calcutta has grown 'sickly' is not only a problem in itself; in a way it also signals the exhaustion of the ideological life of the city proper.

My point pertains to the *type* of differences and disparities these socio-economic changes produce. They do not simply widen the breadth of the opposition between, say, rich and poor, or urban and rural. Instead, they bring about the outright incommensurability of the distance between. Chaudhuri's failure to align himself socially with inhabitants of the same city space – 'Were these people from Calcutta, though?' he asks, remember – is a sign that the social life of the metropolis is deeply ruptured and elusive. I think of the author's brief reference to the Indian Premier League, India's foremost cricket tournament, and his discussion of Shah Rukh Khan, the Bollywood actor who owns Calcutta's team in the competition. Each franchise, aligned nominally with an Indian city or region, has little responsibility it seems to honour its regional ties or the interests of its mass regional followings. In other words, the Kolkata Knight Riders, as they are known, possess a questionable relationship to their fans. Khan, Chaudhuri writes, 'became famous for ... post-match parties he threw at the ITC Sonar Bangla for the team, [Eastern European] cheerleaders, and a handful of unspecified others: models, businessmen, actors, motley KKR [Kolkata Knight Riders] well-wishers' (p. 221). Social membership of that Calcutta entity – or, at least, what is an economically regulated sociality – is so deeply driven by market forces. Privilege – read: wealth – governs inclusion. And we see that same issue of access replicated elsewhere with Chaudhuri himself, who is aligned with, albeit not as a matter of choice, that same social grouping: the wealthy. So much so that his efforts at "social rigourousness" with Calcutta's less-than-privileged denizens are always likely to be thwarted by the fact that he is primarily and unavoidably a moneyed tourist-intellectual figure. And while that distance has always existed between privileged and unprivileged, it is particularly pronounced here because of the incommensurability of the distance, epistemologically speaking, that now appears to exist.

I want to turn to the question of Chaudhuri's literary concerns in *Two Years in the City*, given that commendations from critics of his earlier works had overwhelmingly celebrated the author's evocation of quotidian Indian experiences. Chaudhuri's 1990s oeuvre, which returned recurrently to a Calcutta setting, was recognised for its depiction of the 'magic of normality', its 'extraordinary ordinariness' and for its ability to 'gently stroke the surface of Indian life'.⁴⁹ True, there is in these early novels a distinctive literary engagement with what is ultimately middle-class Indian domesticity, but its attention to sensory detail feels so universally redolent. Consider the following sequence from *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1990), in which the narrator describes the preparation of the evening meal. The description of this domestic moment appears both exceptional and customary all at once:

Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red, fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an even white cake, had a spade-like spoon embedded in it; slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white dish; dal was served from another frying pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on the side, a green chilli, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound as terse as a satirical report), and scattered the tiny seeds in their food. If any of the boys were ever brave or foolish enough to bite a chilli, their eyes filled tragically with tears, and they lingered to drown in a cool, clear lake.⁵⁰

The scene is unexceptional, both in terms of the familial routines described and the ingredients used in the recipe. Preparation is organised around the apparently choreographed contribution of adults and the occasional involvement of children. The inventory of items, though, so unexceptional (the main ingredient, Boal, for example, is a commonly acquired fish in Bengal) explodes a routine family meal into a cornucopian Indian scene. The loud report of the snapped chillies, too, feels somehow deafening. Here, the cooking of the fish curry is a private performance of everyday Bengali domesticity – and, in its intimacy, its proximity to smells and sounds, it feels almost free of the stratification of class. Note the similar sense to be found in a later passage:

Calcutta is a city of dust. If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust like sand-dunes on the pavements, on which children and dogs sit doing nothing, while sweating labourers dig into the macadam with spades and drills. The roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system, or perhaps for some other obscure

⁴⁹ See cover sleeves of Amit Chaudhuri, *Three Novels* (London: Macmillan, 2001).

⁵⁰ Amit Chaudhuri, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, in *Three Novels* (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 9.

reasons, such as replacing a pipe that doesn't work with another pipe that doesn't work. At such times, Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric reason.... At the same time, dust is constantly raised into startling new shapes and unexpected forms by the arbitrary workings of the wind, forms on which dogs and children sit doing nothing. Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again.⁵¹

Mark how the narrator's experience of the city is fluid, how he moves around the space seamlessly from the children and dogs sat purposelessly at the pavements to the workers labouring. There is seamlessness between leisure and work. The different aspects of the city are drawn together by the unifying thread of dust, an indiscriminate and omnipresent refuse that reduces Calcutta to nothingness each day, so the narrator would have it. Overwhelmingly, Calcutta in Chaudhuri's fictional work is presented from a position of privilege – we frequently encounter relatively wealthy families, intellectuals, musicians – but other versions of the city, spaces of less privilege, say, are still accessed. In *Freedom Song* (1998), when the narrative gives an opening for the accounts of two maidservants employed at the home of the protagonists, their view, in this case as they sit on a veranda looking out over the city, is unmitigated:

In a slow, unperceptible way, the city swam around [Uma] ... the vacant white perfect terraces of decaying ancestral mansions, surrounded by the enigmatic tops of masses of trees, the solitary, invisible factory chimney, with its waving plume of smoke the colour of pigeon feathers, the weathered white marble dome of an ancient princely house now given out to wedding parties, and, at large intervals, the famous multi-storeyed buildings with mythical Sanskrit names, all this swam around Uma and Jochna.

Tinkling sounds came from outside, of hammering and chiselling, as labourers worked like bees, and seven- or eight-storeyed buildings rose in the place of ancestral mansions that had been razed cruelly to the ground, climbing up like ladders through screens of dust. An old mansion opposite the veranda had been repainted white, to its last bannister and pillar, so that it looked like a new set of teeth. In the lawn before, a mali in khaki shorts, alone, unaware of being watched, fussed over a row of potted plants. In another sphere altogether, birds took off from a tree or parapet, or the roof of some rich Marwari's house, startling and speckling the neutral sky. (pp. 292-293)

The maidservants belong to the landscape, and here have access to a view from a position that belies the lowliness of their station. That Calcutta is said to swim around them appears less a case of them drowning in it, to continue the metaphor, and more a case of their belonging within it. It seems they are able to comprehend the city holistically, as it were, appreciating its largest and most minute movements all at once. The point I am making refers to the fact that,

⁵¹ Chaudhuri, p. 11.

despite the division of the city into segments – spheres, as it is put in the citation above – there is evidence at some level of fluidity. Chaudhuri's subsequent work, *A New World* (2000), gives us evidence of something similar when the city's divided spheres of existence are bridged by the yearly coming of the Durga Puja festival. Jayojit, returned to the city from America, observes his parents 'withdraw into themselves' (p, 44), apparently shamed by their son's divorce. As the son surveys the neighbourhood as seen from the back of the family house, we are told how, '[i]n all kinds of ways, these people [the neighbours] were a million miles away from Jayojit's parents and their world; their ambitions were different, their friends and referents were different, even the Bengali they spoke was different; they might have belonged to different countries' (p. 44). Yet with the coming of the festival – 'the great leveller,' we are informed – the family becomes once more 'part of a crowd where all disparity and private, secluding grief were temporarily suspended' (p. 44). Separation, on the basis of ambition, social standing and so on, is here undone by the coalescing power of Hindu tradition.

Let us settle upon the thread that binds together these examples and think of them as moments that locate a redeemable and transcendent sociality. In other words, while Chaudhuri's fictional landscapes for the most part depict spaces of privilege, they are at least spaces in a dialogic relationship with their less privileged counterparts – not unproblematically, but irrefutably so. At the meeting point of these spheres, then, is the chance of sociality. I draw attention to this here because, by contrast, that same city of Calcutta in *Two Years in the City* appears to engage a completely new set of concerns and a new, exclusive geography apparently bereft of inter-social dialogue. Acknowledging, of course, that this more recent text employs a non-fictional lens, it still holds that Chaudhuri's focus appears to have been curiously wrested from the multisensory and the social, and is instead engrossed predominantly by the visual. In particular, his perception is driven by what he sees as the highly aesthetic furniture of globalisation. How often the author is preoccupied with the appearance (or the absence) of the process of globalisation. Frequently, he diagnoses whether or not that process is, or has been, present. 'North Calcutta itself is more or less untouched by globalisation: no malls, no coffee shop

chains,' (p. 300) we are told at a juncture, indicating Chaudhuri's chosen yardstick. He notes how on the city's *bandh* ('closure') days, when Calcutta shuts down for monsoons, strike days or festivals, it 'disconnects with globalisation' (p. 138). 'The process is responsible, so Chaudhuri would have it, for entering into the bloodstreams of Calcutta denizens, despite coming 'in relatively small doses' (p. 210). Most tellingly, the author diagnoses a condition among the city's population that he seems to suffer from acutely, too. 'This was globalisation,' Chaudhuri notes, 'more potent than a booster injection, more tenable than an infection, is capable of doing; of being, even before it's a reality, a symptom.' (p. 210)

Indeed, for the author the process of globalisation is characterised by a transformative geography that is discernible in aesthetic terms, but also has an accompanying epistemology. When he speaks with a young woman, also in Park Street, early in the book, Chaudhuri suggests that he has, 'seen faces like hers before – in Northern Spain; in China: a new kind of provincial who populates the globalised world, who changes with its changes without ever travelling outside of the country, even beyond their city or town' (p. 60). Later, he adds: 'I felt ... that I'd seen people like her in other parts of the world, out on a walk, going down a promenade, entirely of a locality, a place, but also entirely of the present, the here and now.' (p. 61) The point is this: Chaudhuri's preoccupation with globalisation as some manner of pernicious arrangement is structured by his own membership to the global. He is bound by contract, the result of which here is his assessment of the woman in terms governed by his own adopted/inherited global outlook. I am minded of a comment by Kwame Appiah, who writes: 'because contemporary culture is ... transnational, postmodern culture is global – though that emphatically does not mean that it is the culture of every person in the world.'⁵² Put differently, one method of reading the world, no matter how ubiquitously that method might seem to have been used, may not always prove the most effective. Chaudhuri makes a variation on this point pertinently in the text when he and his wife meet a journalist for dinner of Chinese food at a new restaurant inside the ITC Sonar Bangla (the hotel of IPL-post-match-party fame). Following the meal, Chaudhuri writes: 'For a week later, our mood alternated

⁵² Kwame Appiah, 'Is the Post- in Postmodern the Post- in Postcolonial?', *Critical Inquiry*, 17:2 (1991), 336-357 (pp. 342-343).

between a marvelling at the green tea ice cream and a corroding guilt about the Mephistophelean pact we'd entered with *Society* and Pan Asia.' (p. 203) What, then, has the writer sold in exchange for his access to this, and other, spaces of privilege? In short, I would argue that the cost is that he must relinquish his tether with locality. That is, the tendency to view the world in terms of its globality, so to speak, is underscored by the threat of losing one's perspective of locality. With it, too, goes one's chance at sociality. Think again of the stunted conversations the author has with the Bantala village folk, with whom he cannot even imagine a connection.

It is a measure of the type of spaces globalisation can be seen to engender. For although one might immediately be struck by the curious aesthetics of the global non-spaces – Chaudhuri writes of Pan Asia, for example, that that it 'was dark in a business lounge way, the dark and quiet of a space in which you don't expect to be threatened by crowds of people, its décor angular and minimal, without undue references to the Orient' (p. 201) – more telling are the relationships respectively between, on the one hand, individuals and what we might call global spaces, and, on the other, between these spaces and other spaces that surround them. Certainly, as much as an observer might be drawn to equating a flattening of spatial difference with an apparently homogenous global aesthetic (business lounges, transnational hotel chains, exhibition centres and so on), of more concern is the social life of global spaces, which is limited precisely because of the lack of dialogue they permit. Allow me to explain by continuing with the example of Pan Asia. Chaudhuri and his wife return to the restaurant on a number of occasions, and on one trip find the dining room closed, 'secret and semi-dark' (p. 208). 'This inactivity at Pan Asia wasn't emblematic,' Chaudhuri writes, 'it felt accidental. Not matter that industry and investment were failing to arrive in the city as they'd once, in the early 2000s, been expected to; new luxury hotels were planned regardless.' (p. 208) Economically, then, Pan Asia operates on a different scale entirely from some other business spaces in the city. (Again: think of the likes of, say, the informal economies of Park Street as the antithesis). By extension, in a social dimension, let us call it, the restaurant also operates on a separate scale, and it is socially incompatible with the rest of the city. Why? Because the social life of a city relies upon dialogue among its disparate spaces

as they develop in conversation with one another. (Recall once more the maidservants' perspective of the city in *Freedom Song*.) Chaudhuri's patronage of Pan Asia is thus, at a certain level, a kind of jettisoning from the social life of Calcutta. In his assessment, he is correct: globalisation becomes a symptom before it becomes a reality, a symptom that is somewhat prohibitive to the writer.

To conclude, then, it seems important to consider briefly the undertaking Chaudhuri attempts in *Two Years in the City*, which, as the book progresses, becomes more and more strained an exercise. It would appear to me that the book seeks somehow, all at once, to imagine a linkage between the following: an historic and a contemporary Bengali modernity, globalisation, the modern-day space of Calcutta and, finally, the social life of the city at large. When I referred above to Chaudhuri's explanation of his time in Calcutta as an 'interruption', I should add that he goes on to write the following:

If I were to rehearse this in generic terms, I suppose what I'm describing the difference between the poetic and the narrative. For me, the poem is neither rhyme, metre, nor beautiful words strung together, but a period of time in which nothing seems to happen in the conventional sense, but which we're still changed by. (p. 295)

What he posits here I take to be credible, particularly in the sense that it emphasises the limitations of his task. There can be no narrative able to reconcile the various aspects of Calcutta life Chaudhuri would like to bring together. The book, consequently, is best characterised by its poeticism, which signifies, equally, a lack of narrative. There remains also the question of 'interruption' to settle. Chaudhuri writes of his childhood holidays in Calcutta having the effect of making visits to the city feel like interruptions. 'Calcutta was associated in my mind with play and freedom' (p. 294), he writes, hinting that his adulthood visits take on the same character of interruptions or holidays, of 'breaks from "ordinary life"' (p. 294). True, his two-year sojourn is an interruption, but this is not only the case in terms of the author's childhood vacation thesis: Chaudhuri is irrevocably a tourist in the city now. Parts of the city are no longer mystified because of the enchanted lens left over from childhood, but due to the mystifying lens that adulthood has brought, with its social, political, intellectual and economic baggage. His movement around Calcutta (physically and otherwise) is full of interruptions, whenever he crosses thresholds of space. This is true of

anywhere, of course. Yet the privileging and regulating of space in the global capitalist model ultimately redraw the boundaries of distance and difference so that they (distance and difference) are felt most acutely in economic terms. Let me put it another way. Chaudhuri travels back and forth, on numerous occasions, between India and Britain in the text. As far as the reader is able to discern, though, there seems less of a rupture between this crossing of boundaries than there does between central and southeast Calcutta. 'Mid-December,' Chaudhuri writes, in the middle of his Park Street ruminations, 'and I was back in Park Street, having spent two and a half months in England, in Norwich.' (p. 43) There is little further mention of an interruption. As we have seen, however, the author's crossing thresholds within the city itself have a more profound effect on him. Travelling within, and then outside of, privileged space is a threshold that marks a more profound crossing than any movement within a sphere of privilege itself. Which brings me back finally to repeat a question Chaudhuri asks on the back of the trip to Bantala: 'Were these people from Calcutta?' Yes, categorically so. And is Chaudhuri also from Calcutta? Yes, as much as he is from Norwich, Dubai Airport, Nineteenth Century Bengal and London.

CHAPTER FOUR
*Postcolonial Reading: Non-White Literature in
Britain*

Doing justice to a work of literature involves doing justice at the same time to who, where, and when we are.

DEREK ATTRIDGE, *The Ethics of Reading*

Even the air of this country has a story to tell about warfare. It is possible to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following it back to its origins, collect a dozen stories concerning war – how it affected the hand that pulled it out of the oven, the hand that kneaded the dough, how war impinged upon the field where the wheat was grown.

NADEEM ASLAM, *The Wasted Vigil*

What you're looking for, and how you look, determines what you see.

ROBIN YASSIN-KASSAB, *The Road From Damascus*¹

I • Missed Opportunities

There have been some missed opportunities in the field of postcolonial literary studies. Where the previous chapters have attempted to illuminate the abundance of literary engagements with the ongoing politics of postcolonial discourses, here

¹ Derek Attridge, 'Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*', *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 32-64 (p. 46); Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 46; Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road From Damascus* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 135.

it is my intention to assess the current shape of the field itself. I write of missed opportunities namely due to two intertwined factors that I identify: on the one hand, a narrow assemblage of texts that have come to underpin the field, and limited reading strategies on the other. In conjunction, this pair of features has flirted with turning the field of postcolonial literary studies into the pursuit of a cosmopolitan aestheticism, when in fact, as I will argue, the field still retains value as a socio-political discipline. That is, to my mind, postcolonial reading is still capable of organising and articulating the cultural landscapes of the former colonies, and is thus also qualified to appraise the place of postcolonialism within wider reservoirs of knowledge. It is my aim in the chapter that follows to offer corrective measures to the issues raised above. To begin with, I put together what are best thought of as different *constellations* of literary works – in this case texts of British, non-white origin – and I do so in order that new routes through swathes of contemporary literature might be established. Thereafter, the chapter turns to the matter of single literary texts, where it offers readings of Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue* (2006) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986). Here, my aim is to set out approaches to reading the two novels that might be seen both to go against the grain of postcolonial reading strategies, and to reclaim each text's respective singularity.

In order to clarify the problem that I propose a response to, let me put forward a short example from a different field. In recent years, much scholarship, responding to an increase in the scale of human trafficking and modern-day slavery, has been seen to over-privilege the “flight” stage of the trafficking process, the period in which the actual movement of individuals takes place. In other words, legal responses in particular have tended, in Janie Chuang's words, to focus on ‘prosecuting traffickers, protecting trafficked persons, and preventing trafficking.’² The whole issue of trafficking is fixated on the passage of the individual. What this approach has seemingly failed to do, though, is to engage with the wider impacts of trafficking and slavery: the socio-economic conditions that structure the forced movement of humans, for example, or the long-term loss of social agency that trafficked individuals suffer. What it also results in is the mass and irrevocable assignment of victimhood to trafficked people. To put it

² Janie Chuang, ‘Beyond a Snapshot: Preventing Human Trafficking in the Global Economy’, *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 13:1 (2006), 137-163 (p. 137).

crudely, some of the research has been blindsided by, say, activity that takes place along the American-Mexican border or at port locations on the English Channel, when the matter of what follows the migration (or what precedes it, for that matter) is overlooked. That I raise the issue here is due to the fact that I find this logic transferrable. My contention is that some readings of postcolonial literatures have tended to over-privilege what we might also consider as the “flight” stage – this time, of postcoloniality. Here I am speaking to a will to favour those experiences that seem to materialise specifically out of postcolonial moments and movements. Of literature specifically, I am thinking of the privileging of aspects of novels in which a postcolonial aspect can be traced as referent, with migration to the colonial metropole standing as the trope *par excellence*. As I see it, the upshot has been a lack of engagement with texts (or parts of texts) where a discernibly (post)colonial referent is less evident. Finally, I see that the intransigent sense of victimhood assigned to trafficked people through limited legal scholarship finds its equivalent in the permanent and unchangeable condition of postcoloniality, which has been structured by restrictive literary scholarship. Before addressing this in more detail, I want first to discuss the prevailing trends in the field, with the intention of illuminating why exactly new modes of reading are required.

II • Reading (and) the Field

The variously issued demands for a reorganisation of the terrain of postcolonial studies in recent times have emerged, then, I argue, because of a decoupling of theory and practice. Since the turn of the century in particular there has arisen growing discontent among a significant number of scholars, who have voiced concern about some of the work undertaken in the field to the extent that, in the final argument, it has been deemed somewhat unfit for purpose. Which is to suggest that, as far as postcolonial scholarship upholds a mandate to register in a meaningful and hopefully progressive way the intractable hangover of imperial rule in matters economic, cultural, sociological, material and so on, it has fallen short of doing so. Where Benita Parry sounds a materialist call for ‘studies of

actually existing political, economic and cultural conditions, past and present ... no longer separated from meta-critical speculations',³ Neil Lazarus has likewise asked that the 'reconstruction' of the field 'supply a credible sociological account of the relation between [its] problematic and developments in the wider social world'.⁴ In both cases the reattachment of theoretical to practical study is identified as a key part in the field's overhaul. Parry, considering the possible costs at stake in the absence of a radical realignment of postcolonial studies, suggests that it 'will remain ensnared in an increasingly repetitive preoccupation with sign systems and the exegetics of representation.'⁵ Parry's concern is with postcolonial scholarship's seduction by signs at the cost of realities.

Elsewhere, in the introduction to *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005), Ania Loomba and her coterie of fellow editors also begin to get to the heart of the issue when they suggest that 'postcolonial studies must add to its fields of analysis and explanatory reference not only to the distant past but also the rapidly mutating present, thus, in a sense, anticipating the future.'⁶ Certainly it must: the perceived narrowness of work in the field requires as a corrective a manner of expansion, so as to better account for the minutiae of individual, material cases. Alongside this (and inextricably linked to it) should be a concurrent broadening of the terms of the debate so as to better reflect these minutiae. Moreover, it is true that these expanded tools must be put to work as a way of both recouping historical detail and speaking cogently of complex present-day realities. Yet reading this particular quote again, something in its formulation is striking: as quickly as Loomba *et al* have identified a problem, I feel they nearly fall victim to another almost immediately. There is to my mind an over-rhetorical tenor discernible in the latter part of the sentence (the all-too-conveniently described 'rapidly mutating present'), one that admittedly I may be apprehending a little parsimoniously, but which ultimately dampens the usefulness of its thrust. Small as it may seem at a glance, I register something symptomatic in the very formulation of the sentence, which is the lack of an adequate critical vocabulary.

³ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 12.

⁴ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁵ Parry, p. 12.

⁶ Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, Antoinette Burton and Jed Esty (eds), 'Beyond What: An Introduction', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2005), pp.1-38 (p. 14).

I am tempted to suggest that the overbearingness of this type of history-flattening language – here expressed through the easy conceptualisation of past, present and future, and traceable elsewhere in, say, the equally simplified discussion of identity or history – has had the (albeit unintended) consequence of rendering immobile the terms of postcolonial debate.

Take the reference to place in Pilar Cuder-Dominguez's essay on the work of Bernadine Evaristo and Zadie Smith, when the scholar casually mentions the 'decidedly hybrid' spaces of Smith's novel and both authors' manner of '[depicting] the heart of Englishness as a multiethnic, multicultural [London] alive with contrast'.⁷ Or, elsewhere, her observation that, 'London has been understood not just as the capital of the British Empire, but also as the true seat of Englishness.'⁸ It has indeed. Nevertheless, a lacuna between theory and practice is downplayed in this consideration, for London is in many ways only the seat of a *cosmopolitan* understanding of Englishness, regarded here as some manner of lifestyle hurdle-to-overcome for newcomers. How exhilarating and unproblematic urban life appears to Dominguez! How lucidly, meanwhile, the dynamics of globalisation are rendered by Paul Smethurst when, in a discussion of the works of Caryl Philips, he writes:

[T]he contemporary, postmodern, world in which difference is erased through globalization (and yet reasserts itself in complex trans-national geopolitics), is not, like the modern world, one of linear journeys in space and time. As if reflecting these spatial and temporal complexities, postmodern narrative invariably disrupts the linear flow of storytelling.⁹

If Dominguez irons out the creases of urban space a little too easily, Smethurst's treatment of both difference and of time is equally levelling. The so-called "erasure of difference" is problematic even when its reassertion is also accounted for. As a final, cursory demonstration of the point, take Neluka Silva's 2002 study of Michael Ondaatje, an examination of the novelist's work that relies totally on the cogency of Homi Bhabha's assumptions on hybridity and mimicry.¹⁰ For ten pages or so, Silva takes Bhabha's conjectures largely at their

⁷ Pilar Cuder-Dominguez, 'Ethnic Cartographies of London in Bernardine Evaristo and Zadie Smith', *European Journal of English Studies*, 8:2 (2004), 173-188 (p. 183; p. 176).

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹ Paul Smethurst, 'Postmodern Blackness and Unbelonging in the Works of Caryl Philips', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37:2 (2002), 5-19 (p. 9).

¹⁰ Neluka Silva, 'The Anxieties of Hybridity: Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 37:2 (2002), 71-83 (p. 76).

word, only occasionally extending or altering their scope to secure the best fit. Her conclusion, that Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* 'is valuable as a springboard for interrogating and deconstructing hegemonic myths of a pure national identity that are very much in place today, and overdetermine contemporary assumptions of identity'¹¹, is somewhat negligible and might be (in some cases has been, in fact) written of infinite postcolonial novels.

At a more structural level, I locate an inclination among some critics towards an unhelpful and self-perpetuating practice of affirmation and disavowal. By which I am referring not only to scholarship that works according to, or against, a particular theoretical standpoint, but also to works that censure, say, the perceived narrowness of an earlier scholar's work whilst simultaneously calling upon, and thus confirming the canonisation of, the same limited collection of texts.¹² What I am pointing towards is the idea of the gradual constraining of the very language of postcolonial scholarship – not totally, of course, but enough that the consolidated nomenclature of the field has become somewhat stifled and, at times, unproductive, because of a cache of buzz words and ideas that have come to prominence at the expense of others. That I have cherry-picked isolated examples here should not overlook the magnitude and the pervasiveness of the phenomenon; and indeed, I will expand upon this further below.

I am suggesting that a discipline and a language has emerged from within the field of postcolonial studies. That language has been flattened over time into common parlance, and has duly come to function in a way that facilitates easy inter-scholarly conversation. Nevertheless, that same language cannot at any one time be capable of doing justice to matters as varied as, say, Hong Kong protest movements on the one hand and Israeli-Palestine relations on the other. While ideas, tropes and terms inevitably travel, they require overhaul in each individual setting in order that they retain a level of utility. Peter Kalliney has observed this

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 82.

¹² See, as example, Dave Gunning, 'Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Empathy in the Realist Novel and its Alternatives', *Contemporary Literature*, 23:4 (2012), 779-813. Gunning dedicates large parts of his essay to challenging earlier readings of works Monica Ali and Zadie Smith, only to evoke at length the same combination of authors and the same texts for consideration.

as a language of marginality that has come to serve a powerful academic and cultural function.¹³ He writes:

The terms of this paradox, in which the politically marginal becomes part of a cultural dominant (or, more precisely, a site of symbolic prestige), point to the difficulties of interpreting the political function of modern art in a postcolonial age. It is possible to read the modern arts trading in 'the languages of the margins' as responsible for opening a counterhegemonic space, but it is equally apparent that such works circulate in a system of cultural production that celebrates them for those putatively hegemonic traits.¹⁴

Kalliney notes the fetishisation of marginality to an extent that it renders the very experience of marginality void. The overlap between postcolonial and global reading is pertinent for obvious reasons, given that in both cases the hegemony of privileged cosmopolitan readerships is often concealed beneath a triumphant rubric of globalism.

What I want to do in this chapter hereafter is in part to respond to the call issued by Lazarus, Parry and others, by contemplating both how a more considered and nuanced approach to postcolonial literary criticism has already begun to emerge, and by also enacting my own readings in the process. As much as anything, we are dealing here with the issue of postcolonial reading strategies (and the canonising impulses entrenched within them), which – echoing others – I argue have been both unhelpful to the interpretation of individual texts, and also quite damaging to the understanding of a whole body of literature more generally. As a result, what we might take for 'postcolonial literature' is perhaps a narrowly selected cosmopolitan anthology that leaves out as much as it includes. So as to complete the route that has this far taken in the settler polities of Australia and South Africa, before moving to India, here the focus is on literary output emerging from the former colonial metropole itself. In Britain, in particular, the will to a postcolonial literary canon has been as prevalent as anywhere. As such, a manner of reconstructive reading stands to bear fruit.

Both Parry and Lazarus have critiqued the institutional character of work enacted habitually within postcolonial literary studies. Lazarus, writing on the narrowness of the critical lens, suggests that 'the range of literary works typically

¹³ Peter Kalliney, 'East African Literature and the Politics of Global Reading', *Research in African Literatures*, 39:1 (2008), 1-23 (p. 11).

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 17.

addressed by postcolonial scholars is not only remarkably attenuated, but that, even with reference to this restricted body of works, the same questions tend to be asked, the same methods used, the same concepts mobilised, and the same conclusions drawn'.¹⁵ For him, then, postcolonial literary criticism is played out as something of zero-sum game, the value of the work in some cases being cancelled out by the uniformity of the routine. Lazarus's chosen recourse is the development of a 'differently weighted' research archive with 'different emphases'.¹⁶ Where he speaks to the restrictive trends of text selection, Parry, meanwhile, voices her concerns at the almost modish critical vocabulary of the field – and particularly that which emerges out of the writing of Homi Bhabha, whose work Parry takes to be paradigmatic. For her, Bhabha's work – along with the work of many who have followed his theoretical lead – often threatens to elevate a material (and in all likelihood historically violent) postcolonial reality to an untethered, and thus unhelpful, theoretical realm. Listing Bhabha's reliance upon transience in his explanations of culture production – his 'usage of paradoxical and open-ended words: ambivalent, borderline, boundary, contingent, discontinuity, disjunction, dispersal, dissemination, hybridity, in-between' and so on – Parry then writes:

This preference for terms which condense the play of difference, the instabilities of enunciations or the elements of undecidability within any system of communications, registers Bhabha's affiliation with a critical practice which undertakes to reveal how the uncertainties of textual meaning are produced/undermined as permutations on a chain of signification.

The implications of rewriting a historical project of invasion, expropriation and exploitation in the indeterminate and always deferred terms Bhabha proposes and implements are immense, and for me immensely troubling, since his elaborations dispense with the notion of conflict – a concept which certainly does not infer antagonism, but contra Bhabha, does not posit a simplistically unitary and close structure to the adversarial forces.¹⁷

Parry's complaint points once more towards the history-flattening (and often triumphant) language of postcolonial scholarship, which, somewhat similar to my suggestions in a previous chapter, has assumed a sign value unreflective of its real-term counterpart. If we side with Parry, who suggests that Bhabha treats 'difference as a fashionable buzzword ... so long as it is conceived in ideal

¹⁵ Lazarus, p. 19.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Parry, p. 56.

abstraction from the contexts of real-world experience', we are looking at a scenario in which movement (read: ambivalence, difference, borderlines, discontinuities etc.) in a text is celebrated by some scholars as though in itself it marked a *bona fide* expression of postcolonial reality; a reality whose real-life correlatives are lost beneath the seduction of the sign. In the words of Ann Brower Stahl, there has been an 'ongoing preoccupation with meaning, which is seldom defined but often linguistically conceived'.¹⁸ For her, much of the problem can be explained by what she calls the 'rule-driven behaviour'¹⁹ of some scholars, who place too much focus on the textual and linguistic construction of cultures. Given the heightened attention placed upon the question of migration at the time of writing, it seems more important than ever to ensure that human movement, cultural difference and so on are read in committedly political and economic terms, and not simply as some uncomplicated signs of the times.

The upshot, as far as Lazarus and Parry are concerned, is that the material, social and economic knowledge that stands to arise from responsible postcolonial scholarship is left untapped where a packaged aesthetic is the thing most prized. Crudely put, we are faced with a situation in which the likes of Bhabha's theory and, say, Salman Rushdie's novels are bedfellows, and where further inductees are granted access into their circle on the basis of their relationship to these totemic figures. In a word, postcolonial literature denotes only what it has been made to denote. Over time – and this is crucial to the direction this chapter now takes – this manner of scholarship becomes cyclical and self-perpetuating to the degree that the body of literature resembles not so much the product of a literary discipline as a generic, cosmopolitan arrangement of texts. The words of Timothy Brennan are apt here when, pondering the long-term ramifications of parochial literary criticism, he writes:

Several younger writers have entered a genre of third-world metropolitan fictions whose conventions have given their novels the unfortunate feel of ready-mades. Less about an inauthenticity of vision than the context of vision, such novels – typically grouped together in the display cases of library foyers – unjustly comes off as a kind of writing by numbers.²⁰

¹⁸ Ann Brower Stahl, 'Colonial Entanglements and the Practices of Taste: An Alternative to Logocentric Approaches', *American Anthropologist*, 104:3 (20), 827-845 (p. 828).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.829.

²⁰ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 203.

Brennan's comments, no less appropriate now than at the time of their publication in 1997, are a warning about the wholesale making cosmopolitan of postcolonial reading *and* writing. One eventually begets the other. As such there is still a requirement to reconfigure (or perhaps, to return to) the discipline of postcolonial scholarship as a responsible and yet indiscriminate project of literary gathering; responsible in terms of its approach to reading texts, indiscriminate in the way that it first interpolates those texts within the project.

At the Writing South Africa Now symposium held at York University in 2014, an event marking the twenty-year anniversary of South African deliverance from apartheid, I was struck by the curious absence on the day of reference to J.M. Coetzee – more curious still given the attendance on the day of David Attwell and Derek Attridge.²¹ Not until the end of proceedings was the subject of Coetzee finally broached, and even then only cursorily. Was it that in this room of South Africanists there existed a collective disavowal of the Nobel winner's contribution to the country's national literature for the past two decades? Surely not. More likely, I reckoned, was that an abundance of Coetzee scholarship in the past decade (some excellent, it must be noted) coupled with his works' ubiquitous place on undergraduate syllabi and the award of the Nobel Prize – in sum, the institutionalisation of Coetzee as preeminent South African novelist – had moved him into a parallel literary field, and had somehow distanced his work from the remit of the event. As far as the symposium was concerned, his absence would barely be registered. Coetzee hadn't been forgotten, but he had apparently been *done*, for now. At fault were not the organisers, those who had kept Coetzee out of the programme (in fact, perhaps there had been no submissions for a paper on his work anyway); at fault, if we can put it in such terms, was the erstwhile annexing of Coetzee's work, the overwhelming critical attention dedicated to the Nobel winner. It seemed to me a curious turn, but perhaps not altogether unprecedented. Novelists, after all, fall within the viewfinder of a critical lens almost fashionably – and *vice versa*.

²¹ See David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 1993) and Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004).

III • Writing New Networks

That same event in York culminated in a discussion between Attridge and Attwell over their editorship of *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012). The pair recounted that, to overcome the obvious imperative to fairly represent the multicultural, plurivocal and multimodal reality of South African literature in the collection, the notion of the “Beijing reader” was developed. That is, Attridge and Attwell noted how they produced the impressive compendium always with a far-off, uninitiated reader in mind. Ignoring Coetzee would not do, but nor would ignoring any known writer, irrespective of the perceived magnitude of his or her contribution to South African literary history. Hence the vast territory the collection attends to, from the study of Xhosa *iimbongi*, to the emergence of the South African novel in English and Afrikaans, black journalism, apartheid literature from all sides of the debate, the plentiful post-apartheid literary incarnations (and, as the saying goes, much, much more).

Should we not always, though, when considering works of literature grouped together as collective formations under umbrella terms, attempt to keep in mind that uninitiated reader? Should we not always work on the assumption that the formation deserves presenting in full? To that end, would it be anything other than expected to find the task an overwhelming, unending one, given that possible connections between works are seemingly infinite, and literary landscapes so porous? (In any case, would the Beijing reader not, in journeying from the centre out to the very margins of the landscape of, say, South African literature, manage to discover in the process a connecting route back home to China?) There runs a line (whose origins are questionable) that talking about music is like dancing about architecture.²² Writing about writing, too, is a similarly prohibitive undertaking when it comes to illustrating in words whole bodies of literary texts, given the obvious discrepancy between the respective protocols of ‘creative writing’ and critical discourse. For our encounter with the former is not quantifiable and cannot be separated from our moral, intellectual or circumstantial convictions. (I raised the point with Attridge and Attwell that the messy, handwritten explanatory notes scrawled in preparation for their vast

²² The origin of the phrase has long been disputed and has been credited to figures as varied as Frank Zappa, Elvis Costello and Thelonus Monk.

collection would provide a fitting accompaniment to the *Cambridge History*.) But in the event that we take on the task of doing so – and of course we should if we are to stand a chance of at least anticipating the connections between texts – it is an undertaking to be attempted thoroughly, paying attention to the fact that we bring as much of ourselves to a text as we take away.

At the most rudimentary level, I find no problem with positing the following condensed trajectory of literary texts as a way of explaining a route through postcolonial British literature: Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956); V.S. Naipaul, *The Mimic Men* (1967); Buchi Emecheta, *Second-Class Citizen* (1974); Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988); Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000). I might also add to this list a novel such as Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006), or Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004). That such a prospective syllabus holds its shape pertains to the fact that, read as a coherent syllabus, the texts offer a chronological, progressive and popular literary itinerary – a through-route, as it were. We might tally the texts with their respective historical contexts and settle upon some gradually emulsifying narrative of black British cultural assimilation, as though this were a narrative that postcolonial literature should seek to achieve. More components could well be slotted into the string of texts to form what would appear to be a comprehensive compendium of postcolonial British literature. But what does it benefit us to select texts in this manner? And moreover: what becomes of literature that, due to the selectiveness of our reading, ends up left in the margins? In the process of forging grand narratives of literature, the possibility of a more inclusive knowledge is foreclosed. Similarly, that same selective process performed in the reading of singular texts also runs a risk of closing off (or at least overlooking) potential meaning and, by extension, possible connections with other texts.

* * *

IV • Bodily Affirmation

Let us begin somewhere familiar consciously, before moving on responsibly. As much as one is taken to treating, say, *White Teeth* as a paradigm of British polyethnicity (as some have), the novel is better served I think by paying attention to Smith's mode of literary address, here, and also elsewhere in her writing. Attention to detail reveals that Smith's presentation of London in *White Teeth* is intended less as a realist mimetic enterprise than it is a parody of institutional attitudes concerning non-white belonging. As such, it would be better judged as a novel that locates an ironic comic tenor in its skewing of the debate over multiculturalism. Given that the novel's context is the Blairite government of 1997-2007, a period characterised by assimilationist immigration politics and which saw an influx of migrants to Britain accompanied by an official rhetoric of harmonious integration, Smith's attempt to appropriate this discourse is not entirely surprising. *White Teeth* pointedly satirises the interpretation of cultural belonging as a lifestyle choice, something that seems to emerge as a side effect of triumphant multiculturalist thinking. 'Multiculturalism, on this optimistic view,' Will Kymlicka writes, 'not only preserves ethnic peace, but actually reduces inequalities and remedies injustices, and furthers the ideals of the human rights revolution and of civil rights liberalism. Is there any evidence for this optimistic view?'²³ Smith offers a critique of the filter-down effect of this optimism, placing in her turn-of-the-century polyethnic teenage characters a compulsion to forge their own hybrid identities as a matter of design. In the following instance, the decision-making process concerning the shape of Millat's so-termed *Raggastani* "cultural" group are outlined:

It was a new breed, just recently joining the ranks of the other street crews: Becks, B-boys, Indie kids, wide-boys, ravers, rude-boys, Acidheads, Sharons, Tracies, Kevs, Nation Brothers, Raggas and Pakis; manifesting itself as a kind of cultural mongrel of the last three categories. Raggastanis spoke a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati and English. Their ethos, their manifesto, if it could be called that, was equally a hybrid thing: Allah *featured*, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme brother, a hard-as-fuck *geez*er who would fight in their corner if necessary; King Fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; adding to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian; the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani.²⁴

²³ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Odysseys: Navigating the New International Politics of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 83.

²⁴ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 232.

For Millat, cultural understanding is almost written into being as theory, but is not put into actual social practice. It is a critique revisited in Smith's most recent novel, *N.W* (2012), when it is noted of one of its teenage protagonists: 'Keisha Blake ... watched her friend ascend to the top deck in her new panda-eyed make-up and had a *mauvais quart d'heure* wondering whether she herself had any personality at all or was in truth only the accumulation and reflection of all the things she had read in books and seen on television.'²⁵ Smith's is a commentary on the over-privileging of the body as a cultural entity and an invitation (albeit one she does not take up herself, necessarily) to focus attention on the actual attainment of social agency.

It is interesting to observe the recurrence of this trope of bodily affirmation more widely. That is, it is poignant to consider the notion of the body's confirmation as a physical body (even if not yet a culturally understood or coded body) standing as a simultaneous confirmation of agency. Take as an example Lucinda Roy's *Lady Moses* (1998), in which Jacinta ultimately finds self-affirmation through her physical pain. Like Keisha, it is mentioned that the young Jacinta, '[spends] much of [her] early childhood living inside the pages of books, or inside the black-and-white Rediffusion television set'.²⁶ After the death of her father, Jacinta finds solace in diary writing and later from attending church. When she experiences her first kiss at thirteen, rather unwillingly, from Maurice, Jacinta remarks that she 'was letting him do it even though [she] was a good girl.'²⁷ Immediately afterwards, locking herself in her room, she notes: 'Something in me had been sleeping. Something in me had been thrust awake. I would never be Jacinta Louise of the diary again.' Willed or not, the physical encounter is catalytic and is enough to interpellate Jacinta. 'I found my hand between my thighs,' she writes soon after, as though instinctively putting the physicality of her body to the test. As an immediate reaction to having sinned she then holds her hand over the naked flame of a stove, burning her palm and passing out in the process, but noting the 'sweet smell of burned flesh'²⁸ as she

²⁵ Zadie Smith, *N.W* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 185.

²⁶ Lucinda Roy, *Lady Moses* (London: Virago, 1998), p. 33

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 47.

does so. As she convalesces from her injury, apparently buoyed by confidence that has come from her encounter, Jacinta's awakening as a physical body is reiterated. In the extended passage that follows, mark her fixation on the significance of anatomy:

At thirteen I had a loud voice and the highest grades in Form III alpha ... Louise, despite what she'd said in the hospital, didn't reassert herself as the primary mentor in my life. She existed only in my peripheral vision. She'd been an absent mother for years, evident only in the flesh, floating around the house like a fragment from something grand... My Mother was semi-transparent – an outline filled in with whatever colour I chose to throw her up against. I ruled the roost now, and made many decisions usually made by adults. I should have known better, but I assumed Louise would continue to become a smaller and smaller fixture in the landscape, and that I would become a bigger one. I was going to be a great politician, or and actress, or a writer. I became strong – far stronger than I'd been when the flames of [the] gas rings drew me in. My hand was scarred, but it functioned well. And there was a certain fascination in the scars. *Now my body told a story.* Tragedy was written in my palm. (my emphasis.)²⁹

It is the very act of self-injury, which itself is prompted by an initial moment of bodily contact, that marks the origin of Jacinta's journey as an active social agent. The physical scars act as the necessary receipts of her interpellation.

In the closing passages of two further novels from the same period, we find similar attention paid to the affirmatory potential of the body experienced as body. In *Brick Lane* (2003), Nazneen's final acts of small-scale triumph in the novel are physically enacted. In response to the absence of employment following the departure of her husband back to the Asian subcontinent, it is noted that in order for work to be forthcoming, Nazneen must first learn to 'imagine'. Yet immediately following this, as Lulu's warbling song 'Shout' streams from the radio, it is the physicality of dancing that appears to precede – to enable – the burgeoning of Nazneen's imagination. 'She went to the radio and turned it up,' writes the narrator,

The singer jumped off her cliff of expectation and cavorted in an ecstatic sea.

Nazneen moved her head to the song. Her hips went side to side. She tapped her right foot, then the other. She raised her arms and moved her chest. The music broke in waves over her entire body.

She waved her arms, threw back her head and danced around the table. *Shout!* She along, filling her lungs from the bottom, letting it all go loose, feeling her hair shake down her neck and around her shoulders, abandoning her feet to the rhythm, threading her hips through the air. She swooped down and tucked up her sari into the band of her underskirt.³⁰

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁰ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*, pp. 488-489.

The singer's fall from the cliff into the ecstatic sea is emblematic of Nazneen's own plunge into what we might simultaneously interpret as womanhood or belonging, but which is perhaps better left here signifying the acquisition of simple agency. Pages later, Nazneen consolidates her bodily confirmation, this time on an ice rink. Registering the ordinariness of the people on the ice – a woman skates by wearing 'no sequins, no short skirt', but jeans³¹ – Nazneen hesitantly follows suit. 'To get on the ice physically hardly seemed to matter,' it is mentioned. 'In her mind she was already there.'³² Yet it is the bodily encounter that has enabled the flourishing of the imagination at all.

In the second case, dancing again forms the basis of bodily confirmation, this time in Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (1991). On this occasion, 'the thrill of belonging'³³ is explicitly the order of the day. Educated in Britain after having being sent from Nigeria as a child, protagonist Remi's moment of physical triumph comes at the novel's conclusion as she and her fellow Nigerian graduates attend a party at the Western High Commissioner's house in London. In the passage immediately before the party, Remi expresses her delight at the fact that she and her friends now

dressed to look alike deliberately and we didn't care who stared at us now, protected by our identical beehives and dark glasses. When asked who we were and where we were from, we smiled mysteriously and moved on, languidly swinging our hips, all of us in our high, high heels and our tight, tight skirts.³⁴

The sense of belonging, then, as much as it arises from the harmony the girls experience as a group, also stems from the visibility their bodies now have. That they are said to no longer care about people's stares would suggest that the lens cast in their direction is now one that registers their presences as active agents. While we might as bystanders question the wisdom of the girls' clearly provocative gestures, their actions are reflective of the status they have secured.

With Bedford, Ali and Roy, though, care must be taken not to overstate and misinterpret the nature of the triumph in the gestures. It is important as readers and critics that we responsibly frame these moments as instances of bodies being incorporated into the social, rather than the cultural, imaginary; and that we

³¹ *ibid.*, p.492.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Simi Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 184.

³⁴ *ibid.*

acknowledge that these are only preliminary moments. What I am suggesting is that cosmopolitan postcolonial reading (let us think of the likes of Cuder-Dominguez) has at times been over-insistent upon peddling too simplistic an understanding of agency untethered from any material footing. In so doing, where moments are perceived only as instances of simplified cultural triumph – Nazneen skating and Remi dancing, for example, observed as explicit, uncomplicated symbols of belonging – it somewhat neglects to attend to the novels' social dimension. Rashmi Varma has commented on this, of *Brick Lane* in particular, suggesting that we take from Nazneen's socialisation the sense that she is enjoined in a relationship of solidarity with others in her own position, within London and beyond. As Varma argues, despite the fact that the novel refuses a romantic ending (Nazneen's marital and extra-marital relationships failing), Nazneen's employment as garment-maker ascribes her to an international community of women workers. Varma writes:

Her work as a sweatshop worker stitching garments for London's fashion industry connects her not only with other women in her community, but also with her sister in Dhaka who also works in a sweatshop supplying garments to the world. Exploitative and unfulfilling as this work is, the novel pulls the domain of women's work into its still invisible articulation with the global economy. Ali's novel is an attempt to fictionalize both the experience of such work at a microscopic and intimate level (the sorts of relations it destroys and others that it produces) as well as its linking up with a transnational sisterhood. But whether Nazneen would go on to participate in any kind of feminist or secular politics that could challenge the dominant neo-liberal and increasingly unsecular global city is of course a question that the novel's plot does not accommodate, even as its discourse opens up these questions to critique.³⁵

I endorse Varma's suggestion here that Ali is opening up a critique, even if it is left unclear whether Nazneen herself could go on to participate actively in turn. That Varma is able to draw such conclusions at all also pertains to the fact that, as I have argued, the body is better read as social entity; and that as much as habit has made us attentive to perceived moments of cultural expression, we ought to remain focused on recognising signs of social affirmation. Varma's reading of *Brick Lane* avoids what I regard as the trappings of over-privileging cultural agency. In other words, it stops short of regarding Nazneen's struggle as one of cultural self-definition and treats it instead as one tightly tied to the question of rights.

³⁵ Rashmi Varma, 2012, p. 165.

V • The Bodyness of Bodies

There is a second dimension concerning the postcolonial literary body that I want briefly to pay attention to. Perhaps as a riposte to the prescriptive readings of her work, in a quite brilliant 2008 *New Yorker* article Zadie Smith traces a lineage from her own literary characters back through notable comic figures of British television: Tony Hancock, Basil Fawlty, Alan Partridge, David Brent. Discussing her father's own comic tastes, she writes:

Hancock's heartbreaking inability to pass as a middle-class beatnik or otherwise pull himself out of the hole he was born in was a source of great mirth to Harvey, despite the fact that this was precisely his own situation. He loved Hancock's hopefulness, and loved the way he was always disappointed.³⁶

That mix of hope and despair has been a mainstay of British comedy for decades, and finds a traceable lineage in non-white writing more generally. Smith, passing comment on comedy connections, writes of 'Hancock's battered homburg, Fawlty's cravat, Partridge's driving gloves, Brent's fake Italian suits'³⁷ – these characters' dubious attempts to aspire beyond their class. It is comedy that emerges out of the perpetual crashing back to earth following aspirant gestures. In *The Office*, for example, fortysomething paper merchant manager David Brent arrives one morning suavely sporting a (possibly fake) leather jacket and an ear piercing. Before the end of episode the ear has become sore and infected and the piercing never reappears on screen again. So often, then, comedy arises from a viewer witnessing the sameness of bodies, the reduction of any single body, regardless of class or age, for example, to its base level. In short, there is comedy in the *bodyness* of bodies, in the uniformity of their respective needs. Undoubtedly, it is something of a recurring trope in postcolonial British writing. In Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for instance, Galahad's desperate hunger in the post-Windrush English capital drives him to hunting pigeons by hand for food. 'Galahad eye a fat fellar who edging up to the rail,' Selvon writes. 'He start to drop bread a little nearer, until the bird was close. He make the snatch so quietly that the other pigeons only flutter around a little and went on

³⁶ Zadie Smith, 'Dead Man Laughing', *New Yorker*, December 22, 2008. Accessed at: <<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/12/22/dead-man-laughing>>.

³⁷ *ibid.*

eating. He start to swing the pigeon around, holding by the head, for he want to kill it quick and push it in his pocket.’³⁸ The comedy, we might suggest, comes from the universality of human experience of hunger, expressed here in a moment of absurd, flamboyant despair. Much later we might look to a writer like Hanif Kureishi, who touches upon the sexual-but-unsexy bodily experience or the comedy of the body in performance, in a way that again exposes the fallibility of all bodies.

Just as in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), in which Haroon, while always (unrealistically) open-minded – here apparently embracing his Indianness by practicing yoga – is continually checked by the mundaneness of his body: ‘He was standing on his head now balanced perfectly. His stomach sagged down. His balls and prick fell forward in his pants. The considerable muscles in his arms swelled up and he breathed energetically. Like many Indians he was small, but Dad was also elegant and handsome.’³⁹ Later, in *Something to Tell You* (2008), in which the protagonist habitually visits a West London brothel, the reader is greeted by the image of the non-white body divested of its ‘Converse All-Stars, trousers and shorts’, still clad in a shirt because ‘it was a little cold’, and waiting for the effects of Viagra and painkillers to take hold.⁴⁰ The novel’s protagonist is an often quixotic, but intelligent character, and his reduction here to a rather pathetic bodily state underscores his flawed mortality. Similarly, in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996), mark the moment when Meena, whose upbringing is as an Indian girl in an overwhelmingly white mining town in the West Midlands, claims that her most thrilling moment in life to date involves choking on a sausage. Syal writes:

I squeezed my hot dog and suddenly the sausage shot into my mouth and lodged firmly in my windpipe. I was too shocked to move, my fingers curled uselessly into my fists. They were still talking, engrossed, I could see papa’s eyes in the mirror, darting from my mother’s face to the unfolding road. I thought of writing SAUSAGE STUCK on the windscreen and then realised I could not spell sausage. I was going to die in the back of the car and somewhere inside me, I felt thrilled. It was so dramatic. This was by far the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me.⁴¹

³⁸ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin, 2006; 1956), pp. 118-119.

³⁹ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Hanif Kureishi, *Something to Tell You* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 218.

⁴¹ Meera Syal, *Anita and Me* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 27.

Meena's scrape with death is for her the most fitting confirmation of her mortality and of her sense of being. It arrives in the form of this markedly comic image: the body reduced to its most flawed, most universally human, state. We might draw examples from more novels: in Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006), for instance, when its main group of young male, British-Asian characters, despite their mutual obsession with designer clothes and top of the range mobile phones, are apparently most unified by the consistency of their respective digestive systems' reactions after eating their mothers' *chana dal*.⁴²

What I am hinting at here is the comedic inscription of the body – not in a derisive sense, but absurdly or playfully as a unifying symbol of human sameness. That is, a sense that in showing the body to be reducible to a contorted or inept state a sense of commonality can be established among characters and with readers. Finally, then, I draw attention to a passage of critical work by Martin Fradley, writing here about the British filmmaker Shane Meadows, whose films have often had what Fradley calls a 'preoccupation with the corporeal'.⁴³ More than just a directorial indulgence in the abjectness of the body, Fradley suggests a specific politics at work. 'Looking across Meadows' career to date,' he writes,

I argue that in wilfully foregrounding the alterity and eruptive vitality of the body, the director's work thematically valorises mutuality and working-class commonality through recourse to corporeal terrain. Politics, then, are significantly embodied in Meadows' films. By emphasising their excessive bodily habitus, Meadows' characters expose the performative contrivances of middle-class social normalcy. In rejecting the regulatory fictions of atomised individualism and the primacy of the self-regulating consumer-citizen, Meadows' work functions as a form of 'dirty protest'. In endorsing the grotesque body as a corporeal metonym, Meadows ideologically repudiates – to appropriate Bakhtin's terminology – the dominant neoliberal fiction of 'a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world'. In doing so, I wish to suggest that Meadows' devotion to the abject significantly underscores his commitment to an inclusive pro-social agenda.⁴⁴

If Fradley's suggestion concerns the commonality of abject working-class bodies, I am pointing towards the transcendent sociality of the non-white British body simply expressed corporeally. In other words, in the confirmation of one's corporeality is an important moment of social agency.

⁴² Gautam Malkani, *Londonstani* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007).

⁴³ Martin Fradley, "'Al Fresco? That's up yer anus, innit?': Shane Meadows and the Politics of Abjection", in *Shane Meadows: Critical Essays*, in (eds.) Martin Fradley, Sarah Godfrey and Melanie Williams (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. (p. 39).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. .

As a final auxiliary point on the matter of bodies, in Hardeep Singh Kohli's *Indian Takeaway* (2009) the Glaswegian comedian takes his cobbled-together repertoire of culinary knowledge on a journey around India, where he plans to cook "English" dishes *en route* for various hosts. Before his travels, Kohli's understanding of India is notional, having grown up in Glasgow and, in his own words, having lived as an Indian only on a Sunday when his family visited the Gurdwara.⁴⁵ Much as the explicit pretence of the narrative is that Kohli intends to cook British dishes in India as a way of finding some manner of culinary negotiating point, there is a grander narrative alluded to concerning the seemingly more important matter of the meeting point of his British and Indian identities. 'If I was to find myself in India, I must take some of myself with me,'⁴⁶ he writes, at the planning stage of his journey. Yet rather than resting on the symbolic implication of the phrase – a voyage taken under the auspices of self-discovery – he pledges instead to take with him his materially realisable catalogue of personalised recipes. What Kohli's journey becomes, then, is a chance to share the physical experience of cooking and eating as an avenue of self-understanding. On arrival in Kovalam, he first plans to cook a version of Scottish stovies⁴⁷ but, despite the dish's permanent place on his menu at home, decides instead upon 'something really poncey and European'⁴⁸: chicken breast stuffed with pesto. Sourcing the ingredients wherever possible and making compromises with his original recipe in the process (using strained yoghurt in place of pecorino in the pesto, and skinless rather than skin-on chicken breasts), Kohli cooks a dish that receives only a lukewarm reception from his diners. Later, he muses: 'What I had cooked could never really be described as British; it was the bastard child of French and Italian cuisine with a misplaced Indian influence.'⁴⁹

The point I wish to make is that Kohli is at first concerned by his inability to translate the meaning of his planned dishes, particularly given that he struggles to source the correct ingredients. As the book moves forward, though, he begins to

⁴⁵ Hardeep Singh Kohli, *Indian Takeaway: A Very British Story* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009), p. 6.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ A traditional Scottish dish of stewed potatoes.

⁴⁸ Singh Kohli, p. 52.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 55.

cook according to the myriad circumstances dictated by each meal. Kohli makes fishcakes, replacing breadcrumbs with sweet rusks; a lamb stew in which the aubergines are substituted in for lamb; and toad in the hole (sausages in a Yorkshire pudding batter) in which virtually all of the ingredients are modified, including the sausages, which are replaced with mutton steaks. Kohli's gradual acclimatisation to a new mode of cooking derives from the fact that he shelves the idea of individual recipes existing as transferrable structures of meaning, for he realises that a dish loses some of its meaning when it is decoded. Instead, he begins to see that the truest meaning of each dish exists in the shared experience of eating, that each diner brings to it his or her own personal and circumstantial contexts, and that the inexpressibility of the meaning of the dish is overcome by the communal bodily encounter with it. Thus the sprawling personal histories that accompany each of Kohli's dishes are, quite literally, rendered less meaningful in the process of exchange. Meaning is necessarily experiential. By extension, the text's larger preoccupation with the process of identity formation begins thereafter to assume a different significance. The swaying this way and that of Kohli's feelings of Indianness and Britishness – and, subsequently, the inevitable and ultimate state of flux this comes to – is something of a familiar postcolonial narrative trope. Kohli realises, though, that like his dishes he is always a coded message and that attempts at decoding will always result in a loss of meaning. There follows a realisation that his identity is only to be felt experientially and cannot be written into being. When the time comes for him to prepare his final meal, then, he no longer concerns himself with the intractability of cultural meaning, favouring instead a manner of cooking that attends only to the deeply personal relationship between himself and the dish:

It's quieter than usual in Ferozepure this evening. I stand in the tiny kitchen chopping onions and heating oil, waiting to taste my own goat curry... The aroma of Indian onions frying in Indian oil combined with Indian spices is the smell of India yet also the smell of growing up in Glasgow. For the first time in my life these are not two different places but the same unified space; and that space is within me. The only sound I can hear now is the sound of frying and the sound of my own heart beating within my chest. I can barely imagine my father standing in this kitchen, cooking the same dish, but I know he did; and I know that my grandfather did. Dinner is ready. All I have left to do is the garnish with freshly chopped coriander and eat.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Singh Kohli, p. 284.

VI • Marginal Voices

At the end of his essay on the politics of global reading, Kalliney laments postcolonial studies' 'primitive reading strategies'⁵¹, which he suggests have fallen short over time of 'making transparent [their] investments in particular texts and critical strategies'.⁵² That he should talk in terms of investment is pertinent, for there is, I feel, a demand for literary critics to state the nature of their ventures. If we are to avoid playing a hand in the authorisation of an unreflective knowledge of the postcolonial world, our approach as literary critics must tend to the specific conditions of postcoloniality that permeate the texts we seek to enact readings of. (Part of that approach, of course, must necessarily address the current understanding and efficacy of postcoloniality as a term in and of itself.) Much of the early critical reading of the post-Windrush era more than half a century ago justifiably paid attention to questions of arrival, first contact, preliminary negotiations of difference and so on. It was an approach that reflected the beginning of a significant period of cross-cultural contact on British shores. While posing those same questions now is not an entirely valueless enterprise, however, the scope of our contemporary work ought to be broader. In short, it must seek take the pulse – not sound out its own manufactured rhythm – of the mass experience of civic life in Britain, the politics of immigrant (vis-à-vis white British) experience (and *vice versa*), the myriad processes of social acclimatisation at work nationwide, and the social and economic division of the landscape. This should factor into our investment. To a degree, of course, our contemporary reading must always bear in mind the consequences of the unavoidable and overwhelming narrative of aggressive global capitalism (as a theory and as a practice) and also, in a more engaged way, to the following: the significant political, social and cultural implications of, say, 9/11, 7/7 and Britain and America's so-called counter-insurgency missions in Afghanistan and Iraq in the last decade; the geo-political disruption signalled by the Arab Spring from 2011 onwards; the ongoing conflicts raging across the Middle East. Of Britain particularly, we must address the way that a politics of austerity, a gradually

⁵¹ Kalliney, p. 17.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 19.

emergent rightist political climate, the arrival of displaced communities from the Horn of Africa, Syria, Iraq and so on, have in recent times been factored into British civic life – not in an abstract, but in a determinate, localised sense. Only recently, I sat in a Leicester laundrette a few hundred yards back from the city's Golden Mile waiting with a basket of wet clothes for a dryer to free up. Around me were all types of people, all doing the same: working out their places in the pecking order, remaining on guard in case someone tried to push in. It is curious to witness human behaviour when entitlement is concerned. To one Hindi-speaking woman, without a word of my own I seemed to metamorphose into the tactless colonialist *gorā*, who takes what he wants without asking (although that is only one explanation). She stood steadfastly next to a machine so as not to allow a chance for me to jump the queue. A lone Somali woman, meanwhile, was greeted with scornful looks as she came through the door with two large bags of laundry. In that case, too, there was no way to discern the origins of the gesture, but one could speculate that she was being vilified as a newcomer (perhaps to the laundrette, possibly to the country). Nevertheless, the moment evoked a sense that histories were converging in a Leicester laundrette. I was reminded of the narrator's words in Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil*:

Even the air of this country has a story to tell about warfare. It is possible to lift a piece of bread from a plate and, following it back to its origins, collect a dozen stories concerning war – how it affected the hand that pulled it out of the oven, the hand that kneaded the dough, how war impinged upon the field where the wheat was grown.⁵³

The singular moment expounded reveals beyond it a genealogy of shared and separate histories, something that the moment in the laundrette would surely also yield if we were able to tease out the details. Leicester's most significant minority group, Indians forced from their homes in Uganda by Idi Amin's Africanisation policy in 1972, have over four decades carved out along with their descendants a distinctive place in the civic life of the city. The majority of the earlier white British inhabitants of the area surrounding the so-called Golden Mile have now moved out. More recent migrants have thus not been mere additions to a non-white British population; they (other South Asian, African, Afro-Caribbean and European migrants) have been pursuant of their own unique

⁵³ Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 49.

place in the city's social fabric, along with countless other groups here and further afield. As Ali Behdad notes in 'On Globalisation, Again': 'To ignore the crucial economic and cultural differences among immigrant communities by labelling them all "postnational others" marginalized by the white nation state ... proves not only intellectually problematic but also politically dangerous.'⁵⁴ I call to mind a passing reference in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road From Damascus* (2008), when the narrator notes: 'It wasn't as he'd thought as a boy, that all these religions would cancel each other out. Instead they existed in bubbles. As bubble hit bubble more bubbles formed.'⁵⁵ The sentiment can be extrapolated, of course, so as to account for the same process of multiplication that occurs at the contact points of communities more generally.

What I am pushing at is the need to work towards understanding the space/place of marginality in contemporary Britain (and, concurrently, the experience, the politics and the representation of it.) In particular, given the wider context of Islamic fundamentalism and its often unfortunate interpretation as a reflection of the religion at large, it is imperative that our writing and reading of Islam pays close attention to its important place(s) in contemporary Britain. Yassin-Kassab and Aslam have both played significant roles in this regard, addressing the idea of Islam's stratification in a British setting, illuminating its points of contact with, and distance from, mainstream British society – and the gradations of scale between the two points. Equally, both novelists engage in the debate over the cohesiveness of Islam as a theological system of beliefs, probing at the points of classist, generational and gender conflict present within it. In *Road From Damascus*, Yassin-Kassab's protagonist, Sami, is plagued by the question of British Muslim citizenship. A postgraduate, Sami's religious beliefs are filtered through the lens of his place within academia, as are the prejudices he gathers throughout the novel. Put differently, his moderate, secular incarnation of Islam is challenged by the stricter Koranic adherence of his wife and the flamboyant "hip-hop Islam" of his brother-in-law. Yassin-Kassab hints throughout at the need for an experientially determined understanding of Islam, free of the trappings of overarching ideological definitions. At the outset, the reader learns that Sami has travelled from London

⁵⁴ Ali Behdad, 'On Globalization, Again!', in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, pp. 62-79 (p. 76).

⁵⁵ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road From Damascus* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 245.

to his ancestral home in Syria, to 'reconnect with his roots; remember who he was; find an idea'.⁵⁶ Yet it is an ultimately disappointing journey for Sami, for he finds no answers to his philosophical questions. That he undertakes this voyage so early in the novel, and with such a negative outcome, would suggest the unprofitability of any "narrative of return" – and thus sets up a different sort of trajectory. Sami's journey, then, is one that shows an increasing sense of despair at fellow followers of Islam, while there is a feeling that his disillusionment pertains to his own isolation from Muslims around him. This emerges, it seems, out of Sami's inability to locate his own position within a larger whole. He is unable to connect his respective positions as a follower of Islam and as a citizen of secular Britain, and duly feels Othered from both. The following passage, midway through the narrative, points to the crux of Sami's issue: his inability to understand the wholeness of Islam because of his inability to comprehend even its most elemental signs. Observing different Islamic women on a walk across London – 'Saudi wives and daughters', 'British Bengali girls in heavy brown or green hijabs', 'earnest Levantine housewives'⁵⁷ – Sami trails off into agitated contemplation: 'What we they symbols of? What did it all mean? Where would he fit [his wife] into this? And what did it mean for him, being the husband of such a sign? What was he now? What was he a symbol of?'⁵⁸ As if to underscore the point that, at this stage of the novel, Sami does not have the means to find answers to his questions, we are told: 'These were the questions he took to Tom Field ... an academic of a different stripe.'⁵⁹

The novel rehearses the question of difference, which is a different matter to the question of belonging. Sami gradually progresses towards locating the necessary tools to at least acknowledge the splitting of British Islam into separate but overlapping spheres, whose boundary points are fragile. When, towards the end of the novel, Sami learns of the attacks on the World Trade Center towers, for example, his wife and brother-in-law's contrasting responses hint at the nature of this splitting:

Muntaha held her face as Sami would have liked to, between her hands, and whispered, 'God, I hope it wasn't Arabs.'

⁵⁶ Yassin-Kassab, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Yassin-Kassab, p. 102.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 103.

Anmar prayed, 'Let it be the Muslims!'⁶⁰

Sami's attempts to cope with the irreconcilability of these disparate opinions deliver him tentatively by the end of the novel to a 'trembling, contingent faith'.⁶¹ Most importantly, it seems, is the fact that he finds a suitable language capable of speaking to the nature of his material circumstances, even if it is not yet able to speak beyond it: 'He's Nur's son. Muntaha's husband. These are facts. But to define himself as other people's attributes – it isn't much... So what else? He's a bit more of a man now. Meaning, a moment of consciousness.'⁶² Sami's is a call, then, for a language that begins to operate beyond the materiality of experience:

Our language is adequate for the detail of social relations, and for the objects made by us, or those for which there is an obvious human use. Language is primarily economic. However, for the economically useless, for the natural more-than-human, words are silly, shiny labels signifying only their own poverty. Words like star, sky, sea. Words like blue when applied to the sky.⁶³

A similar feeling is illustrated in Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), where the transferral of Pakistani Islam to a small British town seems to empty it of its familiarity and damages its adherents' ability to confidently follow its laws. Early on, Aslam sets up the idea that,

Millions of [Pakistan's] sons and daughters have managed to find footholds all around the globe in their search for livelihood and a sense of dignity. Roaming the planet looking for solace, they've settled in small towns that make them feel smaller still, and in cities that have tall buildings and even taller loneliness.⁶⁴

Where these migrant communities have latterly downed roots, the foreignness of the new setting has had the effect of warping previously strong community structures. An honour killing in a small, unnamed British town is thus the catalyst for Aslam to outline the breakdown of Islamic community coherence. 'In the neighbourhood there are as many opinions about the death as there are mouths,'⁶⁵ it is noted, suggesting the gradations of scale in opinion in this British

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 318.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 348.

⁶² *ibid.*, pp. 348-349.

⁶³ Nadeem Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 347.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 186.

setting. That the town is named throughout only as Dasht-e-Tanhaii/The Wilderness of Solitude/The Desert of Loneliness is a measure of the fact that the community exists less as a physical space than it does as a collectively experienced sense of displacement. What the novel does more than anything else, though, is to open up a debate on the domestic space of British Islam, particularly through the family of the deceased's response to the killing. Again, as with Yassin-Kassab, there are conflicting opinions in the family that fall along the continuum between religious and secular belief, and the family is eventually brought to the edge of disintegration as a result. Husband and wife are brought to fierce disagreement in terms of their divergent interpretations of Islamic faith in modern Britain; parents and children are also at odds. Even traditional familial structures are pushed to the point of collapse. When Kaukab, the mother of the family, goes to great lengths to plan a feast (and the narrator goes to equal lengths to explain the minute details of the two-day preparation), it is met ultimately with anger by the son: 'What the fuck *is* all this for? What are we celebrating with this ... this *feast*?'⁶⁶ As Chris Weedon has written, 'as in many British South Asian novels, the generational tensions increase as the children grow up and gain greater access to mainstream British life'.⁶⁷ Here, the collision of opinions is a point of breakdown between generations, families and specific sets of individuals, is a barrier to community cohesion more generally, and is a hurdle that stands in the way of civic wellbeing. The novel is thus concerned with the private experience of British Islam as an experience of loneliness, and with pushing a debate on the ways in which those disparate experiences can be pieced together. In Weedon's words, the significance of the novel lies with the fact that it engages 'issues on which there are differing perspectives within minority communities and which cannot be understood outside of the broader contexts of mainstream attitudes, racism and Islamophobia'.⁶⁸

Much is made of marginal groups' attempts to establish an autonomous cultural, social and political life, but insufficient attention, I would argue, is given to understanding the private experience of marginality – particularly, in

⁶⁶ Aslam, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, p. 303.

⁶⁷ Chris Weedon, 'Tropes of Diasporic Life in the Work of Nadeem Aslam', in *Metaphor and Diaspora in Contemporary Writing*, ed. Jonathan P.A. Sell (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) pp. 20-38 (p. 31)

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 38.

this case, from a British Islamic perspective. In a literary sense, Aslam and Yassin-Kassab enter the debate, outlining contact points between knotty issues of Muslim life and the nature of their place in wider British society. Leila Aboulela and Hanan Al-Shaykh, meanwhile, in *The Translator* (1999) and *Only in London* (2001) respectively, have contributed similarly to the debate. Aboulela confronts the issue of the double exile encountered by Islamic women in academia, while Al-Shaykh, much like Yassin-Kassab, explores the separate bubbles of Islamic life in London. In the latter novel, it is pertinent that one of the main characters' apartments is described as being her prison⁶⁹, for she is unable even to fathom the nature of her personal, let alone her public, space within the city.

Our reading of novels that find expression for the experience of British Muslim life (or Islam in Britain) should seek to find in those experiences a common language, one that speaks to the issue of marginality more broadly. In other words, where the novelists above have opened up the debate on the place of Islam in Britain, critics – and particularly those with a background in postcolonial literary studies – must look to establish a dialogue between texts. Namely, there is a responsibility to pursue an understanding (for Muslim and non-Muslim populations) of the place of British Islam in unpretentious terms. That is, we have a responsibility to push an understanding not expressed rhetorically or figuratively, but grounded in material and social circumstances. Were this undertaken successfully, we (again, Muslim and non-Muslim populations) would be better placed to understand the specific conditions of marginality, so as to observe it not as an irresolvable condition of distance or a manner of philosophical impasse, but as a point at which genuine negotiation can take place. My point is that committedly writing and reading the conditions of marginality is a didactic enterprise, our investment in which should aim for dividends paid out in the shape of better tools with which to understand it.

So far I have explored routes through the landscape of non-white British writing, suggesting that new literary networks are important in maintaining the efficacy of postcolonial literary criticism as a discipline. Now I intend to hone the debate in on the reading of individual texts, demonstrating in the process the

⁶⁹ Hanan Al-Shaykh, *Only in London*, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 135.

way in which some strategies might be seen to have failed to do justice to the singularity of literature.

VII • At Brick Lane, Turn Back: *Alentejo Blue*

In his vast *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said outlines the discipline of “contrapuntal reading”, suggesting a desired approach wherein a reader does not overlook the references, overt or otherwise, in a given text to a presence of colonial power. ‘References to Australia in *David Copperfield*,’ Said writes, ‘or India in *Jane Eyre* are made because they *can be*, because British power (and not just the novelist’s fancy) made passing references to these massive appropriations possible.’⁷⁰ Said’s call points towards a situated and committed mode of reading, one that both avoids glossing over even incidental allusions to empire – fleeting visitations to the West Indies in Austen, for example, or mentions of India in *Vanity Fair* – and that also registers elsewhere absences and screaming silences, missing references to things made possible at all by British imperialism. He writes: ‘The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was forcibly excluded.’⁷¹ And shortly afterwards, he adds: ‘In addition, one must connect the structures of a narrative to the ideas, concepts, experiences from which it draws support.’⁷² If Said’s thrust is broadly twofold, on the one hand is a comment on the reciprocal relationship at the height of the British imperial project between the novel and empire (in essence, the idea that the two are mutually constitutive and inexorably linked); while on the other hand is Said’s idea that, in his words, ‘the imperial perspective has been neglected’⁷³ in critical responses to certain literary texts.

I call to mind this passage of *Culture and Imperialism* concerned with colonial-era literature because, to my mind, an almost antithetical reading discipline has become discernible in the reception of contemporary *postcolonial*

⁷⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 78.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*

writing. That is, a mode of critical reading that actively (and sometimes overly) foregrounds the imperial dimensions of literary texts, to the extent that some valuable portion of meaning risks being lost. That such a discipline has been able to take root, too, relies rather heavily it seems upon the somewhat unhelpful canonisation (or even, institutionalisation) of postcolonial writing – as though this taxonomy were a simple-to-demarcate whole. My reservation is not with postcolonial reading itself, which is evidently an important ongoing practice, but with the particular parameters and symbols this discipline has ultimately established. What is at stake in all of this is the integrity and the singularity of literary texts. If Said is positing the wilful ignorance of the critics of yesteryear, I am gesturing towards a canonising impulse in some of their contemporary counterparts, whose efforts ultimately serve to ring fence both individual and groups of texts. Susan Sontag, writing in the 1960s in something of a different context, bemoans that, ‘the modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs “behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.’⁷⁴ True, Sontag is speaking to an idea of modern interpretation as a concept as old as modernism itself, which begins much earlier than the period I am now gesturing towards. Nevertheless, the reference to the notion of verisimilitude, that sense that there is perceived by some to be a hard seed able to be extracted from the messy soil of the text, still holds. While I see no real problem with searching for a sense of centre *per se*, I also question the value of an at-all-costs excavation in which the interpretation of a text resembles a wheat-from-chaff sorting exercise. The ‘open aggressiveness’⁷⁵ of interpretation, as Sontag sees it – its pursuit of ‘latent content’ – is to my mind a particularly prevalent feature of postcolonial reading.

We can go further. Echoing the tenor of Sontag, Derek Attridge discerns in the mind of the critic an, ‘inclination towards repetition, its tendency to process novelty in terms of the familiar’.⁷⁶ Attridge’s drive is at the critic’s wont to transform otherness into sameness, bent as he or she may be upon the uncovering of patterns, tropes. ‘Rather than the familiar model of the literary work as friend

⁷⁴ Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), p. 6.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Derek Attridge, ‘Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other’, *PMLA*, 114:1 (1999), 20-31 (p. 20).

and companion,’ he suggests, ‘I propose the work as stranger.’⁷⁷ Like Sontag, Attridge is making an historical claim differently aligned from my own. I support the universal conviction in Attridge’s stance, though, for what does negating or downplaying the otherness of a text achieve other than to lend a hand in the creation of false knowledge? For that matter, there is a sense that in the landscape of postcolonial literary criticism, texts that seem to resist straightforward interpretation are sometimes kept at arms’ lengths as strangers. In other words, if a text does not play to the rules deemed necessary to a postcolonial reading, it can be cast off elsewhere or left alone entirely. Does this crude treatment of a text have a graver consequence than simply the undermining the critic’s own work? I would suggest that it does. False knowledge is dangerous precisely because it can be explained simply and solidly. Postcolonial literature, we might say, is often defined by questions of lost and found histories, identity, voice, hybridity, self-discovery, belonging and so on. But knowledge is more protean than that. It is less a repository of gathered tenets than a constantly changing body of ideas that emerge out of real, material contexts. Consequently, if the ambition of literary criticism (as it must surely be) is to galvanise and to expand upon the constellation of knowledge within its own given field, and, if by extension, the specific ambition of postcolonial literary criticism has been to elucidate over time the expression of “postcoloniality” in the literature of the once-colonial world, with the ultimate goal of understanding the conditions that at any given time govern these expressions, then to effectively place limits on the type of critical work enacted under this mandate threatens to undermine its own ends. Let me be clear: I am not dismissing the culture of literary criticism outright, but I am suggesting only that misdirected or unhelpfully focused critical lenses are no less than harmful than none at all. If postcolonial literary criticism is to retain value as a discipline that is capable of understanding the material conditions of the postcolony and beyond, suitable and updated lenses are paramount to the discipline.

Let us call upon an example. Monica Ali’s second novel, *Alentejo Blue* (2006), has received little scholarly attention in the near-decade since its issue, even taking into account the inevitable critical lag that follows publication. The

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 26.

response to her debut, *Brick Lane* (2000), had been a different story. In fact, this turn of phrase is convenient here. As far as I can see, the discrepancy between responses to the two texts can be explained away precisely by the fact that the latter novel offered a *different story*. ‘The further you go in *Alentejo Blue*,’ writes Natasha Walter in her review, ‘the further you seem to get from *Brick Lane*.’⁷⁸ How are we to read this? There is a palpable disappointment throughout Walter’s piece, but it is necessary to consider from where it arises from and where it is directed. The answer seems simple and revolves around the idea that *Alentejo Blue* is not a suitable sister text to *Brick Lane*. ‘The only thing that holds the book together is its geographical unity,’ Walter suggests elsewhere, as though that were a preposterous premise for a novel. When she opens a later sentence with, ‘But given the expectations we already have of Ali’, we are somewhere close to the crux of the problem. Walter is reading *Alentejo Blue* through the lens of *Brick Lane*. She is disappointed that the more recent book assumes a ‘different accent’; elsewhere she writes that *Brick Lane*, ‘managed to bring to life with marvellous precision a particular emotional journey in a particular milieu.’ I cannot help taking from this that, to Walter, the shape of *Brick Lane* – its very precise grounding in turn-of-the-century multicultural London, its inflection-on-the-realist-tradition narrative – earmarks it as a *bona fide* postcolonial British text, something that Ali’s follow-up apparently does not emulate in the same terms. *Brick Lane*’s author is a brown woman writing a story about a brown woman; *Alentejo Blue*’s is not. While it is not my aim to make any ungrounded judgments on the matter, it seems telling that Walter (we are told in the review) is the author of *The New Feminism* (1998) as well as the founder of the charity Women for Refugee Woman. (Why has she been tasked with writing this particular review? One can only wonder.) These two simple facts alone demonstrate at least something. Perhaps she did not enjoy the book because it did not play the games that she wished it to. We cannot be absolutely sure; it may after all be simply a question of reader preference, but something feels suspicious. My point is not necessarily to criticise the reading of *Brick Lane* in this manner (although I am not convinced that Walter’s views entirely hit the

⁷⁸ Natasha Walter, ‘Continental Drift: *Alentejo Blue*: Review’, *Guardian*, 20 May 2006. Online. Accessed at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/may/20/featuresreviews.guardianreview14>>.

mark in any case). Rather, I am more concerned with the way in which Ali's fall from grace, as far as Walter is concerned, is put down to *Alentejo Blue*'s deficiency contra its predecessor. Using Attridge's logic, it seems the reviewer is unwilling to welcome the newer text as stranger. More than that, we are somewhere close to a central flaw in some postcolonial reading strategies, which, as Benita Parry points out, 'remain ensnared in an increasingly repetitive preoccupation with sign systems'.⁷⁹ That is, Walters is frustrated by the lack of familiar signs.

How, then, should I most productively read *Alentejo Blue*? Firstly, the importance of reading the text at all should be drawn attention to. That the autobiographical thread strung between author and text is less tight here than it may have been previously is no reason to devalue it, much as this fact seems to dissatisfy Walters. Secondly, I need to remind myself that I am a reader primarily, a critic afterward. Thirdly, I should not be coerced into believing that I am only undertaking a postcolonial reading, for that risks conjuring up signposts to look for that for now I am better without. Let me proceed from there.

To begin with, I pick a cloth-bound copy from the library shelf. Its sleeve has been removed and thus the cover gives away nothing but the gold-embossed signature etched along its spine. I am familiar with the author's name and it instantly evokes a whole cast of thoughts and images that I associate with another of her books. Not only that, I feel stretch out before me a vast formation of other works by other writers that somehow connect up with it in countless different arrangements. In this case, it is difficult to encounter the name and not think of London, of womanhood, of alienation and so on. Perhaps if I had not known the author, I might still have handled the two syllables of the surname and instinctively drawn some conclusions. Yet while I contemplate all this, I keep the subsequent thoughts as hidden away as I am able to. The title, meanwhile, does jar slightly against the name of the author: Alentejo: the south-central region of Portugal. It is far removed from both the London of the previous text and also the Bangladesh of the author's ancestral home. That thought, too, is put aside as much as it is possible to do so. Only a cursory measure of extra research provides

⁷⁹ Parry, p. 12.

ample information to continue with. The region in question has been historically poor, long home to traditional agricultural practices and is well known for its cork production. With these cursory background notes in mind, I feel I am able to open up the cover. After the title page comes a pair of epigraphs, one from Jose Saramago and the other from T.S. Eliot. 'Villages are like people, we approach them slowly, a step at a time,' the first reads. There is no thought of ignoring this, even if I choose to leave it aside for the time being. Already I know of Saramago's origins in Portugal, but have not read the book directly referenced. It is a signpost, though – an explicit invitation by the author to regard what follows as a response, to some degree, to that earlier writer, to the sentiment of the epigraph, or to the book from which it has been taken.

The novel consists of a series of vignettes, each one held together with the next (as Walter suggests) by geographical unity. Immediately, though, there is a discrepancy in the types of lives being described by Ali. The first chapter, which details the moment at which an elderly local brings to an end his life by hanging himself from a tree, is then followed up by an introduction to Stanton, an Englishman and a writer, who is residing temporarily in the region to work on his latest book. For the elderly deceased, the land of the Alentejo has long been unforgiving. He has, we are told, 'over the years ... been a grape picker, an olive picker, a goatherd; a tanner of hides in Olhão, a labourer on the roads in Ourique, and a gutter of fish in Portimão'.⁸⁰ It is to him the sort of land that must be toiled upon, for his livelihood has been tied up in it. For Stanton, meanwhile, the landscape is there to be ploughed in another, more abstract way: harvested for inspiration. Thereafter come the accounts of Vasco, a philosophical bar owner returned from America; Jay, the teenage son of an emigrant English family; Eileen, a British holidaymaker who revels in the apparent anonymity of the region; Teresa, a local girl whose imminent departure to London to take up a job as an *au pair* stirs up conflicting emotions; Chrissie, Jay's mother, a somewhat bored housewife and spouse to China, who we gather is a fleeing criminal; Huw and Sophie, a young at-odds British couple whose wedding plans are stalling. Intertwined within these accounts are a cast of local Portuguese, some resolutely old-fashioned and others committed it seems to the region's modernisation. João

⁸⁰ Monica Ali, *Alentejo Blue* (London: Doubleday, 2006), p. 16.

whittles down bread with a penknife; old lorries lurch by occasionally stacked high with cork bark; an Internet café is opened; rumours about the building of a huge hotel complex circulate around town with mixed responses. There is no question of overlooking the unevenness and disparity in Alentejo. Perhaps the whole novel is held together only by an accidental geography, but this appears even at first glance less like a narrative shortcoming than a conscious commentary on the politics of contemporary space.

The characters, it is true, are not easily reconciled to one another. In ways they do not appear even to be agents of the same environment at all. When one reads of Jay, occupying himself in an afternoon by darting through cork trees, playing a solitary game he has devised himself, it is difficult to believe the trees are likely the same trees that João had once shorn cork from. All at once the landscape is one of death, adventure, escape, return, investment, revenue, tradition, tourism and so on. History has over the course of time divided it up as such, annexing parts for progress while shelving the development of others. The arrival of the British characters in Alentejo speaks of a new phase of that history. Yet the novel provides more than just a statement about the homogenisation of land – that is, it suggests more than simply the modern-day ease of migration (for the mobile middle-classes) and the subsequent bleeding of cultures that accompanies it. More than that, it points towards the way in which discrepancies arising from the division of land remain tightly interconnected and suggests that the consequences are tangible. The presence of each character in the novel exerts a direct influence over the others, despite the division of the literary landscape into seemingly separate sectors. Difference is not held up as if only to emphasise abstract juxtapositions – tradition against the modern, agriculture against tourism – but instead has a direct hand in the formation of individual stories. Take one of these oppositions, for example: the collision between the traditional and the modern. Mark the following passage in which Teresa, days before she leaves for London, rides on her motorbike up to the house where she has planned to lose her virginity to her boyfriend:

A couple of miles outside Marmarossa, on the road to Ourique where the ochre fields rose and fell gentle as a lullaby, Teresa slowed the scooter as the man stepped out of the low citrus hedge. He held a long stick to which he had tied a red cloth and when he raised it she stopped. The cows pushed into each other at the roadside, heads resting on bony backs. She watched the stragglers; the lazy march across the dormant land, the little circus of dust at their hooves.

They were cream and fawn and brown and glorious in the rich evening light. The man shouted and waved his stick and they began to cross the road. Teresa turned off the engine. She observed without even trying the particular way that they walked. Heads high, ears twitched, the legs that looked set to buckle, the joints that rolled deep in their shoulders in that loose, dislocated way. In London, she thought, it would finally be fruitful, this gift or this burden she had. (pp. 182-183)

Teresa, who is of the generation able to break ties with the landscape and leave, is momentarily checked here by this nostalgia for a past era. The reader has encountered it only moments before, too, when Teresa visits João and the reader is told that ‘she almost envied his simple life’ (p. 147). Now, is it not natural as a reader to read this coming together of generations always as a one-sided, primordial contest wherein the old is eventually and inexorably defeated by the new? And has the reader not grown accustomed to the symbolic encounter between a simplified past and a turbulent present? Have we not been somewhat conditioned by narratives that seem always to mourn the loss of the innocence of the past? (The trajectory that was traced above: Emecheta, Roy, Bedford, Aboulela, Levy: were these not all lamentations on the loss of tradition to the complicatedness of the modern?) Yet if the underlying theme of these mentioned narratives is often the refusal of the past to die away completely, and the sense that it goes on living in some abstract but meaningful sense, in *Alentejo Blue* that apparently bygone era is still actively and concretely present. In the encounter mentioned here the traditional bisects Teresa’s march towards sexual discovery and then London; it literally stops her in her tracks. Old ways of living upon Alentejo land are shown not just to be symbolic counterpoints to the arrival of tourists and hotel complexes, but knottily inseparable from it. If more confirmation of this were needed, the ending of the novel confirms it. When the townsfolk come together for a festival in Marmarrosa and the rumour of Marco’s hotel complex is finally dismissed, the town returns to an apparently unchanged default setting: ‘A few people still spoke of Marco Afonso Rodrigues as winter turned into spring,’ we are told, ‘but many more talked of the price of cork, which had fallen yet again. When the topic was not cork it was usually drought, which was widely predicted this year.’ (p. 298)

When I finish the book, what I am left feeling first and foremost concerns the complexity of landscapes: that they are at any one time put to infinite different uses. *Alentejo Blue* is a novel that interrogates the growth of lives out of

landscapes. Yet there are smaller, perhaps less striking truths that have been gathered en route, which should not be set aside merely on the basis of their modesty. The novel observes, for example, the gradual revaluing of the act of human kindness in this multi-stroke economy where social rules are changing. Neighbourliness is no longer a given, for neighbourliness is no longer a guarantee of sameness and must be offered. China, the fugitive Englishman, who we might be tempted at first to regard as an antagonistic figure, emerges as a welcoming character, willing to offer his home to Stanton on the basis of a shared bond of transience: 'My home is your home,' (p. 58) he remarks, perhaps unconsciously epitomising the new logic of the land – one's home is always one's neighbour's home, here. When Stanton asks what brought China to Alentejo, the latter replies, again hitting upon some fortuitous wisdom: 'Mate. What brought any of us? On the run, aint we? On the fucking run.' (p. 58) China is the novel's inadvertent philosopher, stumbling upon these sage reflections in a tongue whose tenor jars with the soundness of the logic it uses. 'If you have a desire, act on it – my personal philosophy of life,' (p. 51) he says to Stanton, who obliges by sleeping with China's wife. 'Fuck the village. Fuck the lot,' (p. 51) he then adds, consolidating his evanescent bond with Stanton as a fellow *estrangeiro*. Elsewhere, Ali highlights the fact that old social bonds formed by regional kinship – and robust against the passing of time – have constantly to be renewed, at the risk of otherwise expiring. Telma Ervanaria, for example, who claims to have a womanly, familial and indubitable bond with her niece, Teresa, fails to register the fact that the two are actually polar opposites. Their respective attitudes on trends, travel, relationships are all shown to be divergent. Not only are they different, the incongruity is brought into even sharper relief because the changed landscape, which once would have held its denizens safely within its sphere, allows now for looser ties – and thus for less prescribed relationships. So much so that when Telma, placing a sisterly hand on her niece's arm, notes, 'we are two of a kind' (p. 140), she could not be further from the truth.

What follows the closing of the book, then, is an instinctive looking outwards that marks the sudden release of thoughts gathered during the reading itself. Held in an unresolved state while ever the book remained unfinished, these half-

thoughts can then be presented to the world beyond the novel like calls awaiting echoes. Which is to note that the reader poses the question of the text: if these are the calls that the novel has offered up to me as reader, what echoes can be listened for beyond its pages that might provide an extra layer of meaning? There is responsibility to be exercised in this, however, for the loudest echo is not necessarily the most helpful – and by “helpful”, I am referring back to our will to take away something meaningful from the text. What use does it serve in the grand way of things, for example, to expect a strong semblance of correlation – a strong echo, if you will – in any encounter between *Alentejo Blue* and *Brick Lane*? That I ask such a question at all is merely an observation on the way that ostensibly postcolonial writers are perhaps expected to write variations of familiar postcolonial narratives over and over. Certainly, there are meaningful overlaps between the two novel. But the problem for the unaccommodating critic arises when these overlaps cannot be placed into his or her own workable schema. Attridge in his essay on reading J.M. Coetzee notes an allegorical pull at work when reading the South African novelist, an inclination not dissimilar to that which I am suggesting here, and which for Attridge finds its zenith in attempts to ‘translate the temporal and the sequential into the schematic’.⁸¹ Attridge discusses this pull in relation to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a novel of Coetzee’s that takes place in a temporally and spatially indistinct imperial setting, but which was published at a time when the struggle to end South African apartheid was in its final, violent years. Attridge offers two different readings of the text, one regarding the novel’s leitmotif of torture as a reference to activist Steve Biko, the other suggesting that the book can be read as an allegory of oppressor and oppressed. Attridge writes: ‘The danger both readings court is of moving too quickly beyond the novel to find its significance elsewhere, of treating it not as an inventive literary work ... but as a reminder of what we already know too well.’⁸² Accordingly, then, when I look outwards from Ali’s novel, I am of course mindful of the relationship between it and its predecessor; but I am far more concerned in seeking out more resonant crossovers. I am drawn to the otherness of the text – its Portuguese location, primarily – and perhaps cannot avoid pondering this fact’s greater relevance,

⁸¹ Attridge, *Coetzee*, p. 46.

⁸² *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

particularly when contrasted to the very specific cultural milieu of *Brick Lane*. (It must be noted, of course, that this interpretative move to a certain extent pushes us beyond the reach of Attridge's mandate of "reading as an event", but his words have for now done their work.) Firstly, the pre-text reference to Saramago lingers: it cannot be otherwise. I duly look to the Portuguese novelist, take up a copy of *Raised from the Ground* (1980), a novel whose setting I soon discover is also Alentejo. I read the opening lines:

There's never been any shortage of landscape in the world. Whatever else may be lacking, that's one thing that's never been in short supply, indeed its sheer abundance can only be explained in some tireless miracle, because landscape clearly pre-dates man, and despite its long, long existence, it has still not yet expired. That's probably because it's constantly changing.⁸³

The novel tells the story of the latifundio, a large estate held by a rich landowner, upon which toil workers who itinerantly pursue changeable employment opportunities. While broadly speaking the protagonists are the Mau-Tempo family, whose fortunes over the course of several generations are depicted, it is not too far a stretch to suggest that the main role is acted out by the land itself. (I am, during this reading, continually merging threads that appear with Ali.) Indeed, it is throughout the novel pressed home that the human stories we are being told are but 'minor episodes in the history of the latifundio' (p. 19). The lives passing through the landscape are mere blemishes, it is suggested, simply minute variations on a grand cycle in which the land is ever dominant. *Raised from the Ground* registers the rumblings of events happening further afield – both world wars and their political implications across the globe – but these are said to be heard only 'like a shout from a rooftop ... down below that shout grows fainter and fainter until it vanishes to nothing' (p. 53). The latifundio, then, is a place unto itself where lives are 'made up of repeated words and repeated gestures' (p. 279) and where the land itself is able to foreground or foreclose what happens upon it:

To those surprised at the freedom with which people add to, subtract from and generally alter stories, we need only remind them of the vastness of the latifundio, of the way in which words are lost and found, whether mere days or centuries later, when you sit beneath a cork oak, for example, and listen in on the conversation between that tree and its neighbour ... Anyone who has ever got lost on the latifundio always ends up being able to distinguish between the landscape and the words it conceals. (p. 293)

⁸³ Jose Saramago, *Raised from the Ground*, trans. by (London: Vintage, 2013; 1980), p. 1.

So long as the ascendancy of the land is maintained its denizens are secondary to its whims. Yet there is something telling about this notion of timelessness, the sense that all that happens on the latifundio is gathered as though the surface of the earth were but a repository. Thus, at the end of the novel when a communist revolt amongst the country's workers looks set to dethrone Antonio Salazar, the one-time Portuguese Prime Minister, the whole cast of characters who have graced (and then left) the pages of the text are returned. 'Overhead the red kite is counting,' we are told,

one million, not to mention those we can't see, for the blindness of the living always overlooks those who went before, one thousand living and one hundred thousand dead, or two million sighs rising up from the ground, pick any number and it will always be too small if we do the sums from too great a distance, the dead cling to the sides of the trailers ... we can see Sara da Coneição over there ... and Domingos Mao-Tempo with the noose still around his neck, and here's Joaquim Carranca, whose died sitting at the door of his house. (pp. 385-386)

As much as Saramago's vast novel warrants further study in its own right, it is not difficult to quickly identify the overlaps with *Alentejo Blue*, which emerges through this mode of reading as a novel that builds directly upon the landscape of the latifundio. There seems to me almost no question about the connection between the grounds of the two texts: that both novels begin with a worker hanging himself is evidence enough of Ali's intentions. But, as I have suggested before, it is the nature of the conclusions drawn that is key.

Thus, with the two texts laid out before me (and the chimera of a whole host of other texts, whose ideas seem to connect with them, just beyond), what follow must necessarily be responsible and unforced analytical deductions that are allowed to speak for themselves. Firstly, there can be no overlooking Ali's preoccupation with land use, which, seen in contrast to Saramago's presentation of rigid economic ties between workers and the latifundio, are shown to have diversified. Ease of movement has allowed for the loosening of human ties with the land. But, as much as the likes of Stanton and the Potts family are free to form only transient and superficial ties to Alentejo, there still exists the sort of dependent relationship observable in Saramago – here, through the likes of Rui and João. With a degree of assurance, then, I can make the next step and draw the conclusion that one of Ali's master statements pertains to our modern-day ways not only of inhabiting space, but also writing about it. Her multi-vocal

narrative raises the issue of one's capacity to singularly represent a space, which itself has echoes of Saramago, whose narrator constantly dips in and out of characters' consciousness. ('Which do you think are the narrator's thoughts,' we read, 'and which are João Mau-Tempo's, both are right, and if there are mistakes, they are shared mistakes. This bureaucracy of registers.' [p. 252]) Equally, through this lens Ali appears to offer a critique of the very symbolism of this Portuguese pastoral, suggesting perhaps that the manner of gathering meaning from spaces such as these needs rethinking. Huw, noting the dying ways of land-ownership with a degree of irony, says: 'Peasants are so picturesque.' (p. 219) Meanwhile, when Stanton sees at the bar in Marmarrosa old men, 'in their black fedoras and black waistcoats, red handkerchiefs tied at the neck, they appeared to [him] like postcards from the past' (p. 26). Yet, as the book suggests elsewhere, it is not so: the men figure more than just symbolically. Later, almost as a corrective, as Eileen sits in the town square and watches what is a similar scene to that witnessed by Stanton, she notes: 'I don't know what it is, this place. I can't see any signs anywhere. I like that.' (p. 113) The message seems to be that the symbolism of the locale – the postcard quality that Stanton registers with the old men – needs reinvesting so as to better reflect the ambivalence of meaning attached to each symbol. In other words, Ali is making a roundabout point that all is not as it seems. Again, there are echoes of Saramago, who would seem to share such a position when he writes:

The fields grow green and lush, the undergrowth is steeped in peace and perfume, but a second look tells us that the wheat has lost its tender freshness, there are tiny dabs of yellow in that vast space, and the men, where are the men in this happy landscape, perhaps they are not, in fact, the serfs of this glebe. (pp. 199-200)

Now, here my reading is nearly at its most speculative, one might suggest: but of all possible grounds upon which to posit a comparison between *Alentejo Blue* and *Brick Lane*, it is perhaps here that such a meeting bears most fruit. The former text lifts itself clear of the sort of reliable symbolism that has been gleaned so eagerly by critics in the latter. Where it has been possible to read *Brick Lane* as a like-for-like mimesis of turn-of-the-century London, *Alentejo Blue* evidently resists such a reading. That noted, the degree of abstraction from modern-day Britain in the latter novel does not necessarily preclude the emergence of knowledge that can be valuable to our understanding of it. Rather,

we must avoid letting go of the link between author and text simply because it appears less tightly bound at times. Put another way, there is no reason to suggest that the Portuguese locale and lack of non-white characters should foreclose the possibility of valuable truths being lifted from the text. If we are to credit Ali as a postcolonial or black British writer, as an artist whose writing is capable of taking the pulse of modern Britain, then are we not also crediting her by rights as a writer minus the prefix, too? On such grounds, I find *Alentejo Blue* to be a compelling piece of literature that presents a nuanced collection of coexisting modern-day attitudes concerning belonging. Moreover, some of the derisory responses to the novel's "accidental geography" to my mind overlook the fact that this manner of coming together actually provides a prescient reminder about the dynamics of our contemporary landscape (something that is further emphasised through the comparison with Saramago.) To sum up, we are somewhere close to the crux of the matter when we ask: what is it that we critics want to do with a text? Do we require, say, postcolonial writers always to play the same game even if the prize for doing so becomes less valuable over time – accounting for the fact that the same game played repeatedly essentially prohibits the embrace of otherness? And finally: by extension, are texts that do not adhere to the rules of the game not worthy of receiving the same critical lens?

My aim in this section so far has been firstly to question some erstwhile strategies for reading postcolonial literature; or rather, to question the efficacy of a bifurcated approach which, on the one hand, tends to read selected texts as postcolonial texts by a pre-arranged schema, while at the same time shelving other works that cannot be productively submitted to it. Ultimately such a strategy threatens to undermine critical work undertaken in the field. As a corrective, I have begun to present a mode of reading that at any one time remains attentive (and open) to the otherness of literary texts, to our own individual distance from those texts, and to the material circumstances at work in both. Only then do I believe that the true value of a text can emerge. It is worth noting that what is at stake here is both the integrity of literary texts as cultural artefacts and the accompanying risk of selling them off as cosmopolitan canon-fodder, if you will. Such has been the institutionalising treatment of postcolonial literature in some circles. Much as we cannot do away outright with

vocabularies, designations and taxonomies in literary and cultural studies, we have a responsibility to engage with them sensitively in order that interpretation does not become something of an imperial discipline in its own right. In fact, this very metaphor is useful in marking out the importance of the distinction between practices of exploration and exploitation: while the former is an open-ended exercise, the latter has predetermined aims that are pursued at all costs.

When, now, I open the blue cloth cover of Ali's book at my desk I conjure up Alentejo, its 'great plains stretched out like a golden promise' (p. 10); although I know now not to submit fully to the simplicity of that pastoral vision. Any contemplation of Ali's Portuguese landscape is an exercise in ambivalence. Marmarrosa's peach trees and woodland then bleed together with images of the latifundio, which in turn call to mind visions of Salazar and of workers' revolt, which in turn, which in turn, which in turn, and so on. If at one moment I draw into sharp relief the figures of Stanton or Vasco, the next I am unwittingly met with a picture of João Mau-Tempo with ligature marks on his neck. Thoughts concerning the antiquity of cork production yield suddenly to notions of loneliness, nomadism, transience, old and new divisions of land. Somewhere at the very edge of my imagination, too, is Nazneen, cooped up in a Brick Lane flat; and somewhere is Monica Ali herself, at the head of a trail that traces a route all the way to Bangladesh. Ultimately, I behold a vast melange of ideas: some hardened and more easily articulated than others. It is my responsibility to arrange these disparate components into coherent written trajectories, all with the grand aim of advancing (as opposed to simply reinforcing) knowledge in the field. The point I am making is that the reading of a literary text is indeed, as Attridge has encouraged us to believe, an event, which, along with every other event gathered within our repertoire, is duly inducted into one's own individual constellation of meaning and knowledge. The subsequent process of writing literary criticism is only the final stage in a process that has begun with reading. And there is no harm in constantly reminding ourselves of the creative and participatory enterprise of reading itself. It seems somewhat strange to me that a body of literature whose multivalence and plurivocality has necessarily been celebrated as characteristic should then have its parameters set narrowly enough

that it threatens to preclude a voice arising at all. There are infinite voices to be heard if only we are able to tune in to them. As Sontag puts it: 'What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.'⁸⁴

VIII • Kazuo Ishiguro: Floating Worlds, Floating Words

A short biographical note on Kazuo Ishiguro is necessary to begin with here. The writer's birth in Nagasaki in 1954 and the indelible tenor of Japanese that rings in his name has, in light of his childhood migration to England, had the unsurprising effect of marking him out as a British-Japanese writer – not necessarily just by circumstance, but by an apparent aesthetic discernible in his fiction. But Ishiguro has been keen to maintain that the Japan visible within his work – particularly in the early novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating Word* (1986) – is in his words a 'personal, imaginary Japan'.⁸⁵ In interview in 1991 he noted that by the time he 'reached the age of perhaps twenty-three or twenty-four I realised that this Japan, which was very precious to me, actually existed only in my own imagination, partly because the real Japan had changed greatly between 1960 and later on. I realised that it was a place of my own childhood, and I could never return to this particular Japan'.⁸⁶ It is curious, then, that the reception of Ishiguro's works should draw upon perceived national associations, some going as far as to note the apparently Japanese texture of the prose (despite the novelist's repeated assertion that his Japanese is poor). If one points to the persistent attention granted the question of the nation in the Ishiguro oeuvre, it is not as straightforward as it might first appear; for, much as the novelist's own Japan is a personal, imaginary construction, the very idea of the nationality in his novels is often approached as though it were some membership of blind duty. Of *The Remains of the Day* (1989), a novel driven by the notion of Englishness, Ishiguro has suggested that it may well have been set

⁸⁴ Sontag, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Kazuo Ishiguro and Oe Kenzaburo, 'The Novelist in Today's World: A Conversation', *Boundary 2*, 18:3 (1991), 109-122 (p. 110).

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

anywhere, ‘that that the essence of what I wanted to write was moveable’.⁸⁷ Whether or not we agree – I would actually tend to argue against this assumption – there is evidence to suggest that we need to adopt a different approach to reading his work. In fact, judged on its own merits his work warrants such an approach, one that engages more deeply with the more delicately drafted politics within it. In recent years, as I shall show, this sort of scholarship has finally begun to emerge.

Ishiguro has important points to make on the question of the nation and at times has provided astute commentary (particularly in terms of the post-war British political and cultural climate he depicts in *Remains*). My point here, though, is to suggest that a differently tailored engagement reveals more about Ishiguro’s canny disruption of postcolonial literary politics, with what Lazarus has called his politics of ‘disconsolation’⁸⁸, his redrawing of the symbolic fabric of the contemporary novel and, perhaps most enlighteningly, his distinctive appropriation of standard English. The scholarship of Ishiguro that has accompanied his work since his arrival on the literary scene in the early eighties has not been erroneous, even at its most ostensibly feeble. On occasion his work has been cast in an altogether too restrictive light. Let me start by suggesting that the disgruntlement of those who in the nineties sensed great critical prejudice at work in the lumping together of Ishiguro with the likes of Shiva Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Buchi Emecheta and Timothy Mo, is itself somewhat misguided. Or, at least, it somewhat misses the point. As far as the premise of such an assemblage was concerned, the writers mentioned had been gathered together under the banner of “new internationalism” in a book by Bruce King, a move later reframed (but largely reinforced) by Barry Lewis. ‘[Ishiguro] is a representative of the “age of the refugee,”’ Lewis writes as ratification, ‘promoting “in-betweenness” and “displacement” in a time in which globalisation makes traditional boundaries ever weaker.’⁸⁹ The argument ran that the work of these writers was patently marked by the influences and consequences of diaspora, the worlding of English, and the development a global literary market place. In my

⁸⁷ Kazuo Ishiguro, ‘The Art of Fiction: Interview with Susannah Hunnewell’, *The Paris Review*, 184 (2008). Accessed at: < <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5829/the-art-of-fiction-no-196-kazuo-ishiguro>>.

⁸⁸ Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, pp. 31-32.

⁸⁹ Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12-13.

view, there is nothing too untoward in this. If, by the same token, a larger supposition has been to hold up these individuals as postcolonial novelists, I do not have any major objections here either, for there are cases to be made in support of such positioning. Any effort that attempts to register in Ishiguro the presence of British or Japanese imperial mythologising, meanwhile, and which tries duly to unpack its lingering discursive resonances, is not without a certain value to it. Many scholars have done so, with varying degrees of commitment to a responsible schema. Where Pico Iyer offered his now well-known proposition of Ishiguro as a 'paradigm of the polycultural order',⁹⁰ other critics have been more sensitive to the deeper dislocations of his work. Susie O'Brien's 1996 essay, for instance, 'Serving a New World Order: Postcolonial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', is not unproductive in its twofold treatment of the novel,

as a narrative which is thematically constructed around an opposition between what are commonly regarded as Victorian values – formality, repression, and self-effacement, summed up under the general heading of "dignity" – and those associated with an idea of "America" that has expanded, literally into a New World – freedom, nature, and individualism – and second, as a text which has come to occupy a significant place in global popular culture ... as an exemplary product of a burgeoning "world" fiction industry.⁹¹

O'Brien's essay makes a number of sound observations. *The Remains of the Day* reflects upon the shifting value systems of British country houses in the years following the Second World War. Its narrator, a butler named Stevens, is throughout the novel taken to reminiscing over memories of his years at Darlington Hall, finding that the most persistent thread is his commitment to remaining dignified. As the aftermath of the war witnesses a changing of the guard on the world stage (the coming of an American-led new world order) and at Darlington Hall itself (with the arrival of an American at the helm), the novel quite explicitly presses home the connection between the two. Stevens's outmoded opinions on the nobility of British "greatness" – personified for him in the figure of the dignified and unflappable butler – find a direct parallel in Britain's post-war world standing. By the end of the novel Stevens's dedication to the myth of the butler's role is shown to have been to his detriment, such that

⁹⁰ Pico Iyer, 'The Empire Writes Back', *Time*, 8 February 2003, pp. 46–52 (p. 54)

⁹¹ Susie O'Brien, 'Serving a New World Order: Postcolonial Politics in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 42.4 (1996), 787–806 (p. 788).

he has not really lived a life of his own at all. Tellingly, he has missed out on the opportunity of love: the hinted-at interest throughout the novel in his colleague Miss Kenton comes to nothing, overwhelmingly because of Stevens's devotion to his job.

Now, my concern arises from the fact that O'Brien works largely to interrogate Stevens as a representative figure, to cast him as a fixture traceable in an imperial imaginary. She finds that connection unavoidable. 'If Stevens's narrative reads as an elegy for a dying social order,' O'Brien writes,

the tale that it finally tells is a love story, by whose inexorable logic Stevens – and the social order he represents – are judged and found wanting. But the magnitude of Stevens's failure is even greater than this, for he violates the terms not only of the narrative of romance, but also of the narrative of *history*.⁹²

O'Brien cannot avoid seeing Stevens as an allegory of the imperial imaginary. She writes: 'The suggestion ... is that dignity, *like the Empire it served*, is predicated on surrendering the dictates of individual conscience and "natural" human feeling to the authority of a rigidly (if arbitrarily) stratified social hierarchy.'⁹³ For my part, I do not renounce O'Brien's essay as though it provided little of value to consider. Toward the end she rightly begins to address the issue of Stevens's 'narrative ambivalence'⁹⁴ – the butler's questionable memory, tinged by nostalgia – and she suggests that this formal dimension to the text, the unreliable teller, has its own consequences concerning the manner in which one should receive his account. O'Brien's is a study that decries prior scholarship using tenable claims. But this angle is an under-developed line of inquiry. I find the sustained reading of *Remains* using these particular parameters somewhat wasteful. In the first place, the approach prohibits a reading of the character of Stevens on his own terms; he is always inseparable from its association with the state of Britain, it seems. O'Brien's focus on the so-called *postcolonial politics* of Ishiguro prohibit an engagement with what Emily Horton has more recently termed the novelist's 'attention to social ethics and affective subjugation'.⁹⁵

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 795.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 789.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 801.

⁹⁵ Emily Horton, *Contemporary Crisis Fiction: Affect and Ethics in the Modern British Novel* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 15.

The issue is of course one of reading strategy and critical lenses. Horton herself laments earlier scholarship on Ishiguro, which she suggests ‘repeatedly over-prioritises metafictional and textualist concerns.’⁹⁶ For while there is no question of Ishiguro’s literary engagement with, say, the politics and contemporary discourses of nationalism, globalisation and international capital, there is a question mark hanging over the superficiality of some of the scholarly approaches to come to terms with it. As a corrective measure, Horton identifies a need to sharpen the tools with which to penetrate the landscape of Ishiguro’s fiction, suggesting the importance of registering the nuances at work in the politics of his texts. I quote her underpinning appraisal of Ishiguro’s work at length here, when she points out that:

Ishiguro’s work *does* negotiate important postcolonial principles even while he is not the postcolonial ‘world writer’ that some critics would make him out to be. This is visible, for example, in his refutation of cultural stereotype through the use of unreliable narrators, whose endorsement of exoticist, imperialist and elitist prejudices undermine their own affective and confessional agendas, seeing them aligned to a reductive dramatic irony, despite themselves, which betrays their own exculpatory instincts directly. Furthermore, his fiction offers a re-reading of postcolonialism in light of contemporary neoliberal culture by drawing connections to both nationalist and transnationalist instances of exploitation, both in the past and the present. Thus, his narrative settings, through the use of allegory and impressionism, refuse the simplicity of historical realism, instead building figurative associations between past and present in order to critique an on-going history of imperialism upheld through such discourses as nationalist authoritarianism, traditionalism and nostalgia, as well as corporate transnationalism.⁹⁷

Let us take a moment to consider this more fully. The thrust of Horton’s argument is that Ishiguro’s work engages appropriately and effectively in negotiating postcolonial principles, albeit through means at odds with established critical expectations. In other words, it plays the game according to rules that have been beyond critics’ frames of reference. She points towards the novelist’s utilisation of the unreliable narrator figure as key to obfuscating the text’s politics – that is, she suggests that a different manner of literary engagement is required in order to reach them. She is inviting us to consider the real-term significance of these narratorial slippages at work across the Ishiguro oeuvre; not only in the obvious, surface-level instances of unreliability, wherein the

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 166

narrator's intentions are self-consciously and repeatedly unfulfilled⁹⁸, but in their very inadequacy to act as vehicles for representing the world in which they exist. More than that, Horton hints at the literary consequences of Ishiguro's narrative concealment strategies in which, say, the '[refusal of] the simplicity of historical realism' works to prohibit the delivery of any straightforward message. We cannot necessarily discern from Horton's statements whether she is specifically evoking a realist tradition, perhaps traceable back through Austen, Galsworthy, Thackeray *et al*, to bolster the terms of her thesis; but her observation nonetheless raises the issue of history as something discrete and readable. Ishiguro's prose does indeed prohibit what we might think of as a realist interpretation, instead encouraging a reader to rethink his or her assumptions about historical narratives. In doing so, she argues, it is required of that reader that he or she develops more 'figurative associations between past and present,' which would thus enable a greater recognition of the continuities that exist between them.

Accordingly, we are right to ask: what do Ishiguro or his reader stand to gain by more deeply interrogating the evocative, but ultimately abstruse mechanics of postcolonial prose? By which I am suggesting that the apparently familiar language of postcolonial literature – of any ostensible body of literature – conceals as much as it reveals, and that Ishiguro pushes at (and takes his readers to) its limits. I am asking what a novelist's hopes and a critic's slated rewards are by committing to such a practice. What would be the consequence in terms of our shared understanding of Ishiguro's place within the landscape of contemporary literature? In her own words, Horton remarks that Ishiguro's approach is one that seeks to 'resuscitate postcolonial cosmopolitanism',⁹⁹ before adding:

I would argue [that his work] is a re-reading of postcolonialism *discursively*, not so as to revoke past ideas of struggle tied to Marxist solidarity but instead so as to appreciate imperialism's strategic language and to explore how it co-opts even those on the margins. Thus, while postcolonialism is condemned on the left for its links to consumerism and elitism, and is seen as falling prey to market exploitation, Ishiguro's novels overturn these associations, positioning the impetus for postcolonial writing in the project of contemporary

⁹⁸ As one experiences in virtually all of the Ishiguro oeuvre, from Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* through to Cathy in *Never Let Me Go*.

⁹⁹ Horton, p. 165.

anti-imperialism, in contestation of banal and romantic appropriations of nationalism and multiculturalism.¹⁰⁰

Horton's understanding, then, is that Ishiguro works to overturn both colonial- and postcolonial-era discourses *from within*, inhabiting and calling upon the very landscapes the novels seek to redraw – but, crucially, at a critical distance. Ishiguro's almost parasitical treatment of a postcolonial literary landscape can thus be seen to simultaneously debunk and to reinforce historical mythmaking all in the same instance. Consequently, we are in essence able to read multiple versions of the novel all at once and are held at various distances depending on our respective commitment to that same project: that is, the project to resuscitate postcolonial cosmopolitanism.

IX • *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986)

Ishiguro's second novel has been interpreted variously since its publication in 1986 – as a direct political message, a confession narrative piggybacking a national history narrative, a space-clearing gesture, a commentary on the recurring cycle of imperialist systems and so on. In any case, there is little question that the tranche of scholarly work has, over time, given rise to valuable knowledge concerning Ishiguro's oeuvre and workable approaches to it. That such a well-varied and nuanced catalogue of critical writing has emerged over three decades also suggests something of the intricate and enduring landscape evoked by the text. Not only this, it speaks to the very murkiness of the novel, too, whose framework refuses any definitive textual understanding – advocating, then, perhaps, the affective, social approach favoured by Horton. *Artist* follows the muddled narration of Masuji Ono, a former painter who in the process of making provisional marital arrangements for his youngest daughter, Noriko, begins to interrogate the details of his own (and, by extension, the national) past, realising in the process the fragility of erstwhile assumptions about his life. According to custom, the family of Noriko's prospective suitor are set to make enquiries regarding the suitability of the bride-to-be's family, something that

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 166.

arouses in Ono a obligation to ‘take precautionary steps’¹⁰¹ – although it is not clear at first what this might involve. What one later learns are the details both that, in the first place, these steps refer most likely to Ono’s role as a propaganda artist in producing the ultranationalist and expansionist rhetoric of the Sino-Japanese war and also, perhaps more tellingly, that the origin of Ono’s obligation probably arises from a different source to the one initially credited. ‘Precautionary steps’ are first mentioned in a retold conversation between Ono and his older daughter, Setsuko, but she later denies that this discussion ever took place, by which point in the narrative suspicions concerning the reliability of Ono’s account more generally have already been well couched. The narrative hinges upon a series of apparently unequivocal moments, begun by the news of Noriko’s impending marriage. Thereafter, a recounted childhood scene in which Ono’s father comments that artists, ‘live in squalor and poverty’ and ‘inhabit a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved’ (p. 46), provides the impetus for the son’s narratorial project of self-justification. Later this recollection is placed within a framing context when, following his public declaration of past wrongdoing at the *miai*,¹⁰² Ono goes on to reflect that:

I must say I find it hard to understand how any man who values his self-respect would wish for long to avoid responsibility for his past deeds; it may not always be an easy thing, but there is certainly a sense of satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one’s life. In any case, there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them. (pp. 124-125.)

In simple terms, this outpouring could be seen to complete the trajectory of the narrative, which begins with the triggering exchange between father and son, is followed by the catalytic announcement years later of Noriko’s marriage, provoking in Ono a need to explore his past actions, and which is then completed here with what Wai-Chew Sim terms Ono’s ‘move to a more discerning level of self-understanding’.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, the novel refuses even this degree of narrative certainty. Ishiguro’s utilisation of unreliable narrator figures has been mentioned above,

¹⁰¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 49.

¹⁰² The Japanese matchmaking custom of meeting potential suitors with one another in order to consider the prospect of marriage.

¹⁰³ Wai-Chew Sim, *Globalization and Dislocation in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), p. 87.

and it is worth momentarily reiterating the details of its impact. Ono's direct questioning of his memory has implications beyond the recollections he directly doubts. When he offers on various occasions words to the effect that he does not fully trust the accuracy of his memories, we are given reason to question not only the factuality of the individual statements themselves, but also their very moral integrity – and of others. Thus, at the epiphanic moment cited above, knowing that Ono's account is in a general sense not to be taken at its word, as it were, there is certainly a case to also distrust the candour of his admission. Indeed, if not only for the fact that the following sentence – 'in any case, there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith' – reads like a partial retraction in itself, the remaining section of the novel (another seventy-five pages) casts further doubt upon Ono's credibility, in the sense that his original (nationalist) beliefs seem largely still intact by the end. After a final meeting with his former colleague, Matsuda, towards the novel's close, Ono claims to feel 'a profound sense of happiness deriving from the conviction that one's efforts have been justified; that the hard work undertaken, the doubts overcome, have all been worthwhile' (p. 204). How are we to interpret that earlier admission in light of this continuation of Ono's conviction in his actions – other than to regard the initial admission as insincere?

While Ono's account is thus deeply flawed in terms of its reliability, it is not the sole technique employed by Ishiguro that establishes distance between the reader and meaning in the text. Take as an example the following address by Ono to his students, in which he discusses the beliefs he apparently gathered under his former teacher's tutelage:

'Being at Takeda's,' I told them, 'taught me an important lesson early in my life. That while it was right to look up to teachers, it was always important to question their authority. The Takeda experience taught me never to follow the crowd blindly, but to consider carefully the direction in which I was being pushed. And if there's one thing I've tried to encourage you all to do, it's been to rise above the sway of things. To rise above the undesirable and decadent influences that have swamped up and have done much to weaken the fibre of our nation these past ten, fifteen years.' No doubt I was a little drunk and sounded rather grandiose, but that was the way those sessions around the corner table went. (p. 73)

This is curious. In the first place, the claim that a teacher's authority should always be questioned immediately creates a paradox, given that Ono himself is making the address as a teacher. As he continues, then, we are perhaps all the

more suspicious of the politics he follows up with. Yet at the end of the passage there is the added shadow cast by the fact that for the duration of the address Ono notes (albeit later, soberly) that he was ‘drunk and sounded rather grandiose’.

It cannot be coincidental that similar obstructions come to disrupt the delivery of several of the novel’s more significant passages. Just as when Ono disparagingly suggests to Mrs Kawakami what he feels was the meagre contribution made by his compatriot Shintaro to the war effort. Shintaro is said to have evaded any engagement, choosing instead to remain in his studio painting. Ono, by contrast, hints at the importance of his own contribution. But as soon as he is through with his tirade, we read: ‘Mrs Kawakami, a cigarette burning in her hand, leaned on her edge of the counter and cast an eye around her little bar. We were as usual alone in the place... Outside, the men were still working. For the past hour the sound of hammering had been echoing in from somewhere, and a truck starting or a burst of drilling would frequently cause the whole place to shake.’ (p. 126.) Thus, depending how we configure the two clearly associated elements – the conversation and the noise from outside – any of the following meanings might be inferred. Firstly, that Mrs Kawakami is apparently absentmindedly looking about the otherwise empty bar detracts from, perhaps even completely nullifies, the impact of Ono’s outburst. Equally, the clattering sound of the workmen outside can be read either as a further blanket thrown over Ono’s speech, or figuratively as a the sound of post-war development overpowering the painter’s own (perhaps now outmoded) politics. The immediately following passage of the text, too, when Ono is suddenly ‘struck by the thought of how small, shabby and out of place [Mrs Kawakami’s] little bar would seem amidst the large concrete buildings the city corporation was even at that moment erecting around us’ (p. 126), is but further evidence of the anachronism of the whole setting. ‘Like many things,’ Ono then suggests, ‘it is perhaps well that that little world has passed away and will not be returning.’ (p. 127) Noting that he did not actually suggest this detail to Mrs Kawakami on the evening in question, ‘for clearly the old district was dear to her heart’ (p. 127), we cannot but infer Ono’s own lament for this earlier time.

Later still, Ono recounts a pivotal conversation with his former teacher, Morisan, a discussion that marks the moment when the pupil breaks with the

instruction of his teacher. Ono suggests to Mori-san that he ‘now [feels] it is time ... to progress to other things. Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light’ (p. 180) The conversation follows the apparent confiscation of some of Ono’s work, his most politically engaged pieces to date, that he is said to be ‘more proud of ... than anything else’ (p. 178.) If this announcement is to be read as reflective of a breaking point between two artistic systems – Ono’s graduation from the mass production of commoditised “Japanese” artwork to the production of nationalist propaganda – the efficacy of the gesture is clouded by the passage that follows immediately afterwards:

Mori-san remained silent. When I glanced at him past the lantern I was lighting, it was difficult to tell whether he was pondering my words or thinking about something else altogether. There was a strange mixture of light in the pavilion as the sky continued to set and I lit more lanterns. But Mori-san’s figure remained in silhouette, leaning against a post, his back to me. (p. 178.)

There is no confirmation that Ono’s message has been received, for Mori-san might well not have heard it, given the poor light and the ambivalence of the tutor’s gestures. Therefore, where we might have deduced some manner of in-text logic, in which the power of nationalism is seen to supplant the relative power of commercialism, the clarity of the message is lost because its receipt is unconfirmed. What I am trying to suggest is the importance of the blind spots Ishiguro incorporates into the novel, to the extent that the text’s moments of passage are stymied and that the macro-narratives that one might retrieve from these instances thus come to serve only as messily presented, irreducible ideas.

In short, *Artist* never allows the triumphant replacement of one thing by another. Progress never follows its familiar course, but nor is an alternative interpretation shown to be any more fitting. By extension, the novel’s textual centre is constantly dislocated, and not only in the cases drawn attention to above. The compromised voice has been a leitmotif of the Ishiguro oeuvre. From Etsuko’s displaced voice in *A Pale View of Hills* to Stevens’s blind attendance to a code of dignity in *Remains*, those who are perhaps most able to voice a story are the least willing or able to do so. In *Artist*, moreover, not only is Ono’s account flawed by its unreliability and its duplicity; but to gather up and

contemplate the holes in his politics does not necessarily amount to producing a coherent set of ideas either. In other words, there is no way of reading the novel that would allow for a clear picture to be painted. Nor is any other character able to present with any authority an uncomplicated or unproblematic stance so as to act as counterpoint or reinforcement to Ono's – ethically, politically or otherwise. Each figure in the text is somehow prohibited from filling in the holes in the narrative. From what we can glean from Ono's account, his daughters seem only interested in their father on filial grounds and thus fail to engage with his historical or political ideas; their respective partners, meanwhile, while emblematic of liberal capital (both holding positions in "new generation" international companies), are apparently bound by etiquette not to deride their father-in-law's past; so too are the accounts of Ono's various former colleagues, called upon often only to try and justify Ono's own political position and, judging by their conversations (which are sometimes proven to have been manipulated in any case), there exists a conversational etiquette that seems always keep the issue at stake at arm's length; Mrs Kawakami is both passive and dogged by a personal nostalgia related more than anything else to the downfall of her business, rather than to a fallen era; and Ichiro, Ono's grandson, who perhaps in his youthfulness is able to strike more deeply than anyone at the heart of his grandfather's character, is also obstructed by that very youthfulness at the same time.

This final example is worth addressing more closely. Presumably off the back of an earlier conversation with his mother, Ichiro asks Ono about the similarities between his grandfather and a wartime propagandist songwriter who killed himself. Ono's response is measured and spoken within a censored (thus distanced), adult-child language: 'Mr Naguchi wasn't a bad man at all, Ichiro. He was brave to admit the mistakes he'd made. He was very brave and honourable,' (p. 155) he says. But where another question might have pressed Ono into giving more substance – that is, revealing something that would clear up whether the grandfather is actually referring indirectly to himself here and whether, therefore, his answer is a measure of an ongoing conviction in his own actions – Ichiro, true to his youthful inattention, loses interest and falls silent. By the end of the novel, Ono has been questioned no more provocatively and what Sim called his

‘more discerning level of self-understanding’ has come to little. Moreover, Ono’s reference to his ‘happiness’ at the novel’s denouement, sanctioned by his belief in his own convictions, is also necessarily an acknowledgment of his unwavering belief in his own past actions.

I have discussed the idea of responsible reading earlier in the chapter and have since suggested that, while there are familiar literary signposts in the landscape of *Artist*, the threads between signs and meanings have been amended. Put differently, Ishiguro urges us to rethink our relationship with his literary landscape. There are infinite ways to read the novel, therefore, but some would seem more useful than others when it comes to retrieving Ishiguro’s intended message. In order that I put my own hat into the ring, let me begin to wrap up the discussion by calling upon a comment made in an essay on Ishiguro by Rebecca Walkowitz, in which she suggests the novelist is led ‘not to reject or hybridize standard English (as Rushdie does) but to reproduce it out of place’.¹⁰⁴ What Walkowitz draws attention to is the idea that Ishiguro neither fully adopts, nor fully makes a departure from, standard English in his writing. It strikes me that a similar process is at work more generally throughout *Artist* (and perhaps across Ishiguro’s work even more generally) wherein the novelist inhabits familiar parameters of the Anglophone novel but keeps the text always abstracted. The Japan that is presented is one that, to be clear, is self-consciously and very personally imagined by Ishiguro. But, importantly, read deeply enough we can see that the textual landscape is a well-known one that has been reinvested with new meanings (but which still carry resounding echoes of their former incarnations). As such, where we might well take from Ishiguro’s overly courteous, inscrutable characters (Ono, Etsuko, Matsuda) a sense that the novelist is parodying an historic Western perception of the Japanese, might we not see this also functioning as a device that more generally forecloses the possibility of retrieving meaning? By which I mean that the equivocal voices of Ishiguro’s characters render them always distant to a reader. As Walkowitz begins to posit in her essay¹⁰⁵, we are best to see that Ichiro’s giddy (mis-) pronouncements to Ono about ‘Popeye Sailorman’ and ‘Hi yo Silver’ (*Artist*, p.

¹⁰⁴ Rebecca Walkowitz, ‘Ishiguro’s Floating Worlds’, *ELH*, 68:4 (2001), 1049-1076 (p. 1065).

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1065-66.

152; p. 30) do not pertain only to Americanisation of Japanese youth or a process of exoticism in reverse – reducing America to images obtained from popular culture – but that also, in their slight misappropriation, they suggest something about the intractability of cultural translation. In short, as we read we are never in a landscape that is helpfully familiar, but nor do we inhabit one free of the familiar. Yet as Walkowitz's points out, 'the refusal to inhabit, to affirm, or to represent "the real world" is its own political act'.¹⁰⁶ Inasmuch, (political, cultural, social) meaning in *Artist* comes to us circuitously and in fragments, not provided by what information is given, but by us considering why certain pieces of information *cannot be given*. 'Ishiguro's novels dare us to read indirect style as cultural content,' Walkowitz writes, making the point that our explicitly textual readings perhaps fail to attend to the most pressing impulses at work. In other words, we are better to locate meaning within the very mechanics of the novel.

Committing to a practice that serves this end – that is, by considering how it functions as a meaning-producing text – we find most notably that *Artist* provides an astute commentary on both the irreconcilability and the continuity of systems in a post-war, post-colonial worldview. That is, there is a pervading impression that, as I have already hinted, no epochal shift is uncomplicated or uncontaminated. Of course, it is evidenced in explicit exchanges in the novel, such as when Noriko's one-time suitor, Miyake, talks with Ono about the fact that, 'there are plenty of men already back in positions they held during the war. Some of them are no better than war criminals.' (p. 56) The post-war is but a variation on what preceded it, it seems. Yet a variation on the same point is being made throughout Ono's narration in the sense that, combined, the convoluted ideological map that he presents on behalf of the whole cast of characters, and his own inability to make sense of it, gesture beyond the novel towards what Sim has called a 'lack of metropolitan engagement with the post-war settlement [in Japan], including a "neat moral calculus"'.¹⁰⁷ In short, as Ono finds to the cost of his narrative's credibility, there is no way to appropriately understand the forces at work in a post-war world. Sim observes that it is precisely 'this lacuna that

¹⁰⁶ Walkowitz, p. 1070.

¹⁰⁷ Sim, p. 111.

precludes a smoother, tidier, narrative resolution'.¹⁰⁸ Where a certain line of criticism of the text has hinted at its failure to adequately reflect social and political life in the Japan it evokes, the partiality of Ono's account serves to highlight, in a productive way, gaps that only a greater critical engagement can fill. But might we ask whether Ishiguro is highlighting this lack of engagement at the same time as failing to take up the task himself? To a degree the answer must be yes. More importantly, though, Ishiguro's own message is delivered by modifying the familiar parameters of the novel itself, which he utilises as a vehicle to embody the main idea that the narrative also peddles: repetition with difference. For, by inhabiting the same-but-separate landscape of the exoticised Japanese novel (just as *The Remains of the Day* inhabits the nearly-but-not-quite landscape of the country house novel in an almost-Wodehousean way), and by affecting a not-quite-rightness in the reader, who receives mixed messages of familiarity, Ishiguro makes us aware in the process that the deficiencies of the novel stem from flaws in our own critical understanding. In other words, where the recurrence of (political, cultural) systems in different guises is the leitmotif of *Artist*, the novel re-presents a familiar narrative in a different guise, too.

At the end of the novel, Ono visits the pleasure district where once had stood Mrs Kawakami's bar, now replaced by 'a wide concrete road along which heavy trucks come and go all day' (p. 205). Glass buildings, storeys high, take the places of the former bars. Ono casts an eye over the area, noting the swiftness of the 'office workers, delivery men, messengers, all moving busily' (p. 205) while he sits stationary on a bench 'very close to where our old table in the Migi-Hidari would have been situated' (p. 205). While clearly nostalgic for the district as it once was, Ono seems cheered by Japan's likely future, suggesting that it all 'fills [him] with a genuine gladness' (p. 205). The laughter he hears reminds him of the laughter he remembers in the district before. But, as much as it seems that Ono might find at that intersection between past and present some way to reconcile the two, noting that that 'our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things' (p. 205), that thread is elusive. What has happened in the novel before here has foreclosed that possibility and Ono ends his account by breaking any remaining

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

ties he may have had as a symbol of Japan: 'One can only wish these young people well,' (p. 205) he notes, denying himself an active place in the country's future. The passage is curious in the way that it invokes an epochalist vocabulary, as though there were ever a chance for Ono's narrative to be emancipatory, given that that possibility has been prohibited long beforehand. Yet this ending draws once more upon a familiar language, arousing in us the notional prospect of closure, of deliverance from one way of thinking into another, before reminding us that in a roundabout way we ourselves have failed to provide the appropriate tools that would allow it.

CONCLUSION

*Notes on the Arab Spring, Representation and
Postcolonial Scholarship*

I • Representing the Arab Spring

The academic and intellectual treatment of postcolonialism as a readable, writable concept has over time seen its sign severed from its signifier. In other words, from press desks and in conference halls, what we might call the nitty gritty details of once colonial (and still colonial) sites have been somewhat theorised out of focus. Contrary to the prevailing objective, what have been enacted in postcolonial literary studies in particular have not always been *bona fide* recuperative efforts to aid in the reuniting of once colonial subjects with their senses of historical agency, or to reissue postcolonial societies at large with their deserved places in the grand history of the world – no, not always. I am making sweeping claims here, of course, but they are not without their reasoning. My point refers to the fetishisation of the postcolonial world, and particularly to its designation in those exact terms, to the extent that the academically inscribed postcolonial body has been (not entirely, but significantly) separated from its real-world counterpart. Consider the following passage, written by Hamid Dabashi in *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (2012), on the much-reviewed subject of subalternity:

We must ... stop asking the outlandish question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Of course s/he does; of course s/he has. The subaltern needs no representation, or theorization from any English and Comparative Literature department. This is the enduring lesson of Edward Said, who pushed his liberating language out of the English department, and who to his dying day remained critical of his colleagues who were mystifying people's struggles in a prose and a politics that even their own colleagues could not understand, let alone these people risking their lives fighting for 'freedom, social justice and dignity.' Take a look at the streets, alleys and squares of the Arab world, from one end to the other in 2011 and beyond: the subaltern is

speaking; Arabs are speaking. They are in fact crying out loud: *al-Sha'b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam* [We demand the overthrow of the regime]. It is gloriously simple: let's not mystify it.¹

How can Dabashi be so sure, so triumphant? After all, the debate has been one that has, in various incarnations and with various inflections, engaged intellectuals for a number of decades now, without ever arriving at any unanimous outcome. (In any case, how could it?) Dabashi is brazenly unapologetic, though: of course the subaltern speaks, he suggests; let us not overcomplicate the issue; look here at this tangible piece of earth and listen to the perceptible voices of thousands chanting, *al-Sha'b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam*. How could we deny a voice that we can hear with our own ears? In his book Dabashi reinvests the protesting body with a sense of mortality that he sees has been historically stripped from it in its academic and media projections. In doing so, he reaffirms the events taking place in the Arab world as, above all else, civil rights movements participated in by animate Arabic people. In his almost insouciant response to the Spivakean question of subalternity, Dabashi makes the forthright claim that a body is a body is a body and that, in practical terms, a voice is a voice. While *The Arab Spring* is written with a giddy sense of authorial triumph, the overarching points it proposes are straightforward: that the West's manner of reading real-world events (partly due to the fact that the ideological life of "the West" itself is now close to exhaustion) are full of oversight; that the analytical and representational lenses of the West, according to Dabashi, have and continue to be erroneously utilised; and, furthermore, that the West seems also to miss the point of what is being fought for at all. He lays a claim at the door of a number of Western journalists who, to his mind, have been erroneous in their analysis of the origins of the Arab Spring – much in the same way that journalists and governments alike have, during the same period, and in the same region, not always generated the most useful analyses of growing Islamic fundamentalism. Dabashi dismisses what he finds a misinformed article by Robert Fisk, suggesting that mistaken appropriations can be regarded as attempts to bend the events of the Arab Spring into a schema more palatable to western

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), p. 77.

readerships.² Put another way, then, how damaging is it to the overall struggle of a people when the representation of that struggle is poorly and misleadingly handled? It is an ongoing form of epistemological colonialism, to be sure. This is a case of the long-standing investment in not fully reflective information, which was aided and abetted in the colonial period and has not been dismantled afterwards – not that it is Fisk’s responsibility to do so, of course. (The author provides a wonderful example early in the book of the misdirection of media efforts to cover the Middle East, when he reflects on the 2008 pressroom encounter between George W. Bush and Muntadhar al-Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist who narrowly missed the head of the then US president when he threw a shoe during a news conference. ‘Predictable and time-worn Orientalist clichés were immediately deployed to interpret the meaning and significance of the shoe in Arab and Islamic culture,’ Dabashi notes, ‘but, as usual, those wielding them were barking up the wrong tree: for sometimes a shoe is just a shoe, the only object you have to throw.’ [pp. 28-29])

I started out this thesis with a consideration of the postcolonial novel and its evolving frames of reference over time, went on to contemplate the idea that our literary tools of representation are subject to a litany of new anxieties coterminous with events of the last two decades, before suggesting finally that our contemporary postcolonial reading strategies require a significant overhaul if they are to retain their utility. That the inquiry has taken this shape points towards the reality that the perceived watertightness of (post)colonial knowledge formations is undergoing a significant transformation, the scale of which cannot be underestimated. True, destabilising efforts have been enacted in the name of postcolonialism for decades – politically, culturally, economically, socially and so on – and by now they are long in the tooth. But I am referring here to a much more resonant shift in the order of things, affected by the politics of disruption inherent in the likes of (but certainly not exclusive to) the Arab Spring. The

² Dabashi bemoans the casually employed clichés that abound regarding the issue of the so-called Arab World – so-called because, as Dabashi goes on to write, the term has lost depth as a geo-politically sensitive signifier. Fisk is criticised by Dabashi for the former’s insouciant comparison of Rupert Murdoch with a caliph, Dabashi suggesting that the journalist employs ‘astounding racial stereotyping, to which he is habitually prone, not just when reporting on “The Middle East”, but also ... when writing on matters that have absolutely nothing to do with the term’ (p. 97).

massive civil uprisings that took place across the Arab world in 2011 resulted in the ousting from power of some of the globe's longest serving rulers: Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. That noted, Dabashi's account should not be read as a liberation narrative. Nor do I believe he would wish that of his reader. In any case, the years following the publication of the book have not, in any meaningful geo-political sense, been altogether very spring-like. The civil zeal generated at the time of the Arab Spring has not necessarily been reflected in political change. Egypt has proven to be particularly worrisome, given that it has found itself virtually returned to military rule. Commentators such as Dabashi could not have anticipated the turn of events that followed the 2011 uprisings. In fact, there is irony in the fact that, after Dabashi signalled in 2012 the beginning of a post-ideological age, almost immediately afterwards came the so-called Islamic State to global prominence, whose violence across Islamic landscapes has been both distinctly ideological and deeply implicated within the sort of West-Resism that has defined postcolonialism.

Actually, though, this leads to an interesting discussion in itself, which concerns the critical attention given to the matter of Islamic extremism in recent years. First, it is necessary to bridge the gap between the two phenomena, the Arab Spring and the rise of Islamic State. As civil uprisings spread across North Africa, parts of the Gulf and the Levant in 2011, western governments moved to arm rebel groups, sensing the opportunity to remove from power more of the region's obstinate leaders – chief among them, the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. As Assad's forces clung stubbornly to power, though, the arms received initially by rebel groups often found their way into the hands of numerous militant factions who also wished to oust Assad, although for different and less appealing reasons. These groups had already been propelled by earlier western interventions in the region, dating back to the U.S-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Patrick Cockburn puts it illuminatingly in his book, *The Rise of Islamic State* (2014), that

Isis is the child of war. Its members seek to reshape the world around them by acts of violence. The movement's toxic but potent mix of extreme religious beliefs and military skill is the outcome of the war in Iraq since 2003 and the war in Syria since 2011. Just as the violence in Iraq was ebbing, the war was revived by the Sunni Arabs in Syria. It is the government and media consensus in the West that the civil war in Iraq was reignited by the

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sectarian policies of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. In reality, it was the war in Syria that destabilised Iraq when jihadi groups like ISIS, then called al-Qaeda in Iraq, found a new battlefield where they could fight and flourish.³

In the first place, note the multiplicity of conflicts that Cockburn interconnects in the narrative. The rise of ISIS is intimately associated with 2011 Syrian war, and, therefore, with the Arab Spring and the 2003 conflict in Iraq, which is itself traceable back to the first Gulf War, the Cold War and beyond. There are also sectarian factors to consider, along with complex geo-political arrangements in the region. On this matter, Cockburn's book – in a way far more sustained than this passage alone could ever hope to achieve – demonstrates an important point. It requires a very particular approach in order to usefully represent the recent occurrences. Such are the number of intersecting strands and different factions of antagonists, a complicated intellectual landscape has been formed. An experienced correspondent in the region, Cockburn's routine vocation is to report for the British *Independent*, but his longhand publication speaks to the need for a different lens. 'A topic of this complexity,' he writes,

requires a book to explain what is happening, but I was rather appalled to discover that publishers I spoke to talked about publication a year or more down the road. I felt glumly that Isis, already notorious for the speed of its savage attacks, was likely to move a lot faster than the publishing industry.⁴

While Cockburn's lament here ostensibly derives from his sense that the necessarily immediate lens of journalism cannot fully represent the Iraq-Syria conflict, given that the speed of Isis's advances outstrip the pace of any corresponding coverage, it points indirectly to a lack of critical understanding around the subject. Particularly in the early years of the so-called War on Terror, western governments' and media outlets' attention tended to frame the conflict as one characterised by simple dividing lines. With an almost historic imperial sentiment, on the one side have been cast a band of barbarous fundamentalists – Gaddafi, Assad and their supporters – while on the other have been the always-

³ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 8-9.

⁴ Patrick Cockburn, 'How books can defeat Isis: Patrick Cockburn was able to update his agenda-setting 'The Rise of Islamic State' while under attack in Baghdad', *Independent*, 1 February 2015. < <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/how-books-can-defeat-isis-patrick-cockburn-was-able-to-update-his-agendasetting-the-rise-of-islamic-state-while-under-attack-in-baghdad-10009778.html>>.

principled West propagating their ever-democratic values, intent on rolling out their own political blueprint. The occurrences of the last two years or so have proven that initial assessment to be dangerously over-simplified. Cockburn suggests that the nature, and also the lack, of media coverage in the years after 9/11 had enabled western governments 'to play down the extent to which the "war on terror" had failed so catastrophically'.⁵ The importance of this here lies with the consequences of such a media approach, chief among which has been its lack of wider critical understanding. Central to the rise of Isis in particular has been the manner in which, for all the outward appearance of a conflict fought for on ideological grounds, the whole thing has felt bankrupt of ideas. Governments and media organisations have struggled to find suitable frames of reference with which to present the events, which has in turn had the trickle-down effect of perplexing the general public. To my mind, there was something revealing about the way events unfolded in January 2015, when self-termed Islamic gunmen stormed the Paris headquarters of the French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo, and opened fired on those inside. With one attack still ongoing, in another part of Paris a different gunman took hostages inside a Jewish supermarket, where there were further fatalities. In the first place, the attacks, much like the murder of British fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013, were flawed in their motives, and seemed to demonstrate the emptiness of the ideology that drove them. The diatribe of the killers was couched in a language that showed blind faith in a version of Islam that is forcibly divorced from most contemporary interpretations. Nevertheless, the mass public response was arguably more telling still. The mobilisation of the slogan, 'Je suis Charlie', uttered *en masse* by political figures and the global public in the days following the attacks, was of course a demonstration of mass outrage. But there was something in the very composition of the phrase that seemed amiss. For one, what were the grounds on which people felt themselves to be the embodiment of Charlie Hebdo? The phrase did not necessarily reflect or represent the views of all those who chose to utilise it. The slogan was bent out of shape, it seemed, as if to suggest that it reflected the mass consciousness of a modern West. But the coupling of these reservoirs of ideas together felt too strained, unsubstantiated.

⁵ Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State*, p. 2.

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What I have written above undoubtedly points a finger towards scholars, whose theorising of current debates is desperately required. To be clear, I am not only referring to the necessary theorisation of the likes of the Arab Spring and the climate of Islamic extremism that is extending outward from Iraq and Syria, but to numerous settings wherein historic (post)colonial knowledge might still prove particularly useful, albeit with revision. Which is to note that the Israel-Palestine situation is still in serious need of scholarly attention, as is Russia and its seemingly imperial designs across Eastern Europe, as is United States foreign policy and so on. This is not to mention the many former European colonies whose discursive, cultural, historical place in a post-colonial dynamic might still benefit from fuller theorising.

All this delivers us at the following assessments. The Arab Spring did not signal a mass geo-political revolution. The events of the following years have confirmed that the power balance in the region has not been seismically shifted, even if there are notable developments. It did, however, create an opening in the intellectual landscape of the Arab World, wherein Arab bodies and spaces suddenly seemed ripe for reinscription. In other words, there seemed to open up a lacuna in the discursive life of the region. Hamid Dabashi's conviction that the 2011 events ultimately signified the end of postcolonialism is pertinent, albeit slightly wide of the mark. My own contention is to suggest that, without radically overturning entire systems, certain events are able to highlight the obsolescence of existing knowledge formations. Doing away with them entirely and sweepingly, though, is near impossible. In fact, it is triumphalist to think so. Such are the natures of knowledge and ideology that they must be revised over time, their boundaries sculptured and kept open-ended. The ideological life of postcolonialism has not expired, but, as observers have suggested for a decade or more, it is still in need of a shot in the arm. For what it is worth, Dabashi's mode of address is refreshing in its immediacy, written in the initial aftermath of events in Egypt. The book breaks new ground in that sense alone. Like Cockburn's call for written responses unburdened by protracted publication processes, Dabashi's is an unusually emotive academic work that engages ardently with events as they are happening. Almost certainly, part of the programme for rethinking

knowledge formations – and specifically those related to postcolonialism – depends on a reinvestment in the value of writing, in academia and beyond it.

II • Writing as Counter-Discourse

Writing has always been central to both imperial and anti-imperial projects. To the extent that knowledge of the colonial world was written into being, it was of course the case that anti-colonial counter-strikes would be required as a response. As much as reactions to these dogged knowledge reservoirs were enacted using forces necessarily more violent than the written word, postcolonial writing has long been a valiant vessel for recuperative studies of subjecthood, history, geography, injustice and so on. The early part of this thesis tracked the possible trajectories of the novel as it works to reflect the developments made during the postcolonial period and duly demonstrated the power of resistance resident in the novel. The latter part then proceeded to see how these literary texts have been theorised into counter-hegemonic knowledge as a result of the scholarly attention paid to them. Between these two sections, though, I made claims about the place of the written word at large – that its value has been altered in recent times by its ubiquity and trumped by the inflated value assigned to images. This, in an era of instant communication technologies (or: horizontal connectivity) is a reality that simply cannot be overlooked. Such a claim is not to suggest the removal of an activist dimension from the written word, nor to signal the imminent decline of literature and literary scholarship; it is simply to comment on a significant shift in the modern-day economy of representation. The citizen journalism that formed a central pillar of our understanding of events in, say, Egypt in 2011, is a case in point. Consider the production of an infinite amount of images and commentary from the events, more coverage than perhaps has ever been produced in response to an occurrence of this type. Think also of the sheer volume of citizens who recorded, commented on, circulated material concerning, the activities that took place during those eighteen days in January. Of course, the role of new media is commonly held to have been vital to the momentum gained during the protests. Nevertheless, is our long-term understanding aided or hindered by this deluge of

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representation? It is difficult to tell. What is clear is that the rules of the game of representation itself have changed beyond any reasonable doubt. Indeed, moments of civil and international conflict highlight these changes most patently. Equally, there are times when the same fact is demonstrated in less hostile circumstances. We might look at the increasingly important role of new media in political campaigns, where a candidate's credibility is now at least partly judged on his or her online visibility, on the basis of Twitter followers, Facebook posts and so on. We know this to be true simply because, otherwise, there would not be such committed efforts by (sometimes unlikely) political party members to compete on this online footing. That politicians engage with this platform is seemingly a case sometimes of not wanting to get left behind by a rival (such might a lower yield of followers suggest), rather than a given politician holding any great faith in the place of Twitter in everyday politics.

What this points to is as follows. On the one hand, new media cannot be dismissed as frivolous representational tools: they are a new and indisputably important layer to add to our existing methods of covering even the most significant worldly developments. On the other hand, though, we might be wary of taking the mass visibility of this material automatically as a sign of its authority. In other words, ubiquity is no guarantor of value. That all this is important to literature, academic scholarship and the like pertains to the fact that writing and representation at large are undergoing a shift wherein their influence is being challenged and forced to alter. Accordingly, the respective strategies of novelists, commentators and critics must inevitably account in some way for the changing rules. Otherwise, like obstinate politicians, they will be left behind. The postcolonial literary text is far from defunct as a strategy of resistance, even if it must eventually go on to be defined by other explanatory terms. What it must continue to do, though, is regard itself as a genuine foil to the coterminous development of its adversaries – the would-be (and still) imperialising text – which requires of the novel a commitment to innovation and to movement with the times.

I call to mind a text like Salam Pax's *The Baghdad Blog* (2003), a blog post by blog post account of an Iraqi writer's life in the early 2000s and, in particular, during the U.S.-led intervention in 2003. (I am apprehensive about the word

choice, here: *intervention*. Pax repeatedly highlights the discrepancy between the ‘liberation’ and ‘invasion’ perspectives.) Given the date of publication, the text’s form is unprecedented; but more significant is the type of address that the blogging platform allows for. In the first place, the collection of posts is directly shaped by the occurrences in Iraq. The rumblings of an American arrival and a steady public coming to terms with the prospect of war provide the most obvious narrative thread. In terms of the specific concerns of the writer, however, Pax receives word early on from a friend, in October 2002, five months before the first airstrikes (and only a month into his posts), that ‘this is turning into a war-blog’.⁶ The writer responds by suggesting he will be ‘toning things down’ (p. 15). For obvious reasons, Pax cannot avoid returning to the subject of war, especially since by early 2003 it has become a daily fact of life in Iraq. That noted, the writer’s commitment to staging occasional challenges to the conflict’s ubiquity is both a refreshing and an effective counter-discursive strategy. He heads out into downtown Baghdad when parts of the city have been heavily bombed to look for new CDs to buy, for example. This comes after Pax encounters a BBC article in early March, days before the bombs start falling, in which the reporter suggests that Iraqis are ‘putting on an air of normality’ (p. 112). ‘Look, what are you supposed to do?’ Pax responds. ‘Run round in the streets wailing? War is at the door eeeeeeeeeee!’ (p. 112) Elsewhere, Pax responds to a John F. Burns article he reads in the *New York Times* that gives mention to Kathy Kelly, founder of Voices in the Wilderness, whose protesting in Baghdad is deemed newsworthy.⁷ According to the piece, Kelly and others had been protesting against the Bush administration for their plans for war. ‘I read thru it wondering if [Burns] is reporting news from the same Baghdad I live in. Nothing in the news about it and no one at work making any look-at-those-poor-deluded-souls-going-at-it-again comments’, Pax writes (p. 24). Turning his attention to the matter of Kelly, he notes: ‘Dear American friends, please stop sending her over here. She is not helping. Some people might think that this is the sort of thing I like to see happening. It is NOT. Kelly, baby, you have been used. You have been put on a show for the westerners.’ (p. 25) The point I wish to make is that Pax is at great pains to disrupt the narrative of the war as it is

⁶ Salam Pax, *The Baghdad Blog* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), p. 15.

⁷ An activist group campaigning for peace, although now defunct.

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presented through an American/British media lens. His blog stages an intervention – perhaps a liberation or an invasion – of its own. The benefit of the blogging platform for Pax is that his retorts are swift enough that they are able, theoretically at least, to prevent untruths from going down as anything more definite. These interventions occur repeatedly throughout his address and call upon new written strategies each time. When an American blogger questions the legitimacy of Pax's blog, given the seamlessness of its English, the sharp satire of its content, Pax picks apart the accusatory piece line by line:

... [the blog] fascinates me on a couple of general grounds. First, I'm damned curious what people in Iraq (and the whole Middle East, for that matter) really think of the US ... Do they mostly even kind of half believe the Baath Party American Satan thing? [Well, we did have another Satan. During the 1980s Ayatollah Khomeini was the Shaitan before America, but now we are friends with Iran so America gets to be the new Shaitan. Very Orwellian, eh? Do they anxiously await us to come 'liberate' them, as our government general insists they will? [Oh-oh ... did he say 'liberate'?] Raed seems to welcome out prospective liberation [whaaa? Which part of my rant wasn't clear enough and please don't use that word again it hurts.] ... The site looks believable. Also, however, I WANT to believe. [Here he links to the X-Files site – he also thinks I'm from planet K-Pax, apparently.] This alone makes me suspicious. They have a somewhat cynical and fatalistic tone that I'd find likely. There are cryptic personal notes. [These notes are not cryptic. This is Arablish. Because most of the world thinks that communication revolves around the English language we have to adapt our language to these non-Arabic enabled systems. Ya3ni lo a77*I inglizi lo 2aba6il.] (p. 26)

There are numerous points to be made. In the first place, one cannot underestimate Pax's effective use of borrowed online material, which he disputes and reworks as a counter-discursive measure. There is also the fact of his annexation of the English language, in the name of Arablish, yes, but also in the name of an anti-authoritarian, anti-journalistic vernacular. Pax hears a story, for example, about a humanitarian aid delivery to Nasiriyah Hospital in Iraq's south that, of twenty boxes, contains six of shampoo. 'Need a blood transfusion?' he quips. 'Have shampoo, it smells nice.' (p. 180) There is, then, the injection of a biting satire into a narrative that has been presented in media and government-speak, from elsewhere, as a strictly geo-political, civilisational or humanitarian matter. A final note should go to the issue of the author's questioned authenticity. Cynicism arises among the blog's readership on the grounds that it is penned under a pseudonym, that its origin is never clear (blog posts are continually hosted from new sites), and that its mode of address, its silky English, is suspicious. Allegations are made both that Pax is really an American *and*, albeit

not by the same people, that he is a Saddam Hussein-supporting Baathist. This in itself is paradoxical for obvious reasons. To the question of why Pax does not pay much attention in his blog to the issue of 'Saddam's crimes', the author replies:

Sorry to blow your bubble, but all I can do is tell you what is going on in the streets and if you think journalists are doing a better job of that then maybe you should go and read them. One day, like in Afghanistan, those journalists will get bored and go write about Syria or Iran. Iraq will be off your media radar. Out of sight, out of mind. Lucky you, you have that option. I have to live it. (p. 186)

What strikes me is that, when it comes to the matter of authenticity, the blog's elusiveness is potentially its enduring strength. That the authorial presence is never confirmed, and that the book's centre is seemingly never fully graspable, means that its address cannot be disregarded in the same way that other non-Western texts might be, as automatically inferior, *à la* Casanova's thesis: on the basis of their non-Westernness alone. That nagging possibility that *The Baghdad Blog* could be an American/British text parading as an Iraqi text keeps it always in taxonomic limbo. This in itself appears like a discursive victory of sorts.

The value of the written word has changed beyond reasonable doubt. Accordingly, the act of writing has evolved. Each page of Pax's text substantiates those theses. Nevertheless, this is not to elevate a single text above others in order to make a sweeping claim. Nor is the apparent newness of *The Baghdad Blog* measurable by its originality of form alone. This thesis has demonstrated the widespread revolution of postcolonial writing in the last two decades, changes that reflect the altered position of the literary text in the representation stakes. The likes of Suketu Mehta and Katherine Boo are obvious proponents of new ways of writing what was once thought of as (and what might still be) the postcolonial. Countless others, though, have also recognised the ongoing need to revamp the postcolonial literary text, which is not surprising given that it has always tended to embrace flexibility. The writing of Zakes Mda and Archie Weller, over time, shows increasing willingness to push at new ideological ground; Amit Chaudhuri, meanwhile, has tried to look once more at old ground with a new literary lens. Finally, any surveyor of non-white British writing, particularly since the turn of the century, comes up against a remarkable

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vastness of scale. That one's route through it is such a protracted enterprise is a measure of the uniqueness of the writing. Hence my repeated call for sensitive and productive scholarly responses – to both literature and society.

III • Notes on Postcolonial Scholarship

There remains a question I wish to respond to, then. In real terms, what is to be the remit of postcolonialism hereafter – as an intellectual field of inquiry generally, but also in its place as the individual pursuit of writers, commentators, readers and critics? What are we to do? I opt for this first person plural for the simple reason that I am addressing all the while an academic community, which is made to feel at times like a disturbingly narrow channel at odds with the matters it seeks to represent. On occasion, such as when, for example, thousands of bodies are resoundingly screaming *al-Sha'b Yurid Isqat al-Nizam* in Tahrir Square, Cairo, and we meanwhile are witnessing and writing the events at arm's length, is it not similar to the detachment so plainly discernible between politicians talking for “the people” and the people themselves? True, for our part we are literary scholars and the structure provided by our academic institutions is what makes our work possible at all; we cannot always be on location, interpreting events as they unfold. Nevertheless, historically we have relied upon traceable lineages between events, people, languages, novels, films, critics – that is, we have trusted in the linkages between things that happen, the way they are told and the way they are then interpreted. If those lineages feel weak, it pertains most directly to the fact that the ideologies that have until now maintained them have been pushed closer to the point of exhaustion. This is a frustration not necessarily with academic or media labour, but with the system of thought that precedes it. We have been working in ivory towers, it seems.

It helps our understanding if we commit to the idea of the likes of the Arab Spring as open-ended events, for doing so allows for fair-mindedness as we try to unravel their consequences. Worldliness is ultimately what is at stake in our continued work as postcolonialists, which is to suggest that we are committed to stripping the world of its inherent illusions. In other words, there is an onus on

scholars to continue re-theorising the world in light of these worldly events: conflicts, revolutions, market booms and busts and so on. It is thus this that our efforts as provisional citizens of the republic (and writer-citizens of the republic) should aspire to. If worldliness is the civic pursuit of citizens the world over, then as postcolonial academics the nature of our discipline remains largely the same as it has done over the last two decades or more. We will continue to undertake critical work that seeks in a roundabout way to read and to understand the social, economic and political agency of individuals; while the literary critics among us will make this our specific focus as we encounter and read literature. Yet coming to terms with the modified frame of reference that accompanies a new *regime du savoir* is vital if we are to contribute to the new language of the republic. Let us be clear: our roles in the postcolonial field would not diminish even if the ideological life of postcolonialism were fully exhausted. Let me modify and paraphrase this sentiment a moment. Concrete historical sites the globe over need reading in variable ways – doing so is vital in gesturing at what part they play in the moving history of the world.

We should be mindful of being carried away. If it is a commonly held proposition that the end of European colonialism marked only the commencement of imperialism in a different guise, then we should be ever wary of the possibility of false dawn after false dawn. We have seen many: the terms in office of the now deposed Arab state rulers pay testimony. The imperial spirit, energised by the relentless opening up of new, under-explored markets, remains (and will remain) strong. Yet it is important to bear in mind that what is required are not only visible acts of dissent to oppressive regimes – political and otherwise – but more subtly perceptible changes in the way that we use language to represent them. If the adage that the pen is mightier than the sword holds water, we need also to ensure that it is given new ink. And so to the question of the Arab Spring's repercussions on the actual scope of our vocation in the field of postcolonial studies. I am interested in the way we are able firstly to modify our tools of the trade in relation to the Arab Spring (and its aftermath) in a way that is helpful, given that our repertoire of language has been criticised, by Dabashi at least, for being somewhat inadequate to the task. Beyond that, the flexible skills we develop (and have in some cases held all along) need

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sensitively transferring to new sites so as to do justice to the minutiae present there. What is thought of as the postcolonial world is a potentially huge accumulation of concrete historical sites, but not a coherent one.

Let us go further than conjecture. Going forward, it is imperative to commit to making amendments to the discipline of our work, many of which are still – as Ngugi suggested in 1986 – changes to be taken care of in the mind. In the first place, we as writers and critics are tasked with the decoupling of loaded words from meanings. It takes committed actions to begin the process and careful reflection to continue it; one cannot survive without the other. Thus we must also reenergise the relationship between events as they happen on the ground and the way that there are subsequently recorded. In order to do so, we must begin the process of allaying prejudices concerning our own complicity in world events – openly acknowledging our own relationship to it – so as to begin to trust in the immediacy and the singularity of our encounters. The stakes of our investments are better made clear and we ought no longer to work in the shadowy sanctuary of the academy. It is instinctive to want to draw conclusions and there are indeed patterns to be unearthed across disparate historical sites, but forcing these connections in our work leads only in time to the ring fencing of material emerging out of events from the events themselves. The same statement can be made of our reading not only of events, but literature itself, in the sense that the taxonomic inclination towards grand historical narratives threatens to nullify the singularity of the literary text. I still have in mind Derek Attridge's comment on positionality and the reading of literary texts. 'Doing justice to a work of literature involves doing justice at the same time to who, where, and when we are,' he writes.⁸

This thesis has hinted at the need for more active participation in reading and representing events in order that we galvanise the chain of episodes that leads ultimately to the writing of scholarly work. That this is an issue of particular import boils down to the fact that we are perhaps somewhere close to the cusp of a radically different ideological era, which is not to sound out a triumphant fanfare but to warn of a potentially dangerous new era of conflict. What this shift symbolises is only an opening in which the work of scholars whose interests

⁸ Attridge, *Ethics*, p. 46.

have historically been aligned with postcolonial studies will be pertinent. As writers, we cannot underestimate the importance of our contributions to knowledge, nor can we take that fact for granted. Our impact relies upon our commitment to stepping out from cover and engaging with the world as it really is – reclaiming, as Dabashi suggests, the sun as the sun.

Reading the signs of these uprisings, predicated on the delayed defiance that is embedded in and nourished by [a] literary imagination, places us very much in the midst of a fertile hermeneutics of uncertainty – an uncertainty from which journalists, Orientalists, and imperial analysts retreat, but in which the rest of us thrive. On this site, we have to work with the intimation of what we are hearing before we can ascertain how the Arab Spring speaks. (p. 226)

Taking the Iranian at his word, it would seem we have an important role to play in the “hermeneutics of uncertainty”. Indeed, we should be energised by the very possibility of it. The watershed of the Arab Spring could (not will) invigorate an ethically sensitive world of letters, bound together by the common theme of freedom, social justice and dignity, and no longer held together by ideologies unfit for purpose. If such an outcome appears speculative, it is only because enough fingertips continue to cling to the shape of the old order for it to remain just intact. But a new *regime du savoir* is emergent, and we must meet it both with the tools we have well honed and with attentive eyes and ears. I have illustrated throughout this thesis the multiplicity of strands that have delivered us to this point, as postcolonial writers and readers. While it is always tempting to anticipate the arrival at a threshold, there are strong signs that a threshold is indeed upon us. Even if it seems that we are in a winter of discontent, we are also on the verge of spring.

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APPENDIX ONE

*The Indian Premier League, the Spectacle
and the Illusion of a Nation*

I • The Indian Premier League

In 2014, the seventh edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL) began on foreign soil. In fact, the opening twenty matches were all staged respectively between three emirates cities: Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The reason behind the relocation was logistical, it was said, for the start date coincided with India's general election. And so, one mid-April evening, from beneath the immaculate semicircular canopy of the grandstand at the Sheikh Zayed stadium, Abu Dhabi, the Mumbai Indians and the Kolkata Knight Riders took to the field along lush rolls of blue carpet, flanked on either side by showers of pyrotechnics, not on Indian ground at all. The Anglophone commentator addressed his global audience (with a gentle South African lilt): 'Welcome to the biggest cricket show *on earth*.' It took only a couple of minutes for the game to yield its first moment of drama when the Kolkata batsman, Gautam Gambhir (a known Delhiite), misjudged the path of the ball and was thus bowled out without scoring a run, the wooden stumps wrenched from the ground. 'The first wicket of the 2014 IPL... *Pepsi* IPL... belongs to [Lasith] Malinga,' the commentator noted, praising the Sri Lankan bowler who captured this accolade; and not, but nearly, forgetting his endorsement duties in the process. The first "four" of the game, meanwhile – that is, one of the more valuable scoring shots in cricket, wherein the batsmen strikes the ball to the outermost limits of the field – was secured by an ungainly swipe,

the batter's feet all askew and the willow swashed wildly. By the end of the game, the standout performances were both given by Kolkata players: an impressive, match-winning score of seventy-two runs by Jacques Kallis (a South African) and a haul of four wickets by the bowler, Sunil Narine (a West Indian). Off the players went, then, back along the blue carpet, as the television coverage captured concluding shots of more fireworks, exploding against the Abu Dhabi night sky.

I am being intentionally misleading here, in seeming to hint only at the disintegration of regional identity, the rampant commercialisation of sport and the relegation of cricketing tradition in the name of entertainment. Actually, it is more complicated than this, and I hope here to explain the plurality of forces at work in the IPL – from commercial to national to individual – while considering their collective contribution to the production, and projection, of Indian space. For now, it is enough to note that, in final reckoning, it mattered little that this and the following nineteen IPL games took place in Middle Eastern climes; nor that non-Indian cricketers may have stolen the final glory; nor that the commentary team throughout the competition consisted largely of non-Indian pundits; nor finally that the logos of non-Indian brands were emblazoned on virtually every visible surface. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, the actual cricket that happens on the field in the IPL is but a small part of a much larger, orchestrated projection of images issued in the name of India. Secondly, the earth beneath the feet of the players and the actual bodies on the field are far less important – that is, less important to those with vested interests in the IPL as an imagining of India – than the way in which the whole theatrical spectacle is broadcast. Which is to write, in other words, that whatever takes place within the televisual frame can be made to *appear* Indian. We are somewhere close to Barthesian territory, it seems, and the Frenchman's talk of "Italianicity" concerning the now well-known Panzani advert, along with his due declaration: 'Italianicity is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting.'¹ My contention here, though, is that the IPL manages through its television broadcasting to construct a powerful synoptic Indian space, one that panders to a twenty-first century fascination with

¹ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 48.

the spectacle; yet, as a very consequence of this latter fact, obscures in the process the natural artistry of the cricket on show.

A word is necessary on the modern-day manner of viewing sport, which has become an overwhelmingly televisual experience, and which has structured the boiling down of complex cultural, historical and political arrangements to neatly packaged sets of images. I am wary of lodging grandiose claims about the omnipotent sweep of globalisation and its accompaniments, for one can easily be lured into misleading and triumphant assumptions about the evenness of its spread; but the massive international selling of television rights has indeed meant that regional sporting (and news) events are increasingly received globally – and visually. In an age of specialist sports networks, every minute of the IPL tournament can be witnessed live in the likes of Canada and the United States, across Sub-Saharan Africa and in perhaps unlikely parts of Asia, as well as in the more traditional cricketing nations. Live coverage has also been made available through YouTube, meaning that its reach is greater still. No longer do cricketing audiences await match reports penned by Oxbridge journalists whose eloquent dispatches once broke the news of a day's play in the back pages of *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

As much as the sheer breadth of coverage itself plays a hand in the mass availability of the images, though, I am also interested in the actual nature of the IPL's coverage, which, in line with what I see as a wider trend, indulges in the production of theatrical spectacle, creating for the would-be viewer a seductive, entertaining, and thoroughly modern Indian space. Not only this, its treatment of the actual sporting action is similarly – and damagingly – spectacular, fetishizing the game's most dramatic moments to the detriment of all else. In other words, television broadcasters, armed with greater image-capturing technologies and operating in line with an ever-increasing pressure to get closer and closer to the action, have come to prioritise the most visually striking – the most “imageable” – elements of the sporting event, with deleterious consequences for the grander narratives they form part of. In the sporting arena, for example, it has become commonplace for broadcasters to place cameras within sporting equipment – inside helmets or goal nets, mounted onto basketball hoops and racing cars – seemingly so that viewers are able to embody the action when, say, a goal is

scored, or when a crash happens and so on. But the reduction of sporting action to spectacle like this is harmful to the overall narrative of sport as a contest, for the ebb and flow is lost amidst the desire for the visually striking event. In the midst of this, and relating to cricket particularly, I locate an acute problem: the diminished cultural potential of the sport. Cricket's place as a sport tied inherently to British imperialism has historically made it an avenue for anti- or post-imperial challenge, but that avenue, I argue, is somewhat closed off by way of the aggressive and spectacular framing of the IPL, which transforms historically contingent Indian bodies into ahistorical televisual commodities.

II • Cricket at the Boundaries

If one notes only the most rudimentary of details, that cricket's arrival on Indian shores was down to the colonising British, it follows rather unsurprisingly that it became, in India and elsewhere, an important form of resistance. For, as Manthia Diawara observes, cricket was 'another way of introducing Englishness to the rest of the world'.² As a retort, then, the modulation of the sport in non-British hands has held a high value. How important it was, for example, to witness a crop of tall, burly West Indian fast bowlers in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s repeatedly steaming in and knocking over the wickets of cowering English batsmen (noted here, it must be mentioned, through the gritted teeth of an English cricket supporter). Of the West Indian team, Diawara writes:

The appropriation of cricket at the margins of Englishness will liberate modernization in the West Indies, too, and do for Caribbeanness what it did for Englishness: i.e., it will create a collective West Indian will which traversed race and class belongings. It was a will that was made up of the desire to be different and equal to English people, at least on the cricket field.³

For Indian cricket teams past and present, meanwhile, there has been something particularly rewarding about beating the English at their own game – as there has been for most cricketing nations when they have achieved this (and they have often done so). It speaks to that indubitably politico-cultural dimension of the game. When, in August 1971, the hirsute Indian spinner B.S. Chandrasekhar

² Manthia Diawara, 'English and Blackness: Cricket as Discourse on Colonialism', *Callaloo*, 13(4), 830-844 (p. 838).

³ *ibid.*, p. 840.

took six wickets for only 38 runs at Old Trafford, Manchester, it set up India's first ever series win on English soil. In the footage of the game, it is difficult to make out the ball as Chandrasekhar bounds in and rips through the English batting line-up with his leg spin, but it mattered as little as the fact that the Indian batsmen then stumbled at snail's pace to victory, losing six wickets of their own along the way. India had beaten the English in their own back yard. Not only has it been important for these postcolonial cricketing victories to happen; equally important has been the need for these nations to forge cricketing identities by their own designs. I call to mind another West Indian player, Vivian Richards, who in the 1970s and 1980s swashbuckled his way through games almost without fear of failure, dismantling from the very first delivery the spirit of bowlers who steamed in only to see the ball zip off to the boundary time and time again. The Antiguan would lean languidly on his bat between deliveries, always without a helmet, with an air of arrogance that was a thorn in the side of English reserve and orthodoxy. When the ball arrived at him, though, Richards would swipe ferociously and lightning quick, with all the vigor and the hip-twisting of a baseball shot – an elegant nonconformism – and he would often drag the ball across his body from way out beyond his eye line when, contrary to the counsel of cricketing wisdom, it would seem most imprudent to do so. In the context of the era, which saw acute social unrest among Britain's Afro-Caribbean community, who felt undervalued and underrepresented particularly in Thatcherite Britain, Richards' bludgeoning swipes, mammoth scores and general indomitability served as much as cultural and political blows as they did as sporting ones. One need only think of Richards' innings in the first one-day international of the summer tour, at Old Trafford in 1984, when his individual score of 189 dragged the West Indies from a modest total to what was ultimately a winning position. The batsman's counterpunching was compelling: with the Windies one wicket away from being bowled out for a meager 170, it looked for all the world that England would be left chasing an easily reachable score. Richards, though, put the English bowlers to the sword and repeatedly subjected them to the ultimate ignominy by clearing room for himself when facing perfectly good deliveries and, offering a clear view of his stumps and playing with a circular golf-swing strike, hitting the ball back over the bowler's head.

The West Indies eventually posted a total of 272, to which England could only reply with a meek 168. The game – and that whole cricketing summer of 1984, in fact – proved to be a chastening experience for England, team and country, while for the West Indies it was another significant act of defiance against the British, against their now waning myth of superiority and, in a way, against the country's neo-colonial politics. In the middle of it all, Richards was a fitting icon: a nerveless batsman who always demonstrated artistry that challenged cricketing wisdom, and who was incredibly successful doing so.

Latterly, world cricket has succumbed to the pressures of modern-day sporting trends, notably in the induction of Twenty-20, a condensed version of the game that, by way of fitting a full match into around three hours, has encouraged more of the sport's most exciting elements: big hitting and balls crashing into the stumps. In simple terms, cricket's historic prestige had not been particularly lucrative for a time. By the turn of the twenty-first century, both forms of the game then in circulation – a longer version played over the course of several days and a shorter form completed in a day – were seen no longer to offer much appeal, or, at least, not in a way that transferred to revenue. One could not question the dedication of the cricketing purists, as it were, who would gladly sit through long days of sedate, meandering play; but a huge cohort of would-be spectators (and consumers) remained untapped. Hence the creation of Twenty-20, which began as a competition in England but was later adopted by all of the cricket-playing nations, notably in India where arguably the format has been embraced with more vigor than anywhere else. While at first there was a certain amount of light-hearted irreverence about it, so detached did it seem from the pomp associated with cricket, Twenty-20 steadily emerged as a spectacle that pulled in crowds. They indulged in its quickened pace and, perhaps above all else, its huge rise in the number of sixes, the highest-value (and most visually striking) shot in the sport, wherein the ball is hit over the boundary without bouncing. In rising to prominence, Twenty-20 effected two important changes. On the one hand, because of the more pressurized playing conditions – the limiting of an innings at 120 balls (twenty overs, six balls in each) – it gradually compelled players into devising new methods, for there was now little room for

error and great value in trying to score from every shot. If in the past, a batsmen had been able to play reservedly, sometimes happy only to occupy the crease (simply keeping the bowler at bay without much thought of accumulating runs), the limited gameplay of Twenty-20 required that he began to exercise a certain amount of attacking ingenuity in his shot selection, particularly considering his bowling counterpart was at the same time devising his own new methods of defense. Thus cricket in this form cast off the sport's most celebrated characteristics, the lauding of patience and gentility – those traits that were undeniably and unshakably English. In doing so, it created a more level playing field, so to speak, in that the discourse of cricket as the game of the English (colonial) gentleman was discarded, allowing for the re-inscription of the game in new, more fluid terms. In other words, it offered a valuable space for new forms of cultural challenge, and for new sites of enunciation.

On the other hand, though, that the game was somewhat taken down from its lofty pedestal meant that it was opened up to more than just those who played it. Most visible has been the massive commercial influence on Twenty-20, particularly so in the IPL, where advertising is now a presence at every turn. Not unlike other sports, team kits are emblazoned with brand logos, as are the pitches and their surroundings. However, one must look further than the very intentionally visible marketing behaviours of sponsors to see that in the large-scale packaging of these competitions – from the limits set on overseas players to each team's financial input allowance, for example – the decisions made effectively contribute to the way in which the national space is projected. This factor cannot be played down, particularly in the case of the IPL. There seems to me to be a handy parallel between India hosting sporting event of this magnitude and, say, the design of many Eastern European nations to host the Eurovision Song Contest. Not necessarily because it *is* a mark of political stability and cultural progressiveness, but certainly because such an image may be projected. I include here only a number of key details that begin to shed light on the competition as being not so much an Indian cricketing event than a spectacle of Indian interests. Due to the massive financial investment in the IPL, it is now considered to be one of the richest sporting spectacles in the world, and by far the most lucrative cricketing tournament. All of the teams in the competition are

franchises, and are owned by some of India's largest businesses – Indian Cements, the GMP Group and the United Breweries Group among them. Because of the large sums of money invested in the competition, cricketing talent from across the globe is signed up to play for teams, arguably to the detriment of homegrown Indian talent. Equally, the domestic geography of each team does not necessarily relate to its player-base or fan-base. And finally, it must be noted that competition has been broadcast through a much dramatized Indian media lens, so that the on-field action appears as only a small part of greater theatrical spectacle in which players, coaches and owners are at the same time cast as celebrities. The acerbic words of Vikram Bedi, writing in *Economic and Political Weekly*, are useful here in explaining how such a cocktail of influences have been greeted with relative success in each edition of the competition so far:

All of this only works so powerfully because it has the moral sanction of the “national”. And so players making obscene amounts of money, often entirely undeserved, self-indulgent, and ignorant judgmental fans, a galaxy of selfish corporate sponsors, and frivolous media coverage of even minor cricketing events are all exonerated in advance by the implicit or explicit appeal to national grandeur, national will-to-prove-oneself, national excellence, strength and virility.⁴

For Bedi, then, that the IPL has managed to sustain itself is in no small part due to the fact that the competition issues a projection of Indianness, even if its workings suggest overwhelmingly that other interests are served before the nation. And thus one might begin to see the conflicting forces at work in the IPL. In no uncertain terms, the competition is an orchestrated carnival in which the anarchy and innovation of the on-field action takes place within a controlled arena of non-cricketing interests. There is a(n uneven) balancing act between, to use a cricketing analogy, the artistic output of cricketers “in the middle”, and myriad market forces controlling from “the boundary”.

Ultimately, my argument runs as follows. An Indian batsman strolls to the wicket, takes his guard and sets about playing his innings. On this particular day a combination of skill, good judgment and luck all help him put together a fine score. He plays a full repertoire of shots, some unavoidably defensive, some extravagant, and some unremarkable by contrast. In the space of an hour his work has contributed significantly to the shape of the game in question and a

⁴ Vikram Bedi, ‘Indian Cricket as Synecdoche for Our Times’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, June 24, 2006, p. 2521.

little to the narrative of his own personal cricketing history. The innings is full of nuances: moments of good fortune allow him to continue when on another day things might have been otherwise; moments of high-skill give him confidence to play more and more expressively; and his shot selection gives his entire innings some manner of guiding sentiment, be it innovative, explosive or courageous. But, even before any of this takes place, the very structure of the IPL, with all its governing principles firmly in place, ensures that any sense of individuality his innings might have produced is evinced by a grand narrative that runs out of his control. What the viewer observes on screen is indeed an Indian player representing an Indian regional team in a domestic Indian tournament. Unfortunately for him, it is not an authentic Indianness at work, but only a seductive projection of it.

III • Ownership of the Shot

One of the widely agreed-upon hallmarks of English gentility on the cricket field is the English batsman's execution of the cover drive. When the ball is delivered by the bowler and it pitches on a good length outside off-stump – meaning that it arrives at the batsman in a favourable position for him to extend his arms and strike it away from the body – the English batsman has typically lent forward with the most elegance, taken a purposeful stride forward, swung the bat in an immaculate upward arc and, with a resounding thump, sent the ball fizzing across the outfield at forty-five degrees to the boundary rope. 'The cover drive is a statement of technical superiority or undentable self-belief,' writes Rob Steen, 'exuding authority or oozing effortlessness, radiating efficiency.'⁵ (A secondary point is being handily proven here, I hope, that the very language of cricket conjures an unmistakably English pretention.) As such, it was a case of the "empire striking back" when, say, Indian or West Indian batsmen began to make the cover drive their own, playing the stroke with all the graciousness that the English found so praiseworthy. One calls to mind Sir Garfield Sobers, a West Indian, and one of the game's greatest batsmen, striking through the ball so

⁵ Rob Steen, 'What's the Best Sight in Cricket? The Cover Drive', *ESPN CricInfo*, 1 October 2012. <<http://www.espn-cricinfo.com/magazine/content/story/580312.html>> (para. 11).

loosely, such was the fluidity of his movement. But never was his cover drive anything other than controlled. Of Sobers' play more generally, C.L.R James writes: 'Never was such ease and certainty of stroke, such early seeing of the ball and such late, leisured play, such command by a batsman not only of the bowling but of himself. He seemed to be expressing a personal vision.'⁶

Particularly in the Twenty-20 game, though, a form somewhat untethered from cricket's obstinate sense of Englishness, there has been scope for new forms of artistry, less reliant upon mimicry, and it is something that Indian cricketers have undoubtedly seized upon as well as any. The cricketing shot described at the very opening of the chapter – the ungainly swat for four runs – is precisely the sort of practice I am hinting at, for it was, as I have suggested, not one to be found in the English cricketing manual. Thus it was an appropriation, a way of being different but equal; in Twenty-20, four runs are four runs are four runs, no matter how they are scored. Watch any IPL match and one finds young Indian batsmen engineering shots like this in every innings, carving their bats wildly, but not inelegantly, through the air and sending the ball flying to all parts of the ground. If the beauty of the cover drive is to be found in its sense of order – foot planted, knee bent, arm perfectly angled, head still – these new shots are praised for the unlikeliness of their efficiency, the ingenuity of the action. There are raucous cheers for the batsman who manages somehow to retrieve a darting ball an inch from his toes and scoop it back over the bowler's head to the boundary. The Indian captain, Mahendra Singh Dhoni, for instance, has become known for a shot seemingly conjured from nothing, "the helicopter shot", a last-minute circular swipe of the bat that resembles a turning propeller – a shot that often manages to dispatch the ball at wonderfully unusual angles. Bowlers, too, have discovered their own sleights of hand, perfect for this condensed version of the game in which containing the flow of runs is their main objective. Perhaps more than any other nationality, it has been nimble-fingered Indians (and namely spin bowlers) who have most effectively honed their art, always skilfully manipulating the flight, the speed or the rotation of the ball after its release with myriad variations. Each shot played by the batsman, each delivery thrown down by the bowler, each moment of action in the field and each collective game

⁶ C.L.R James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Random House, 2005; 1973), p. 344.

played is a performance, not necessarily dissimilar from those performances given by actors in theatres or by writers on the page. Ultimately, I am suggesting that, as India's premier domestic cricket competition, the IPL is theoretically an important stage for not insignificant cultural acts. Nevertheless, bringing this cricketing demonstration back round to the issue at hand, I want to argue that the trickle-down effect of the obsession with theatrical spectacle threatens to mute the artistic potential of Indian cricket.

I have just watched the last ball of an innings in an IPL game between the Chennai Super Kings and the Mumbai Indians. The Chennai bowler, having taken two wickets and conceded only two runs in the crucial last over, delivers a slower final ball (something of an art form in Twenty-20, often confusing the batsman who swings wildly and too early at thin air) that pitches dead in line with the stumps. Harbhajan Singh, the right-handed Mumbai batsman, takes a lolling left-footed step backwards, drops his right knee nearly to the floor and, only at the last second realising the slower pace of the ball, swings the bat brutishly in stages from somewhere behind his head, connects, and hits the ball high and over the ropes for six runs. In isolation the shot is spectacular, a sort of skewed and collapsed version of a traditional hook shot. The contortion of the batsman's body is strangely dexterous, and the sheer power of it is immense. In the context of the game, meanwhile, this final flourish marks a shift in momentum, giving the Mumbai side a fillip for the second half. For the crowd in the stadium, too, there is joy to be had in witnessing (and hearing), first-hand, this shot in real-time. Yet for the television viewer – and, clearly, most spectatorship is undertaken in this way – I find something ultimately disempowering about the way in which the spectacle is subsequently handled by the broadcaster, who we must regard here as the arbiter of an aggressive visual culture. For not only is the second-long footage of the shot shown again once in real-time and perhaps half a dozen more times, slow motion, from various vantage points – including from cameras embedded within the stump and attached to the brim of the umpire's hat – not only this, but the footage is then shown close-up and in ultra-slow motion, a theatrical soundtrack added, a loud bang effect timed for the moment the ball strikes the bat. My reservation is not

necessarily with the footage itself, which affords the interested viewer an insight into its very anatomy. I am instead bothered by the outright fetishization of it and what the knock-on effect is on the esteem in which the whole thing is held. The shot is made purely theatrical, transformed from sport into spectacle. Cricket, lauded as a game epitomized by the sharp snap of leather on willow and all that the sound summons up, is reduced here to that and that only: the repeated, fetishized staging of the game's most striking moment.⁷ Are we not treading once more here on a Barthesian footing, in terms of his thoughts on the spectacle of wrestling? 'The spectator [of wrestling],' Barthes writes, "is not interested in the rise and fall of fortunes; he expects the transient image of certain passions."⁸ When Barthes draws upon the differences between the sport of boxing and the spectacle of wrestling, and duly notes that, 'a boxing-match is a story which is constructed before the eyes of the spectator; in wrestling, on the contrary, it is each moment which is intelligible, not the passage of time'⁹, can we not suggest that the difference has now narrowed? Is not spectacle coming to define the way of all sports? By extension, one might well suggest that Twenty-20 is to earlier forms of cricket what wrestling is to boxing – which is not to downplay the merits of wrestling *per se*, but simply to contend that the very heart of cricket has been shifted from story to style. Professional players have lauded the Twenty-20 format for freeing the imagination and the bodily mechanics of the cricketer, who is liberated from the traditional expectation of, say, taking guard in a particular position, keeping still as long as possible at the crease, or, as a bowler, releasing the ball from the hand in a particular manner. But that liberation is short-lived, for a given ownership of the shot is claimed from above, neatly packaged, and presented in a way that curtails its organic value.

Let us return to the matter of Harbhajan's shot, and the distillation of the whole context of the game of cricket – not just this particular game, but the sport at large – to a single frame, an image almost sexualized in its phallic symbolism,

⁷ (I have witnessed this elsewhere: the phenomenon of the ultra-motion replay at the boxing match, the strangely roused gasps of the crowd when the moment of one boxer's knock-out blow is shown over and over at an agonising pace on a big screen. It is as though the rest of the drama is supplanted by the one frame showing the head of the losing participant shudder and his body crumple to the floor.)

⁸ Barthes, 'The World of Wrestling', in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), pp. 15-26 (p. 16).

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 16.

in which the batsman's contribution to proceedings becomes a moment of mere looking, untethered from all else. Put simply, it is no longer the batsman's shot. Something about this fetishization of the shot is reminiscent of a development traceable in modern-day pornography, which we might consider to be the height of spectacle, and which is worth discussing here on the basis that it tells us something further about the span modern-day trends in visual culture. The closer and clearer attention paid to the act of sexual penetration in pornography – enabled by better quality camera equipment and structured by the mass availability of material online, which drives forward the need to outstrip a standard – has had the harmful consequence, among others, of detaching the genitalia of performers from their bodies, physically and socially. In a pornographic video of a female, for example, wherein the viewer is granted an ongoing close-up of the woman's vagina, given the detachment between sexual organ and body the viewer is left watching only the theatrical spectacle of penetration of a, not *her*, vagina; that is, an indefinite, rather than a definite, article. This, for obvious reasons, is dangerous territory. Returning to the six shot in cricket, I observe its elevation to what we might call a “money-shot” image (sexual penetration, bat on ball), to an unassailable apex at the top of our hierarchy of representational forms, in which the isolated and repeated clip of the six is detached from the larger contest and viewers are left to delight in the spectacle. The classic money shot itself, the on-screen display of male sexual climax in pornography, is an evidently fetishizing act, foregoing the natural (and visually unspectacular) conclusion of sex in favour of a manufactured graphic display: the visibly ejaculating penis. In 1989, Linda Williams put it that the money shot affords ‘maximum visibility’, ‘the sense of an ending’, and ‘visual evidence of the mechanical “truth” of bodily pleasure’¹⁰ – in sum, an orchestrated and truly striking spectacle that is an unnatural elucidation of sexual intercourse. This finds something like its equivalent in the IPL in the similar inflation to a zenith of the point-of-contact image, when in ultra-motion the would-be defenceless cricket ball (which is clearly not the case in reality), gliding harmlessly through the air, finally meets with the would-be phallus – the bat – wielded by the cricketer, and the camera captures the most muscular and

¹⁰ Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), p. 94; p. 93; p. 106.

powerful moment of the action. (Something can be said of the moment that the bowler hits the wickets, too, at which point the television viewer's perspective changes and, from within the slow-motion stump camera, one bears witness to the now deadly ball increasing in size, expertly avoiding the swing of the bat, until it appears to penetrate the very lens itself. Importantly, it is an image that cannot sustain itself, for, a split second after contact is made, the stump is wrenched from the ground along with its wires and the stream of footage is broken.) If it is too simple to note just that this inclination towards the money shot in both modern pornography and cricket reduces broader wholes to concentrated images, then one must begin to consider what exactly is lost in the process. Or, perhaps more importantly, what is it that cannot be retrieved? True, in the case of cricket, the actual game continues to an unscripted, organic conclusion regardless of the festishization of images that takes place en route – which is to note that the actual outcome of the gameplay is, in theory, always above being influenced – but there is something damaging about the culture that this behaviour begets. Cricket invariably moves towards valuing not the action itself, but always how it looks. Put differently, overwhelmingly the spectator (the television viewer) is put before the artist (the cricketer). For the Indian cricketer playing in the IPL who might have held, through his innovative manipulation of bat and ball, a cultural potential, it is dispiriting to see that his labour is taken from him as quickly as he has made it.

There is a strange logic at work in the IPL. In the very act of creating a platform issued explicitly in the name of India, on which Indian cricketers can theoretically perform important cultural acts for themselves, for ordinary Indians and for more around the world – acts that might well contribute over time to the development of a narrative history of Indian cricket – there has been the unfortunate corollary that those performances are always already prey to larger forces (commercial, national and so on). Those forces have both enabled the cricketing performances in the first place and yet, at the same time, almost entirely diminished the potential of them in one fell swipe of the bat.

* * *

IV • A Narrative History of Indian Cricket

In *The Cambridge Companion to Cricket* (2011), Boria Majumbar writes triumphantly of the IPL, suggesting that ‘India’s position as the new nerve centre of world cricket, completing what I call the “decolonisation of Indian cricket”, has been strengthened in recent times thanks to the impact of the IPL’.¹¹ True, the contribution of Indian cricket to an historical understanding of India and Indianness cannot be overstated – the title of Bedi’s article, ‘Indian Cricket as Synecdoche for Our Times’, makes clear this judgment – but I find Majumbar somewhat overstates the potential of the IPL. True, there is little doubt that, as he says, India has become cricket’s new nerve centre; such is the vast monetary worth of the tournament that this is largely beyond question. Leading international cricketers have shown willingness to forego their national commitments in order to play in the IPL, which clashes with many international ties. I would argue their decisions are overwhelmingly financially motivated, though. I would also stop somewhere short of the claim that the IPL completes “the decolonisation of Indian cricket”, because it assumes the tournament as a *bona fide* Indian vehicle. It is curious, for Majumbar also concedes the “aggressive hyper-jingoistic nationalist sentiment [that] has emerged in India”¹² as a result of the IPL, hinting at the transience and the instability of beliefs it spurns among the Indian cricketing public. He also cites examples of non-Indian players and coaches who have been ‘appropriated and indigenised’¹³ as members of IPL teams, only to be derided later for performing badly. He writes:

David Hussey, the most consistent batsman for the Kolkata team in IPL season one, had soon become “Hussey da”, meaning elder brother in the vernacular. However, this co-option rests on unstable foundations, a fact evident from the venom spat at coach John Buchanan each time the Kolkata Knight Riders failed to deliver. Each failure was greeted with murmurs of a “white man here in India just for the money”. (p. 178)

Majumbar implicitly acknowledges the IPL as an entertainment spectacular parading as a national competition, and as one driven by an aggressively financial – rather than cultural, social, or national – heart.

¹¹ Boria Majumbar, ‘The Indian Premier League and World Cricket’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Cricket*, (eds.) Anthony Bateman and Jeffrey Hill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 173-186 (p. 173).

¹² *ibid.*, p. 178.

¹³ *ibid.*

In a roundabout way, then, I argue that the structure of the IPL, given its superficial treatment of cricket, its dismissal of more than it includes, delegitimizes the tournament's claim to act as a history-producing entity. And yet, the development of an historical cricketing narrative of India is of considerable import. Written or otherwise, understanding India's cricket culture in cogent terms is particularly valuable, not only as a way of narrativizing the national team's on-field successes in recent times, but also articulate the sport's place among the Indian social fabric. There have been a number of literary-historical works published, most notably Ashis Nandy's *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games* (1989) and Mihir Bose's *A History of Indian Cricket* (1990), both of which come too early to record the latest chapter in India's cricketing and economic history. Tellingly, Bose warns in the revised edition of his book (2002) of the country's cricketing plight in the early years of the new millennium, suggesting that,

Indian cricket has entered its most critical phase. When it was growing up in the years after independence it could plead poverty. Now it has money to finance its dreams, but unless its administrators can provide the far-sighted leadership the game desperately needs, the danger is there may be a growing gap between boardroom riches and on-field poverty leading to a growing public disillusionment from which Indian cricket may find it difficult to recover.¹⁴

Written only five years before the inaugural IPL tournament was held, Bose's comments illuminate how unprecedented the magnitude of the competition has been.

That noted, the IPL has not been a panacea to its country's cricketing shortcomings. Instead, it has been something a *trompe l'oeil* in which a highly commoditized international spectacle has masqueraded as domestic competition. Rather than occupying a place in the narrative history of Indian cricket – the would-be success story Bose had hoped for – the IPL reveals only the extent of India's industry-level fixation with image projection. With watertight commercial and media packaging, the competition has not only secured a global sporting interest, in the sense that cricket fans are bound to be captivated by the world's best players taking part all at once, but has also traded on Indian audiences' inclination towards “darshan” (auspicious seeing) and “tamasha”

¹⁴ Mihir Bose, *A History of Indian Cricket* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990; 2002), p. 476.

(grand show). Again, I look to Bedi, who writes (before the inception of the IPL):

How has cricket become a sort of epic democratic-capitalist-nationalist soap opera for all, complete with heroes, villains, heroes-turned-villains-turned heroes? The answer, perhaps, lies in the conjugation of the transcendental, devotional power of nationalism with the equally enchanting power of the commodity spectacle.¹⁵

Which is to suggest, of course, that what has driven this recent reengagement with cricket has not been the participants who have, play-by-play, performed their way to sporting success (and its positive public corollary), but the receptacle through which this narrative has taken place.

What, then, is the value of the IPL to Indian cultural economy? The answer is twofold, of course. On the surface, it provides an impermeable depiction of India in images. When each broadcast begins, satellite-style images display a quick swoop from an all-encompassing map of India down to an overhead view of the host stadium. These pictures cut to footage of scenes within the ground itself. The production values are slick: sweeping shots of the crowd are shown, often focusing on well-dressed and cheering members; the on-screen illustrations, which give details of players' statistics and so on, are flecked at their edges with typically Indian motifs; the kits the players wear pay similar homage to the Indian aesthetic; carefully chosen music is blared out of the public address system throughout the game; and, for the final game in the 2014 tournament, the stadium footage opened with a theatrical demonstration of the on-duty commentators (among them South Africans, New Zealanders and a Zimbabwean), encircled by a camera on the pitch, while all wore traditional Indian garb – as though they too were characters in the drama. Away from the ground (I write only of the British coverage here), the London studio continues the aesthetic: against the swirling orange-green backdrop and the window-view of the Thames sits Shonali Nagrani, the pale-skinned model-cum-presenter, dressed in flattering western attire, whom we viewers are perhaps meant to see as the representative modern Indian woman. All told, the IPL as spectacle is an illusionary but powerful projection of India, the success of which is difficult to tell. Nevertheless, it is a set of images that cater to the contemporary obsession with spectacle, and, on this scale, they are undoubtedly effective.

¹⁵ Bedi, p. 2520.

By contrast, the second estimation of the IPL as a national form must necessarily be valued in less visual terms. Aside from the allure of the spectacle, the question must be asked as to whether the game of cricket itself retains any sense of value in this charged arena. While I have stated already that the artistic potential of a single cricketer in the IPL is diminished by the stage constructed around him, I might add that the competition as a whole cannot contribute a great deal to the overall narrative of Indian cricket. To those who might find something innately revolutionary about the IPL, in its adaptation of a elitist British colonial sport, its repackaging for an Indian audience, one might respond by arguing that the IPL has been equally non-inclusive; that, as Ramani suggests, it only '[panders] to the voyeuristic desires of the consumerized spectator'.¹⁶ 'The anarchic nature of a market-driven sport,' he continues, 'ensures that only a small coterie of readily recognisable talent gets attention.'¹⁷ His contention is that the upshot of this is a system that recognizes not skills but brand appeal. Thus, if the competition neither draws players democratically from the Indian citizenry – which is all but to essentially preclude the dreams of those who aspire to rise to the top from the very bottom – and if it trades in the individuality of every Indian player who *does* make it into the competition, one can mark conclusively that the revolutionary potential of IPL is minimal.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I am inclined to lean more heavily upon this second appraisal for the reason that, ultimately, the enduring allure of the spectacle will prove unsustainable. Indeed, there have been signs already that this is the case with popularity in recent years struggling to reach the peaks of the first few editions of the IPL. If the drive at the heart of the competition is primarily entertainment, there is surely a limit to which it can be pushed. Similarly, if at the zenith of the IPL game itself is the shot bludgeoned for six runs, what can be more of a spectacle than that, unless the rules of the game itself are changed to incorporate a shot that scores eight runs, or ten, or twelve? In the 2014 tournament nearly 720 sixes were scored in the sixty games played, averaging around twelve in each. With some loose calculations, and taking into account that each maximum shot is replayed on screen some four or so times, one reaches a figure in excess of three-and-a-half thousand times that a six hit was broadcast.

¹⁶ Ramani, p. 15.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

I draw attention to this because the pleasure of the image cannot continue to hold its value. By extension, entertainment cannot continue to operate in these conditions. Pointing out the obvious, it should be acknowledged that cricket is a sport, the joy of which has always to have been found in its unpredictability. Each cricketing nation has known its ups and downs (again I write through gritted teeth as an English supporter) and is all the richer for having experienced both. The IPL, on the contrary, cannot secure this nuanced manner of unpredictability and thus will, I argue, increasingly resemble a scripted soap opera. Woe betide the tournament whose total number of sixes falls short of the number in the previous year, for what manner of spectacle will that be?

V • Conclusion

The nationalist-capitalist mechanics of the IPL chime with a reality well known to the postcolonial nation, one concerning the discussion over right to space. In its aggressive manufacturing of an on-screen visioning of India – one that is at any one time entertaining, multicultural, cosmopolitan and egalitarian – the IPL has something of a monopoly over the representation of Indian space, much to the detriment of that which exists just beyond its shown boundaries. In other words, the images the IPL projects, particularly in the context of a contemporary visual culture that prioritises television images, are more highly valued than the myriad off-screen realities. Within the built space of the IPL, meanwhile, the cricketer who takes to the field is always secondary to the on-screen space's guiding principle of engineering a theatrical spectacle, meaning that his performance is always at risk of being bundled up and lost to the greater carnival. Let us consider this a moment. How often the IPL viewer has seen the likes of Chris Gayle, arguably the West Indies' current best batsman (and suitably aggressive enough in cricketing terms to fit perfectly into the IPL mould), take to the crease and swing the bat violently, attacking right from the off. One particular innings in the 2013 tournament, in which he blasted his way to a score of 175 from sixty-six balls, simply set the tone for more innings in the same vein. That is, rather than recognising the performance on the basis of its obvious merit

(never has a score been made more quickly, or astonishingly), the nature of the IPL format meant that it served only as a benchmark to be emulated or evinced over and over, not only by other players keen to gain the record, but by Gayle himself. The wild swinging of the bat from the very first ball has never been a sound cricketing tactic – one should always get one's eye in first, so to speak – but Gayle has been somewhat coerced into a role that essentially requires an exaggerated projection of his normal game, or his normal self. When on occasion he has played in a manner more conducive to overall team success, in doing so playing with more awareness of the wider state of the particular match, there have been cries of: 'Where is Chris Gayle?' Might we not ask, by extension: who exactly is that player at the crease?

Elsewhere, amidst the accompanying IPL paraphernalia, players are utilized to endorse the products whose makers have made the IPL possible at all. These players are seemingly obligated (but well paid, too, one imagines) to have their bodies sprawled across billboards and buses, not just with the products they endorse, but often consuming them too. For it is not enough to see M.S Dhoni with a bottle of soft drink, one must also see him imbibe the liquid. Interestingly, in 2011, as part of a Pepsi advertising campaign for the Cricket World Cup, Dhoni featured in a number of print adverts shirtless, a flame motif seemingly superimposed onto his torso and waves of (one can only assume) Pepsi breaking dramatically at his flanks. The text reads, ironically: 'Rules are for followers.' A complementary television advert, meanwhile, sees Dhoni in a bucolic India being taught by a villager how to operate a piece of machinery. Conveniently enough, the action required is almost identical to that enacted in Dhoni's helicopter shot – a swift wheeling of the arms. For proving himself (and for proving also that cricketing stardom has not alienated him from the ordinary Indian body) Dhoni is rewarded with a bottle of apparently cold Pepsi, which, upon drinking, transports him to the wicket of an international cricket game, where he repeats the same circular action and sends a ball flying for six runs. When the advert ends, with Dhoni gulping from the bottle and proclaiming, 'the helicopter shot,' against a blue background and the trademark Pepsi logo, one barely need ask to whom the shot now belongs. What I am keen to point out here is the extent to which the very labour of the cricketer is owned, particularly in the IPL, from both inside

and out. By which I am hinting at a double movement of, on the one hand, the claim laid by broadcasters, sponsors and commercially minded owners who work to frame cricketing labour from the outside in their own terms; while, on the other hand, and as something of a direct consequence of the former, the cricket played is always already subject to expectations regulated outside of the actual playing arena. Ramani provides telling evidence in precisely this regard when he writes of the basis of the IPL's player auction:

The establishment of this commodity market was kicked off by an auction system that instituted market value for the players through a valuation process. This valuation process considered not just the skill levels of the players but also their brand building capabilities. So it is that Ishant Sharma, a tyro who has promised a great future ... was valued at \$950,000 as compared to the established Umar Gul valued at just \$150,000 although he took the most wickets playing for Pakistan in the World Twenty20 tournament. Sharma's value as a representative for brand building the franchise, owing to his Indian nationality, trumped over the *real value* of Umar Gul.¹⁸

In sum, one might go as far as to note that the IPL claims ownership of the cricketing body and, by extension, its actions. Cricketing bodies are not rated not in terms of use- or exchange-value, in the old Marxist sense – that is, not for their cricketing skill – but by Baudrillardian sign-values.¹⁹ Moreover, the players do not remain players *per se*, but emerge in ambassadorial roles representing those who have secured their place on the stage itself.

Part of the power of history, much like the best cricketing performances, is to be found in its internal battles over time. The cricketer at the wicket, batsman or bowler, cannot ever hope for instant or unhindered success, and must learn to revel equally in the unpredictable turns his game takes. For a sport that captivates the nation's public imagination, it is important that Indian cricketing history can be understood in cogent terms, for it occupies a significant place in the national culture. In turn, the contributions of individual Indian cricketers must be allowed to take up their own small places within the larger narrative. The IPL, though, threatens to become an historical anomaly, reducible to an ultra-motion clip of a batsman, muscularly and agonisingly slowly, heaving a cricket ball from his bat

¹⁸ Ramani, p. 14.

¹⁹ Baudrillard suggests that a proliferation of signs and spectacles is a corollary of the mass production of commodities and that, as a consequence, over time value comes to be measured by the sign accompanying the commodity. In other words, value comes to be premised on, say, prestige rather than as on utility.

over the boundary rope. Without a frame of reference, this image will have no greater resonance than one based purely on shallow aesthetics. But so long as its images of India do hold onto a certain value – that is, as long as one is seduced into seeing the IPL as a *bona fide* Indian entity – it will continue its illusion. The competition was borne out of vanity and excess during a boom time in the mid-2000s when India had the resources to act accordingly. Yet it never had any design of genuinely serving the desires of the Indian cricketing public, which has always remained outside its narrow frame, or has been called upon only in the manner of sweeping camera shots across its cheering mass, for visual effect. Offering a warning, Ramani writes: ‘History tells us that the period of excess is followed by a period of collapse.’²⁰

One should be careful not to overstate the revolutionary potential of cricket, as though the heaving swipes of an Indian batsman, the sharp turn of the Indian spin bowler, and the raucous cries of spectators could hold the same social value as they do during game play itself. But it is important that the Indian public itself is not seduced by the spectacle totally, to the point that it cannot see cricket’s larger antecedent history, in which it plays an important part. Because if (or, more likely, when) the gleaming façade of the spectacle can no longer be contained, and duly shatters, ordinary cricket-loving Indians will be the ones left to pick up the pieces. The narrative of Indian cricket begins in England, takes a turn through dusty Indian village maidans, city squares and informal games played just outside the walls of Eden Gardens, Calcutta. It cannot be reduced to this vulgar base level of fetishized images and expect to continue, untroubled. Perhaps it is only fitting that the final word go to he who is, and quite rightly should be, at the centre of the debate: the cricketer himself. And in the spirit of the game it seems only right to take up a cricketing cliché or two as pieces of advice to him. Play your shots, we might say to him. Look to build an innings. Play the ball, not the occasion. And if in any doubt, occupy the crease. Just occupy the crease.

²⁰ Ramani, p. 15.

APPENDIX TWO
Morning: Belgrave and Latimer

I • 0729

Traffic slides off the southernmost chute of Red Hill Circle, as though it marked the top of the city's gullet, from where the motorcade is then swallowed down Abbey Lane into the city's sickly belly. Beneath the tarmac, if one cared to pull away at it – not that even this much is necessary in places: holes open up at will in the surface, it seems – anyway, beneath this grey-black crust the earth is deep red clay. It is what gives the hill its name. The sun is hauled above the horizon two sharp pulls of the rigging's worth. A hazy, effervescent sky that is yet to settle itself, still fizzy-blue. The wind is gentle enough so as barely to feather its way across one's eyelashes, not nearly strong enough to blow a sheet of newspaper from the gutter onto the windscreen of a car.

But wait, wait, stop, stop, stop. Stop there just a moment. The city is already a poem and does not need rendering so. It forces its own rhythms and chooses its own pitch. How many times can one write the city as beast? The sun rises even if no one writes it. And more spectacular sunrises would easily eclipse this one. Maybe yesterday's was a blinder, I'll never know. Now I think about it, too, the breeze today is neither here nor there. Characterless as weak tea. True, I could make it appear otherwise, make the sunrise that little bit grander, paint the sky with streaky white clouds – or, scrap that, perhaps it is raining, yes, rain tumbling down so hard that droplets bash loudly to the ground from a brooding grey sky.

But it is not so.

While I am making this point, that this day is like any other, people here are not hand-picked characters in some great epic. They are facts. Most of them slip past unnoticed, doing nothing remarkable enough to trouble the scorers. Not every story is a parable.

II • To Begin

Now, while we have dallied, four minutes have passed and I am still stood at the corner of Thurcaston Road with my pen poised and not a scratch on the page. And so it begins with a hundred paces eastward into the rising sun. School to the left, car garage to the right, then a paint shop – the sort of road where a piece of litter

dropped at the gutter remains untouched so long that it becomes part of the furniture. Faded chocolate bar wrapper caught amidst stray leaves. A man walks towards me with two dogs on two chain leads. The rhythmic clang of the metal and the steady grunt of the dogs. The man's boots are paint-flecked and shudder at each contact with the ground. A mother and daughter, full-sized and half-sized, walk just ahead. (Brown-skinned, although perhaps that is a mere irrelevance.) The rumble of the girl's backpack joins the morning score and her hair, tied into little back pigtails, swishes at her shoulders. The two of them talk in that way of any mother and any child: question, answer, question, question, question, question. An oncoming cyclist (black-skinned) breaches the brow of the hill, passes first the woman and child, then myself. And then – wait for it, just a second – the dog-walker (white-skinned). The dogs (brown, white and black, as it happens) pull at their leads in unison and twitch their noses at the bike as it glides past. I stop at the bridge, lean my notebook upon the brick-work; the two in front stretch out the distance between us; turning back, the dog-walker has turned off the road, as has the cyclist. All of us, this early morning cast, moving about our own separate geographies. Walking to school, scraping up a steaming dog turd from the roadside (depositing a dog turd at the roadside), cycling to God knows where.

III • Domesday

And me? My morning began at that last street corner, the one just back there. From a canvas bag I took out a plastic biro and a dog-eared notebook, made a note of the time, and took a century of steps towards Belgrave. Merdegrave, as it read in Domesday, marten grove, land belonging to Hugh of Grandmesnil. Some time after King William's ordered census, to rid the name of any unfavourable French connotations, that beautiful prefix appears. Later, a church goes up. Later still, a Belgrave Hall and a Belgrave House. Some trees are lost from the original grove to pave the way for new additions – a neat row of Victorian villas, for example – while others grow tall to maturity. Later still, the village is taken under the wing of the city of Leicester. Later, an unhinged African dictator (bear with me) orders that the brown-skinned folk residing on *his* African land must leave it. Immediately? No, no, no, he is not so ruthless. Ninety days. *Ninety days*? Yes, ninety days. And, so the story goes, this displaced (and no doubt downtrodden) people arrive in great numbers on Britain's shores. Later, they happen upon this little wedge of Leicester, north of the city, cradled on each side by river and train line. Later, later, later, later. Suns and moons rise and fall. Seasons turn. Years pass. And then, slowing time back down now, no longer leapfrogging great swathes of history as though each jump were of little consequence, we arrive back at this unremarkable September morning, somewhere at the back end of an English summer. It could be any day of the week. But it is Thursday. Writes Saramago: 'It would be nearest the truth to say that each day is the day it is, plus the day just gone, and that the two together make tomorrow.'

And me? Yes, sorry, I took a little tumble back through time just then. Well, with sleep still stinging my eyes, bitter coffee on my tongue, sturdy shoes on my feet and a blue biro in my hand, I am a Thursday stenographer, Belgrave's court reporter. It is an unending task. The pen will deputise for my eyes and my ears and my nose (and so on) until it is me that is finished. And so to work.

IV • Thurcaston Road Bridge

Paint fumes | diesel | baked dog shit, sharp scent opened up by morning dew | fungal smell of rolling river water | Stationery traffic | Moving traffic | Dog leads | Panting, Staffordshire Bull Terrier | Panting, unidentified breed | Backpack, rumbling (probably a lunchbox) | Footsteps, heavy work boot | Thickly accented English | mildly accented English | Footsteps, four feet, two light, two staccato-sharp | Ford Transit: ignition-cough, then first-gear growl | Rattle of bicycle wheels |

V • Belgrave Village

Thurcaston Road bends round to the left where after a hundred yards or so it meets with Loughborough Road (I can see the junction up ahead); but it is difficult from on the right-hand pavement not to slide onwards to Church Road, passing the Talbot Inn. (The pub, I should add, does not look fit for purpose. A 1949 photograph taken from this very spot, at the forking point of the two roads, facing back to the bridge, shows a car in the foreground, the three-storey inn behind it, a few white scraps of litter at the kerbside, Red Hill off in the distance. A man cycles mid-shot. For some unknown reason – there is no one around to ask – the building has now lost its top storey, and lost with it any sense of welcome it might have had. I couldn't go in, for it is barely past sun-up and the paint-peeled door is close. But I wouldn't even if it wasn't. Traces do remain of that earlier time: the eight-foot brick wall to the left of the main building still stands, the metal street sign seven feet up it, five metal wheels – for what use, I do not know – attached to the brickwork in the formation of the five-side of a dice.)

Skirting the path around the church's boundary wall, I see the graveyard offer up something of a moment to relish. A clutch of sunbeams fall in diagonal shafts through the trees, hitting upon a gravestone here, a patch of grass there. A minute later, round on Vicarage Lane, a lone leaf looks to have fallen loose from a tree (I catch something flitting just above my eye line), only for me to realise that, rather than submitting to the laws of gravity, it is actually suspended from a branch by a single strand of spider's web and is falling nowhere. It really happens. You couldn't make it up. I watch it gently rotate, twisting the thread one way and then back the other. It holds me there watching just like the silk holds the leaf.

And then I make to move on, not least because it suddenly occurs to me: for an onlooker, perhaps just drawing their curtains on the morning, the sight of a man transfixed by a tree would really be something to behold.

Point six of a mile under the belt. Just before eight. To the top of Vicarage Lane – number forty-eight is for sale, pretty little mid-terrace, £135,000 – and across the junction at Loughborough Road over to Checketts Road.

VI • 0803

Checketts Road, left-hand pavement. Samuel Checketts, churchwarden at St. Peters Church. The church back there, yes. Now, let's see, yes, yes, what have we here. *Parish Registers of Belgrave*, volume VI. Yes, here we are: Married, 3rd March, 1825, Samuel Checketts & Matilda Henton Ward. So this Checketts chap gives his name to this road, on which now stands, over there, the Flamingo Lounge (I have *no* idea) and, a bit further along, The Jungle Club (no, not a clue).

The heart of new Belgrave is up ahead – I can see it up to the next junction, where traffic is now gathering. But I slip off down a road to the left for no apparent reason. Bellholme Close. Sixties-looking row of houses, wood-panelled frontages. Indian fella crouches by his front door halfway down the street, looks like he's just rolled out of bed, rolled up a fag. Morning, I say, but he's not ready for the world just yet. Ten paces more and I realise the road's a cul-de-sac, so I turn on my heels, thrust an index finger into the air as if I've suddenly remembered something important (it is all an act) and walk back to Checketts. Morning, I think of saying again.

An elderly gentleman stands outside Mellor Community School looking like someone has forced him into his outfit: fluorescent orangeyellow ankle-length number. Lollipop must be somewhere. I do hope so. Shuffles about looking lost. No schoolkids yet. Imagine a butcher, cleaver in hand, without the meat. Just looks a bit odd.

VII • Crossroad

Outside Shree Sai Superstore. Out comes the owner with three watermelons in an old shopping trolley, arranges them on a stack of pallets draped in grocers' turf. Then back inside for something else.

I'm lent on the pitched top of a green cable box facing the junction. Al fresco stenography. Cars build at each set of traffic lights at the crossroads. Lots of north-south traffic, into and away from the city. On the east-west routes, lots turn into the city-bound procession.

At the pedestrian crossings, lit red men hold gathering parties of schoolchildren before green men release them. More gather, and are then released too. Each time, half a dozen group together by the roadside, all dressed in their red shirts and black trousers. Good way to snapshot.

First group: seven boys, two girls. Of all shades, yes.

Second: two girls, one boy. Same.

Third: all girls. A few long black ponytails, one shoulder-length blonde, couple of headscarves.

Fourth: no one there.

They are facts. Not all stories are parables, remember.

Round the corner, heading northwards now on Melton Road, the little groups that have been released in spits and spats gradually join together, making one long stream that I slip into.

Little lad, jet black hair freshly combed, emerges from behind a tatty doorway next to a Portuguese restaurant and stands just back from the passing stampede. Looks for friends, but not there. Difficult to spot when everyone wears the same. Looks again. No. Slips into line alone.

Global News, 288 Melton Road. Lebara Mobile signage out front. Doorman, folded arms. No more than three schoolchildren at once. Ha! I'm twenty-seven. In I go. I take a bottle of still water (yes, twenty-seven) from the fridge and wrestle my way towards the counter. In fact, I pay the bloke a single fifty pence coin above the heads of kids peeling jelly snakes from a box and stuffing them into paper bags.

Outside, weaving amongst the crowd, I cross the road – the green man gives me the all clear – and head back southward into oncoming foot traffic.

VIII • Listen: 0816

Close one's eyes and simply listen. Untangle the separate sounds.

The sharp, distinctive ones. A single parp on a car horn. A schoolgirl's scream and an ensuing chorus of laughter. The tickle of an empty crisp packet. A Vauxhall Vectra, released suddenly by a break in oncoming traffic allowing it to turn down a side street, that little squeal of the tyres as it pulls off and then the engine rising through the gears. A sneeze. A dog bark.

Then, the rhythmic, recurring sounds, regular like breathing. Footsteps and backpacks. Traffic *en masse*. Breeze through trees.

And the ancient sounds, the ones that will never change. The city.

But don't close your eyes for too long, of course. A man stood amidst schoolchildren, eyes closed, dead-still and smiling, is not a good look.

IX • Melton Road Chaat

"...we should definitely..."

"...he got *Barcelona*!"

"How?"

"...????..."

(Too quiet, perhaps not English.)

"Yes."

"Yes!"

"...what *is* it, though?"

"She lied!"

"I lied!"

"...????..."

(Not English.)

X • Woodbridge Road

A factory stood on this empty plot only a few weeks ago. I remember driving past it. Four storeys, the sort that would once have taken in hundreds of workers. It was a little on the derelict side these days, sure – a few windows patched up here and there with brown cardboard – but it still had that sense of magnitude that even old, decommissioned factories have. It cast big, four-storey shadows across the street.

This morning, there's nothing but a level concrete floor, a few stray piles of rubble at the edge of the plot. Temporary fence around the boundary.

There was a fire, a big one. Early morning. Flames flew skyward and smoke billowed so thickly that it could be seen from the other side of the city. The road was closed off between Checketts Road and Troon Way, nearly a mile stretch in total. Two hundred houses evacuated. News came out later that while the houses were

unoccupied, some callous shits went round and burgled a few of them. Got away with a whole load of money, jewellery.

While I'm note-taking, resting on a concrete windowsill, thinking about how much extra light has been gained by the downing of the factory, a father and son walk by. Son two paces behind the father. Different uniform to the black and red; this kid's much younger. Scuffs his feet across the ground at each step. Not happy about going to school. The father is black-bearded, upper lip shaved, bedecked in an England football shirt. Walk prroperrrly, he chides, with added alveolar trill.

XI • St Michael's Avenue to Leicester Colosseum.

[1.26miles. Easy going]

Here is a little itinerary you might wish to take. Turn from the eastern side of Melton Road, a few yards south of the empty plot at Woodbridge Road (if it is still empty), opposite S.P.K Shah & Co Chartered Accounts LTD, into St. Michael's Avenue. There is a heavy-set public bin only a few steps onto the street for you to deposit any litter you might have on your person. An empty water bottle, say. The top of the bin also doubles as a writing desk, should you need to utilise it this way. Set off down the street. Four or five doors down there is a sign in the window of a house warning that one of the inhabitants is a large, open-mouthed dog (there is a picture), who is 'the boss of the property'. Quickly slide past, just in case. If your timing is good, you will catch the street in the midst of its morning rituals. An old woman in a beautiful goldgreenpink sari and slippers might shuffle out of her house directly into your path and edge along at snail's pace, so that you have to slot in behind her and edge along in tandem with her quarterpaces, because it would be disrespectful to overtake her, wouldn't it? And then, when you have made the brave decision to skip past Aunty at the moment she stops and catches breath, a front door might open up and little russet-skinned girl in a pink coat might pour out onto the pavement, followed moments later by her frenetic mother juggling a pushchair and a school bag and a lunchbox and house keys and a *Diary of a Princess* book and a toddler balanced on her hip while shouting, Can you please just give mummy a minute can you not see I have my hands full it is really not a great time so can you just be quiet for just one second while I just lock the door or else you will be late for school! And if you side-step that little bit of life, there might be a little bit more waiting for you at the top of the street, where St. Michael's Avenue meets Harrison Road, because there could be another mother-child duo, stood at the kerbside this time, the older of the two holding the other's hand and saying to him (in the most wonderful Leicester lilt), Now luk this way, and now that way, and now luk this way agenn, and wunce more that way, and mek sure there's no cars cummin, and then you (yes, you, reader) might have to stand there a while as well, while the little boy with his brushed blonde hair looks this-way-and-that-way-and-this-way-again, like he is a spectator at the tennis, because you can't step out into the road now so recklessly can you, because you would ruin the careful life lesson being taught here, so, yes, you might have to stand there for an ungodly amount of time and look this-way-and-that-way-and-this-way-too too, and then wait for mummy to say, On three then: one, two, are you ready, oh wait, wait, wait there's a car coming now, let's start over... And when you do finally cross the road, turn into Magnus Road, where a group of red-jumpered juniors might be standing by school gates with their mummies and daddies and

grannies and granddaddies in tow, waiting to be let inside. And listen to all the voices you hear, the ones that gabble and giggle and chortle and ramble in English and Urdu and Hindi and Polish. And then slide by onto Shanti Margh and think for a moment how out of place the street name seems in the context of all the others, perhaps think this as you're walking down the road, when there are yellow-brick houses on either side of you and raised voices in a language you don't speak blaring from an open window on the left-hand side of the street. And then, still walking and thinking and thinking and walking, you might realise that the road is another cul-de-sac, no matter how much you wish it wasn't, and that you'll have to thrust an index finger purposefully into the air (again), as though you fully intended to walk all this way down a dead-end street. And to save yourself from embarrassment (even though there doesn't seem to be anyone watching), you might as a precaution walk to the very limit of the cul-de-sac nonetheless and look onto the vacant land beyond it and lift your chin and flare your nostrils slightly and put your hands upon your hips and nod your head and say, confidently, Yes, Yes, Mmm, I thought so – before turning back on yourself and retracing your steps back to Harrison. And when you're back there, turn left, cross Gypsy Lane (not forgetting to look this-way-and-that-way-and-this-way-again), then go left again into Northumberland Avenue, which is lined on either side with 1930s semis, and wonder for a moment whether it is yet another cul-de-sac, because it definitely looks that way. But then, take pleasure from the fact that it is not another dead-end after all, and that it is joined to Westmorland Avenue by a narrow jitty (which is what people call it round here). And head down that narrow jitty, and perhaps just as you enter it there might be a black-haired young woman who gets herself onto the path first, only two paces ahead of you, who leaves in her wake a heavenly early-morning smell of something you can't place, and whose legs are long, whose shoulders are slender, and whose eyes when she turns to weigh you up reveal two things: that firstly she has beautiful, walnut irises, and secondly that she looks as though she is scared you have followed her down this jitty with the intention of doing something terrible to her. And if this happens, it is probably best that you don't smile because this might make it worse. And, again, if this does happen, just make sure that when she turns left at the bottom of Westmorland onto Yorkshire Road, you turn right. Then, fifty yards or so further on, stop for a second on the corner of Penrith Road, which will take you back the length of Northumberland and Westmorland to meet once more with Harrison. But yes, just stand for just a moment at the turning. Stop. Straighten yourself out. And then, with your back to the road, you might just sense somebody coming and turn to see little lad of no more than eight swing by you on a BMX. And in the nearly-nine-o'clock East Belgrave sunlight he might just serenade you accidentally in a voice more angelic than ever his impish face could dream of being, because riding past he might sing, Jhoomka Girrrraaa Ree, Haaai, Jhoomka Girrrraaa Ree. Then, turn down Penrith and watch as the Mera-Saya-boychild rides up the kerbs and then thuds onto the pavement all the way down the street, never ceasing to squeal out his tender song. And watch him turning at the top, leaving you alone on the street, your body casting a long grey shadow three times the length of itself along the ground. And look at the neatly placed cellophane sacs of rubbish deposited on the pavement as you pass them. Look at what sort of empty boxes and packets and tins and cartons you can see through the thin plastic and then question what on earth you are doing. Turn left when you reach Harrison again, and perhaps you will pass by St. Patrick's RC Primary just as Mr. Olszewski is marshalling lines of his pupils inside, while parents stand with faces and waving hands slotted through the wrought iron fence outside

saying, Bye sweetheart, See you later pudding, Have a lovely day trouble. Think to yourself: hmm, a Catholic school, I wonder what the intake is like. And let the thought drift away, because it really means nothing. And then, finally, close to the finish line now, turn your back on the school and walk down Leire Street, a road of terraced houses so narrow that it is like a tunnel, and which seems to attack your senses. Take deep nasal breaths and let the scent of brick dust and cigarette smoke and washed hair and diesel fumes and spice and bodies and morningtime swim inside your head. Turn left at the top of the street and walk the remaining three-hundred feet up the hill to the Leicester Colosseum, where you can rest your weary bum on the metal bench by the roadside and pray to all the myriad gods of all the religions that the rather talkative man in the red woolly hat isn't sat there like he usually is, because, if he is, you might never leave.

XII • 0903

On the brow of the hill. I think of the possibility that at one time there would have been soft brown earth beneath my feet. From this raised blemish in the landscape I might once have seen all the churches in Leicestershire, rising up from green pastures to announce themselves. That fair cluster down there in the city itself, a bricolage of saintdom. St. Martin, St. Nicholas, St. Andrew, St. Peter, St. John the Baptist. Now ensconced within a concrete ring road.

But such is the city. Much like a Green-Finger's garden, where a newly bedded plant soon shades another and the latter wilts. Roots grow, mix with others. One plant kills off its neighbour but becomes beautiful itself. The soil loses its fertility in places. Whole summers pass and corners remain untouched by the sun. And then, remarkably, they yield growth once more. One takes a shovel, breaks open an unremarkable patch of earth, strikes something hard and sees remarkably that the object is the china-white pate of a royal skull fused to a crooked spine.

Let us be more frank. Churches rose, factories rose, trains stations were built, units popped up, up went a big blue tower block, a glass-fronted shopping centre. Station came down, factories closed down. A supermarket was built on the site of the station, only to come down too. Thirty years pass in the blink of an eye.

From here, on this brow, I have a view of the city for the first time today. A near-straight course down a gentle slope. The Golden Mile. Dummy Town. One long snake of brake-lights and traffic signals.

I could sit here all morning like this, upon a knee-high wall with the September sun at my cheek, letting the passing world move my pen along.

XIII • Cannon Street

The row of villas, in fin-de-siècle Victorian style, offer up their names in the front-facing triangles of their roofs. Rockville, Hauteville, Andrea, Agostino and so on. Lowering my gaze back to street-level, a man is suddenly upon me, a few feet ahead. Grey moustache, slippers, late-sixties, bright orange and starched turban. Good morning, he says. Good morning.

There is a scent in the air like aniseed, cardamom.

XIV • Cossington Recreation Ground

Awfully quiet, I think, before noticing it's barely nine-thirty. Cossington rec is one street removed from Belgrave Road. Large open space flanked by a paved track. Before long a host of characters emerge. A lone toddler is rocked by her grandma on a swing, which squeaks painfully at each push. A woman swans by – I can't think of a better word – in athletics gear, arms lifted and palms flayed, neck long and chin pointed. She loops the circuit over and over, dodges pushchairs that have just appeared. I scoot up on the bench to welcome an elderly gentleman dressed in a white dhoti. And then another appears, and another, and I realise I've made a bad choice of benches. I perch on the end and make notes in my book while the gentlemen talk in quiet Gujarati. Women in saris and slippers lumber past slowly pushing the pushchairs of their grandchildren. Small gatherings appear at the fringes of the grass. A crow chirps an angry address, a breath of wind lifts dried leaves and sends them scuttling along the path. Just when I begin to become conscious of the fact I haven't heard English for a while, two toddlers happily shout goodbye to each other from their respective prams. Cossington Recreation Ground, the village maidan.

XV • Library

The library on Cossington Street is serene. Two young girls sit and tap away at computer keyboards while three elderly men navigate broadsheet newspapers and share stories with one another. Over on the far side by the local interest section a group of five or six sit at a table knitting, the sound of their needles clicking. It punctuates their conversation, which happens in various languages. The room is carpeted neatly with tufted pastel blue. From the walls hang large prints of images from Belgrave's past. One shows two young girls stood in white dresses before Belgrave Hall sometime in the early 1900s. They peer into the room, unaware of what is looking back at them a century later.

XVI • Shree Shakti Mandir

The tiny Hindu temple on Moira Street still sports a crucifix at the zenith of its pitched roof. Built in 1820, the little building was once a Roman Catholic Church before it was purchased in the 1970s by Sri Karunashanker Valji Purohit. It is a curious building, bedecked throughout in bright drapes of orangegold garland. The door is open and I peer in at morning worshippers performing their daily Pujas. As I make to move on, a miniscule woman approaches down the narrow pavement and I wait to let her go, so narrow is the walkway. Hunched over and bundled within a long heavy coat, only the bright pink of her sari at her ankles is visible. She creeps forward agonisingly slowly, as though each step is a labour too great for her to expend. Her hair is white and wiry, her face stoic. I wait for a full minute or more for her to reach me, before she turns and attempts the three small steps up into the temple. I want to offer to help, truly I do.

XVII • Lunch

All you can eat for seven pounds at a street corner restaurant. There is seated dining and an area filled with South Asian snacks. Inside heated and cooled and well-lit glass cabinets are trays of sweets and snacks: sticky jalebi, tiny wispy strands of vermicelli, Bombay mix, samosas, spring rolls, countless varieties of thick and creamy barfi. A few people are in the dining area: elderly ladies at one table and a crisp-shirted, white haired Englishman at another, shovelling food into his mouth while eying a laptop. At a table by the sidewall I take a seat and await the waitress to give me the go ahead. You can't eat all you want until you've been given licence to. There is a beautifully rich pea and aubergine curry in chocolate coloured gravy. The peas are sweet and bright against the deep brown of the sauce. There is orange daal, thick as porridge, fragrant as blooming flowers, and a potato curry with tangy coriander leaves and seeds. There are chutneys and pickles and a stack of chapattis that have succumbed, as they do, to steam and gone floppy. I load my plate enough to satisfy the empty space of my stomach, but not so much that eyebrows are raised.

XVIII • The Golden Mile Land Use

[Belgrave Circle]

Abbey Motor Parts
Shisha Café
Shoe Coast
Harmony Bar

B & M Bargains

[Garfield Street]

Gasco Quality Cookers
Priya General Stores
Royal Parcel Service
Asha Charity Shop
Champagne Bubbles
Golden Gelato / Golden Chicken
Punjabi Tarka

[Olphin Street]

Hand Car Wash
Square Pizza
Ambe Tours and Travel
Kebabish Original

[Moorgate Street]

Lakhani Art Studio
Milky Lane Dessert Parlous
Sarina
Ek Awaaj Youth Centre
Suits Me
Chennai Dosa (closed)

[Westbourne Street]

Studio Reflection
EO Spa
Milan's
Jai Sareetex
DTDC Couriers

Fashion Ghar
Malaika

[Kensington Street]

Sunny Jewellers
SK Masala
Raj Jewellers
Jai Jaliyan Takeaway

Parul Wholesalers
Prakash (closed)
Hot Potato Shop

[Dorset Street]

A to Z Jewellery Repair
Yamuna Jewellers
4 Seasons Chaat

Sayonara Restaurant
Lucky Jewellers
Mohan's Hair

[Brandon Street]

Shivam Restaurant
Sona Jewellers

Vishal Jewellers
Patani Jewellers

[Roberts Road]

Ram Jewellers
Chemist Saraj
Ladbrokees
Pizza Parlour
Price Wise

Laxmi Jewellers
Bank of Boroda
Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre

[Buller Road / Rothley Street]

Bipin Jewellers
Dakshin Restaurant
Pehnavi Clothes
Bobby's Vegetarian Food

PHS Jewellers
Kavya Clothes
Sahrmilie Sweets
SJ Footwear

[MacDonald Road]

Pallavi Menswear
Habib Bank
Punjab National Bank
Sheetal Fashion
HSBC

Indikal Saris
DM Soni Jewellers
JP Dhanak Jewellers
Chai Paani
Bombay Looks

[Law Street]

Habib Bank

India Bazaar
TFC Cash & Carry
Arinder Bhullar
Chai Paani (closed)

[Cooper Street]

Piri Kitchens
Alankar Jewellers
Canara Bank

Amokhi House of Fashions
Ladlee Saris
Saree Mandir

[Wand Street]

The Balmoral PH

* * *

XIX • A Labour of Love

I have written to the very limits of what my left hand will allow. There is a dull ache down the outside of my palm and ink stains run the full length of my fingers. I filed up a notebook in the space of five hours. I wrote what I saw and heard and felt and smelt and tasted – I wrote my senses rather than my judgments. I sat down at lunch for sustenance because I'd exhausted myself. I wished originally for a longer occupation, but fell some way short. I could come back and repeat the same process, over and over, *ad infinitum*, and write something different each time. The sun would rise at a different angle so that the shadows cast across the rooftops would be steeper or wider. The

XX • Belgrave

The joint wards of Belgrave and Latimer were key contributors to Leicester's manufacturing pedigree. From various spots in the area, the Wolsey smokestack on the banks of the River Soar comes into view, bearing its name in white on the brickwork. Wolsey textiles were produced in the city as early as the 1750s. Likewise, halfway up Melton Road the square mass of the old British United Shoe Machinery factory, once one of the world's largest providers of shoemaking machinery, is a reminder of a past that remains a part of the modern-day furniture. The building now houses a number of shops and restaurants. Down the side of its southern face it now reads BE GRA E COMMERC A C N RE. In the 1970s the whole area began receiving East African Indian migrants from Idi Amin's Uganda after the eccentric leader had ordered non-Africans from the country. Photographs from various points throughout the following decades show the gradual shift in the use of business units, the steady emergence of Indian jewellers and restaurateurs. Later came others, those from Bengal and Bangladesh, the Horn of Africa, Pakistan and so on – all at different times and for different reasons. Over a period of time, people then moved on. Some of the historic inhabitants of Dummy Town, whose origins in the area dated back to the city's industrial days, moved to other areas around Leicester. Some would have been wary of the dark-skinned newcomers, some would have had other reasons. New settlements sprung up on once-open land – Beaumont Leys, for example, a few miles west – and drew new residents to its leafy streets. Many of the original arrivals from Uganda, meanwhile, grew wealthier and went on to find more suitable housing on the fringes of the city, where it was more spacious than in Belgrave's narrow rows of terraced streets. In the 1980s and 1990s the area gained a reputation for its jewellers, its restaurants and its fabric retailers. It was held up as a beacon of Britain's South Asian heritage. Brown road signs – reserved for points of interest – were erected at the behest of the city council to direct tourists to the Golden Mile from the very limits of the city. Belgrave's thoroughfare, with its busy shops and decorations strung from the street furniture to mark religious festivals, is a loud and conscious declaration of South Asian belonging in Leicester. And yet its history – wider, knottier, less noticeable, less tangible – is everywhere, if only one cares to look closely enough. I catch the bus home from outside the Habib Bank at Cooper Street, for example. The little terraced street is an inconspicuous unbroken row of houses, no different from the others. Thomas Cooper was a Leicester man and leader of the Chartist movement in the 1830s. The Chartists rallied for universal suffrage, for vote by ballot, for the division of the country into equal electoral

districts, among other things. Cooper, a man of fiery temper, led the movement in Leicester where, in 1842, he oversaw the protests of hundreds of framework knitters who worked at in Leicester textile factories. When the Mayor addressed the protestors on August 24th, reading out the Riot Act from the steps of the Corn Exchange, the protestors proposed to return in greater numbers the following day. They marched down Belgrave Gate – a section of the main street that would be built, in turn, a train station, a supermarket and a discount outlet, one replacing the other each time – and disorder broke out on the city's streets. Cooper's name remains nearly two centuries on in the form of a 20x60cm plaque signposting an easily missable street. How easily history is conjured up for those who seek it. The narrow streets that hang at right angles from Belgrave's spine like a millipede's legs are also ventures down historical byways. Every nail parlour and half-filled skip, every breath of spice in the air or a passing car is something to be recorded. Every brick and body in this landscape is a historical detail, including the hooch-scented lout who staggered by the bus stop just a moment ago, or the man who came yesterday but not today. That creaking, crawling old lady, inching towards the Shree Shakhti Mandir, the boy on the bike, the schoolkids, the parents by the gates, backward and backward we might tumble, Mr and Mrs Bhagwanjibhai Lakhani in 72, back and back, Cooper and his Chartists, Samuel Checketts, back and back and back and back, Hugh of Grandmesnil and his swathes of Leicestershire land in the 1000s – they are all, to a man, historical bodies and thorns in the side of clear narratives. History is everywhere, growing like weeds. And so I creep off out of the city on a bus that lumbers and lurches in a way that perfectly reflects my state of mind. I am tired, my inky hand aches and I am too full of history.