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Memorials in Robert Lowell’s Poetry: The Synthesis of the Public and the Private

Shanjida K. Boksh

Robert Lowell’s work stands out as the pre-eminent example in recent years of a poetic rich enough to synthesise public and personal concerns in a distinctly literary manner. This compounding of psychological self-exploration and socio-political critique is not wholly unique to Lowell, yet it constitutes a modern example of how the personal and the public entwine. Throughout his career, Lowell attempts to ‘move [his] poetry as close as possible to his experience’ via aesthetic development. That ‘experience’ was not merely his own, but that of post-war America as well. Hence his poems are a crucial index to the temperament and emotions of the era – ‘the weak spots’ of its age, particularly ‘the tranquillized Fifties.’ He deploys the trope of monumental art in lyric forms, contemplating upon some historical facts of the United States as context for his personal experience. In different collections, memorials occasionally appear to reflect significant historical and political contexts and ideas. In fact, from the beginning of his career, ‘Lowell sought to create his poetic identity out of an involvement with history,’ and remained allied to ‘humanistically oriented historicism’ that generated and nurtured the amalgamation of his intensely personal and broadly public concerns in his poetry. Lowell’s poems on monuments reflect this ‘historical sense’ more explicitly in personal tone and intertwine the political and social problems as well as the private concerns to create a single aesthetic entity.

Though Lowell’s biographers, Ian Hamilton and Paul Mariani, and critics, Steven Axelrod, William Doreski, and Terry Witek claim that much of his stylistic accomplishments rest on his use of family drama of psychology, the use of ‘public history to articulate his inner struggle’ is undeniable. Lowell knew well his ‘bondages to the past,’ whether they are personal or historical. He uses the past most frequently in his poems as a means of understanding the present. Reflecting her views on Life Studies, Marjorie Perloff has written that ‘the typical lyric begins in a moment of crisis in the present, moves backward into a closely related past, and then returns to the present with renewed insight’; and what is true of Life Studies is true of Lowell’s

whole career.\(^6\) Lowell’s poems on monuments reveal more emphatically his bondages to the past, and at the same time offer a new understanding of post-war America.

Immediately after the publication of *For the Union Dead* (1964), critics started to weigh up the historical connotations of Lowell’s most personal experiences. In an essay in Jonathan Price’s *Critics on Robert Lowell*, Richard Poirier praises *For the Union Dead* and lays down the cause that gives the collection an ‘extraordinary air of personal authority.’\(^7\) According to him, ‘It is nearly impossible in Lowell’s poetry to separate personal breakdown from the visions of public or historical decline … The assurance that the poet’s most private experiences simply are of historical, even mythical, importance’ (92). This, obviously, dismisses the prior notion made by other critics of considering a Lowell poem an autonomous and self-sufficient verbal entity. Poirier’s assessment is debatable taking into account the varied reviews that state Lowell had brought about certain advancement in *For the Union Dead*, and was ‘making his way back into the world’ to ‘convey the universality of particular emotions and experience’ (93).

Lowell’s individual sensibility and feeling all along point to something else in the concrete realm of human social activity. His earlier collections contain some poems which realise different modes with different means at different times when they place an emphasis which excludes another correspondence. They respond either sensitively to the inner being – like the short dramatic monologue ‘To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage’\(^8\) – or they present an obvious subject or theme revealing the unsympathetic nature of the wider external reality – like the fragmented sonnet ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953,’\(^9\) satirising America’s political leaders and their commitment to a nuclear arsenal. Poirier contends that this affect perplexes readers ‘whenever they expect his poetry to “earn the right” … to the connections between private and the public significance which he chooses to take for granted.’\(^10\)

Lowell has been known as the confessional chronicler of psychic disturbance in *Life Studies*, speaking bravely and with dignity about desperate personal feeling, and admired as the political poet of *Near the Ocean* who grapples with domestic and foreign threats to communal stability, such as cultural decline, racial injustice, and nuclear war. Yet both books have been read by some who felt they had a right to complain through a different lens: *Life Studies* disappointed for lacking the big issues and historical weight of *Lord Weary’s Castle*; *Near the Ocean* drew adverse comment for its lofty pretension to statesmanship, lack of personal crunch and subjective account of *Life Studies*. Such claims and counterclaims provide the familiar experience of a jury of Lowell critics hanging itself on matters of principle.\(^11\) Although supported by some half-truths about some of his work, each side of the

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\(^8\) Lowell, *Life Studies* 82.


\(^10\) Price 93.

disagreement detracts from Lowell’s acknowledged gift – an imagination which offers hospitality to the complex interplay and recognition of opposing forces. In fact, Lowell’s poetry endures contraries and does often refuse to choose, as Poirier recounts, between the preconceived alternatives that some branches of academic literary criticism wish to keep apart, and ‘the new historicism’ aims to bring together again, which are conventionally described as public realities and private spheres, imagined either in public and historical, or personal and immediate, poetry. Poirier concludes his review by looking to the obligations Lowell’s poetry takes on as it reaches across human endeavours. ‘He is our truest historian… The form of any given poem emerges… from a suffering spirit seeking not ease but a further confrontation with precisely those degradation in the self and in the times that are a challenge to form and to assurance.’

Lowell reflects these declines ‘in the self and in the times’ more accurately in his poems on cenotaphs. Cenotaphs recur in poems with some traits and significance when Lord Weary’s Castle (1946) brings Lowell instantaneous and widespread recognition. Many of these monuments are military and of precarious and weak significance. For Lowell and his country, cenotaphs most often are mounted generals, retired ordinance, and the like. Boston’s statue of Joseph Hooker, the Union general disgraced at Chancellorsville is at the centre of ‘Christmas Eve under Hooker’s Statue,’ one of Lowell’s poems in Lord Weary’s Castle. As a descendant of the New England puritan tradition, Hooker embodies the moral and social hypocrisy that has ‘blackened’ the ‘statehouse,’ since his god is Mars, not Christ the redeemer. As twenty years ago the child ‘hung [his] stocking on the tree, and hell’s/ Serpent entwined the apple in the toe/ To sting the child with knowledge,’ so Hooker’s statue exudes the hellish knowledge that transforms boys (“All wars are boyish,” Herman Melville said”) into ironic, self-aware, and guilty men. While Christmas Eve is generally considered to foster commemoration of the origin of true religion, Lowell’s poem seems to confound the birth of Christ with the American republic’s loss of innocence as represented by a rusting and ineffectual ‘cannon and a cairn of cannon balls,’ and Lowell’s own twenty years of aging out of childhood into the chill of knowledge.

In monument as in life, Hooker is weak, threatened, paralysed. The medium of monument transforms human into impotent war god. A ‘blundering butcher’ perched perilously amidst a fraught and split landscape, Hooker’s statue is Lowell’s precise symbol for the nation and the time:

The war-god’s bronzed and empty forehead forms
Anonymous machinery from raw men;
The cannon on the Common cannot stun
The blundering butcher as he rides on Time –

12 Price 96.
14 Lowell, Lord Weary’s Castle 15.
The barrel clinks with holly. I am cold:
I ask for bread, my father gives me mould.15

Hooker’s forehead, ‘bronzed and empty’, made machines of men and his blunders sent them to destruction, but Hooker himself faces a fate somehow worse. Hollow, riding ‘on Time’, he alone inhabits a landscape desolate and unstable. The snow he stands upon is unstable, his ‘heels/ Kicking at nothing in the shifting snow.’ Even the night is filled with danger: a wartime blackout warns of destruction from the skies, and Lowell ends the poem with an expectation of apocalypse, the only resolution to the threat of overwhelming nature. A winter-dominated poem of age, collective guilt, and frustrated faith (‘I ask for bread, my father gives me mould’), ‘Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue’ inscribes in its very title one aspect of the modernist dilemma – the relationships among competing bodies of iconography, none of which means any longer what they were once thought to mean.

However, the personal element of this poem, the memory of a bland and secularised Protestant Christmas with its childhood innocence poisoned by adult understanding, refutes the public element. The latter would extend this compromise of innocence by confronting Christian idealism with politics of expediency that led to the Civil War and perhaps to World War II. Hence, Lowell’s first person voice in ‘Christmas Eve under Hooker’s Statue’ carries a note of regret and nostalgia for the compromised iconography of religion and history. The tones of this insinuated private voice, coloured by distrust of the tradition it invokes, distinguishes Lowell’s work from that of many of his contemporaries long before he fully accepted the voice and began to write openly autobiographical poems.

By contrast, the characteristic voice of high modernism in American, British, and a great deal of French poetry is discrete, distant: archetypal and ceremonial rather than personal, ‘a kind of incantation,’ as Mallarmé describes it.16 It purports to be a voice of objectivity and impersonality, though recent critical thinking has cast doubt upon its actual distance from personal concerns. Certainly it places great faith in the incantatory power of language, sometimes even challenging representation with presence – a heresy in the Postmodern linguistic world. Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and Yeats generate almost infinite possibilities with this formal voice. Overawed by the achievement of the major modernists, yet not quite able to duplicate their successes, the subsequent generation would gradually return to the more personal lyric voice categorically rejected by Pound and Eliot. They associated that voice with the nineteenth century, particularly with Wordsworth, for whom their admiration was decidedly qualified, and with Tennyson, whom ‘Eliot in the 1936 essay on “In Memoriam” had just begun to rehabilitate after years of refusing him a suitable place in the tradition.’17

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15 Lowell, Lord Weary’s Castle 15.
17 Doreski 46.

The Minuteman statue at Concord, the most cherished icon of New England’s heroic past, is the subject of another memorial poem ‘Concord.’\(^\text{18}\) The soldiers who fought the British in the American Revolution (1775) in battles of Lexington and Concord do not provide spiritual inspiration. Lowell’s exhaustive pessimism has been intensified by the ‘tragedy of crucifixion which seems to lie not only in the death of the good (the child), which it symbolised, but also in the hopelessly perverse way in which the morbid power of its image appears to have infected and pre-occupied man’s spiritual imagination – particularly, of course, the spiritual imagination of the founders of Lowell’s nation and, through their influence, Lowell’s own.’\(^\text{19}\) Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘The Concord Hymn,’ on the other hand, reflects an optimistic view and the responsibility of modern man: ‘The shaft we raise to them and thee.’ He says the ‘embattled farmers stood,/ And fired the shot heard round the world’ because they had the ‘Spirit, that made those heroes dare,/ To die, and leave their children free.’\(^\text{20}\) But here Lowell ridicules twentieth-century Americans who have substituted the Puritans’ religious zealotry with commercial conformity:

Ten thousand Fords are idle here in search
Of a tradition. Over these dry sticks –
The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,
The ruined bridge and Walden’s fished-out perch –
The belfry of the Unitarian Church
Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,
How can your whitened spindling arms transfix
Mammon’s unbridled industry, the lurch
For forms to harness Heraclitus’ stream!
This Church is Concord – Concord where Thoreau
Named all the birds without a gun to probe
Through darkness to the painted man and bow:
The death-dance of King Philip and his scream
Whose echo girdled this imperfect globe.\(^\text{21}\)

The poem makes a more provocative use of American history through its contrast of New England’s illustrious past and degraded present. The corruption of the province’s past intellectual and mercantile vitality is clear enough in the poem’s paraphrasable denunciation: exemplary American conduct has deteriorated into violence, ravenous capitalism, irreligious materialism, and empty leisure. This has been well supported by the effective amalgamation of epithets for images of wasted assets: ‘idle’, ‘dry’, ‘ruined’, ‘fished-out’.

\(^{18}\) Lowell, \textit{Lord Weary’s Castle} 27.


\(^{21}\) Lowell, ‘Concord,’ \textit{Lord Weary’s Castle} 27.
Generally perceived as the product of Lowell’s attempt to resolve a personal aesthetic dilemma, *Life Studies* also responds to the situation of public discourse in Eisenhower’s America. When Lowell gingerly returned to political engagement in the Eisenhower years, he was, ironically, more sceptical of the Cold War politics. The communal problems of discourse haunt all of *Life Studies* with a vivid imagining of ‘the weak spots’ of its age, ‘the tranquillized Fifties.’ Philip Larkin was among the first to welcome the poems in the book, which he respected because here ‘Lowell’s historical sense becomes autobiographical.’ The thought has been repeated by many subsequent reviewers and critics to become an opinion with wide currency in Lowell studies. Vendler says that history was Lowell’s ‘unasked-for donne’, a subject he was obliged to treat in poetry (an obligation consummately honoured, we might judge, by ‘For the Union Dead’), and that he ‘spent his whole career defining public and private forms of poetic history.’ Like Pound, Lowell was always drawn to the historical, but the argument in this paper emphasises that he was merging public with the private forms much of the time. He differs from Pound, and looks more to Livy, Plutarch, Carlyle and Macaulay for the literary and subjective nature of their biographical perspectives on history. Lowell seems to have believed that no one can know any history until he understands fictive writing, for he perceives history as a branch of literature and evokes the actions, personalities, attitudes and speech of a huge cast of characters: ancient and modern, famous and unknown, small and large examples of humanity, in trivial and significant acts, in public and private roles.

The sonnet ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’ presents an obvious subject revealing the unsympathetic nature of the wider external reality – America’s political leaders and their commitment to a nuclear arsenal – through its subjective vein. The poem is a satirical cartoon and moves the Manichean battleground against the force of darkness from the Protestant New England and Catholic sites in Lowell’s preceding books to the post-World War II America, which President Eisenhower termed the ‘military-industrial complex.’

The statue of Peter Stuyvesant in ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’ vividly holds Lowell’s political awareness and his struggle to address the social in and through the lyric. In this poem, Lowell brings in three historical and political figures covering the time span of three hundred years – Dwight Eisenhower, Peter Stuyvesant, and Ulysses S. Grant. The snowy and changing landscape in this poem has associations with both a ‘numbing’ psychological perception and a nuclear winter in which the beliefs of

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26 The term ‘military-industrial complex’ was coined by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his farewell address of 1961, 20 January 2014 http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/farewell_address.html.
American democratic principles no longer embrace any significance.\textsuperscript{27} The poem begins with a bleak vision of a New York where ‘The snow had buried Stuyvesant,’ the seventeenth century governor of New Amsterdam who was forced to surrender the colony, and died in bitterness in the renamed English colony of New York. The image of the buried Stuyvesant, along with the mention of the inauguration ceremony, ‘also subtly hints that a similar fate may await the new president’ Dwight Eisenhower.\textsuperscript{28}

The Lowell persona that emerges in the poem is the writer and the citizen Lowell, carried along by the outside forces, ‘The subways drummed the vaults. I heard/ the El’s green girders charge on Third./ Manhattan’s truss of adamant,/ that groaned in ermine, slummed on want …’\textsuperscript{29} The person Lowell is present amidst the symbolic events surrounding the installation of Eisenhower, though in a different geographical setting. One does not expect a poem entitled, ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’ to take place in New York City, though that is where the Lowells were on the day President Eisenhower was sworn in.\textsuperscript{30} Rather, one expects the poem to have been situated in Washington, D.C. where presidential inaugurations normally occur. Lowell skillfully places himself in such a historical moment, though in a New York setting, and brings out significance and ideas represented through monuments.

The closing stanza develops the figure of paralysis through the frosty aspect of these cenotaphs. Like ‘Christmas Eve under Hooker’s Statue,’ this poem, through these lines suggests that it is a winter-dominated poem of age, collective guilt, and frustrated faith. Coming back to the image of winter, Lowell demonstrates the perception that America has just been numbed into stasis:

\begin{quote}
Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move.
Look, the fixed stars, all just alike
as lack-land atoms, split apart,
and the Republic summons Ike,
the mausoleum in her heart. (Life Studies 7)
\end{quote}

In his poem of the Eisenhower era, Lowell undermines the Cold War by parodying its discourse. The poem ironises the occasion, the language and its Cold War context through these concluding lines. Eisenhower, as a president whose crusade stressed the value of domestic security and suburban principles, symbolises the need for the mediation of oblivion at the core of American beliefs. In Lowell’s words, Eisenhower has taken oath to manage the administration of a republic with a ‘mausoleum in her heart,’ an image that again conveys the futility at the heart of American consciousness. Lowell perceives the ‘iced-over spirit of Ulysses S. Grant living on Ike, both the men have stepped into the presidency after serving as the country’s commanding officers

\textsuperscript{29} Lowell, Life Studies 7.
during two respective cataclysmic wars. However, Lowell’s analysis of monuments is comparatively more potent here. The poem works on both personal and public levels, since it appears as a self-critique as much as a social criticism. As stated by Von Hallberg, the poem typifies what would appear to be a ‘1960s period piece, the cultural critique poem.’

In ‘For the Union Dead,’ the last entry into Life Studies’ paperback publication which was subsequently published as the closing poem in the collection titled for it, we come across one of Lowell’s most well organized reflections on cenotaphs. Commissioned by the Boston Arts Festival in 1960 and originally titled ‘Colonel Shaw and the Massachusetts 54th,’ this poem was read by Lowell to loud applause at the celebration on the Common in June of that year. At the Boston Arts Festival, Lowell would say of this most obviously monumental poem:

My poem, ‘The Union Dead,’ is about childhood memories, the evisceration of our modern cities, civil rights, nuclear warfare and more particularly, Colonel Robert Shaw and his negro regiment, the Massachusetts 54th. I brought in early personal memories because I wanted to avoid the fixed, brazen tone of the set-piece and official ode.

The poem demonstrates how powerfully Lowell welds personal and public subject-matter through his monumental vision to craft a distinct artistic entity. It is this synthesis that makes the poem ‘one of the very few American poems that can inspire genuine, unh rhetorical patriotic emotion: Lowell treats history not as something official, but as a private possession.’

In this, the poem seems to corroborate the spontaneous remark Lowell made in introducing it: ‘We’ve emerged from the monumental age.’ The poem, however, works through the deteriorating and declining situation of the city’s monuments, from the deserted South Boston Aquarium to the Saint Gaudens bas-relief of Shaw and his black soldiers, to the Statehouse that faces it, to all the thinning, dwindling Union soldiers on the greens of innumerable New England towns. The personal context is established at once in the second stanza, after a brief description of ‘the old South Boston Aquarium’ setting, with a childhood memory of the Aquarium, a memory later to be hideously distorted or parodied:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles

31 Mariani 222.
33 Quoted in Dioreski 109.

drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.  

William Doreski, in his *Robert Lowell’s Shifting Colors*, explores this particular aspect of Lowell’s extended range of poetic interests more explicitly, commenting on the evolution of ‘For the Union Dead’ from wooden impersonality (‘brazen tone’) toward a more vivid, more openly autobiographical moment. ‘History and autobiography deeply and subtly mingle in Lowell’s creative process, and perhaps we can now more fully appreciate that his public voice developed not out of megalomania but as the authentic speech of an artist whose aesthetic personality merged with the vagaries of history and the contemporary American social scene.’ In fact, Lowell recognized the dangers of writing occasional poetry, and in consciously resisting conventional pitfalls he cast his ‘autobiographical-psychological study of historical self-presence (that is, a poem that places the self at the centre of history) within the framework of a Horatian ode.

Evidently, Colonel Shaw’s ‘picturesque and gallant death’ inspired quite a number of poems before ‘For the Union Dead,’ all of them more or less occasional and commemorative, by well known poets such as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Richard Watson Gilder, Benjamin Brawley, Percy MacKaye, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and William Vaughn Moody. Among them, the most enduring are Dunbar’s eloquent sonnet ‘Robert Gould Shaw,’ which laments the lack of racial progress since Shaw’s time, and Moody’s idealistic, angry ‘Ode in Time of Hesitation.’ Like Emerson (‘Voluntaries’) and James Russell Lowell (‘Memoriae Positum’) before him, Moody presents Shaw as a moral example whose heroism contrasts tellingly with prevalent civic corruption (specially, American imperialism). To this basic contrast, however, he adds a new historical dimension. He associates Shaw’s ‘heroic ideal with the past, and unheroic reality with the present, thus suggesting a pattern of moral degradation similar to that suggested by “For the Union Dead”’ (124).

Besides, Lowell’s descriptions of the statuary in ‘For the Union Dead’ echo phrases from William James’ speech dedicating the Shaw memorial. He remarks of the Saint-Gaudens bas-relief that ‘William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breath,’ an allusion to James’ description of them as ‘so true to nature that one can almost hear them breathing.’ Lowell deliberately turns James’ words of hope and praise into lament. He comments that the Union Soldier statues ‘grow slimmer and younger each year’ in contrast to the increasingly fat and venal general populace.

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37 Doreski 110.
38 Doreski 96.
39 Axelrod 124.
40 Lowell, *For the Union Dead* 71.
41 Lowell, *For the Union Dead* 72.
The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere, giant finned cars nose forward like fish; a savage servility slides by on grease.

Heroic accomplishment, once numbed in commemorative bronze, is endangered by the ‘present’ s new priorities but whoso would so easily forget their history, whoso would sell a heroic birthright for a few parking spaces, becomes inhuman, reptilian or fishlike, savage and servile.

Albert Gelpi recounts the poem as ‘one of Lowell’s most tightly written and most explicated poems; its ironies rise to prophetic outrage in seeing Boston’s decline into barbarous materialism as part of a national and global declension.’ As in ‘Inauguration Day: 1953,’ modern America endangers the ennobled and ennobling past with its commercialism, its insensitive ignorance of history, its propensity toward industrialized annihilation:

A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw and his bell cheeked Negro infantry on St. Gaudens’ shaking Civil War relief, propped by a plank splint against the garage’s earthquake.

(‘For the Union Dead’ 70-71)

Similar to Stuyvesant and Grant previous to him, Shaw is rigid and fragile: ‘he cannot bend his back’ since ‘he is out of bounds.’ But Shaw remains in some ways dangerous that the others do not. ‘[W]renlike,’ holding the qualities of a greyhound, Shaw remains somehow animate:

Their monument sticks like a fishbone in the city’s throat. Its Colonel is as lean as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance, a greyhound’s gentle tautness.

42 Lowell, For the Union Dead 72.
43 Thurston 99.
44 Axelrod and Deese 66.
45 Lowell, ‘For the Union Dead’ 70-1.
46 Lowell, ‘For the Union Dead’ 71.
Yet in his lifeless state, Shaw both leads (as a ‘compass needle’) and threatens Boston’s finned humanity.\footnote{Michael North, \textit{The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets}}\footnote{Larkin 6.} Lowell’s vision through cenotaph reflected in the poems, discussed above, not only proffers an insight into America in some of its historical moments, but also provides the readers with a complex matrix of the country’s national politics through the poet’s lenses of personal poetics. Michael North considers monuments as the ‘microcosmic summations of entire cultures’ (30). Memorials represent history and culture of a society that it determines to remember and celebrate. Hence, Lowell’s poems on monuments meditate to bring about socio-historical significance, particularly, of the postwar American milieu. Moreover, Lowell believes that no one can know any history until he understands fictive writing, for he perceives history as a ‘province of literature’ and evokes the actions, personalities, attitudes and speech of a huge cast of characters. The poet is frequently at centre stage in the cast, even when he overhears and then records the speech of others, for ‘Lowell’s historical sense becomes autobiographical.’\footnote{George Eliot, \textit{Felix Holt, the Radical} ed. P. Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972) 129.}\footnote{George Eliot, \textit{Middlemarch} ed. P. Coveney (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1972) 896.} George Eliot’s \textit{Felix Holt, the Radical} offers a similar model of concept of such an amalgamation: ‘There is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life,’ and her \textit{Middlemarch} further clarifies the fact, ‘For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.’ Many of the finest occasions in Lowell’s work result from complex perspectives, combined in the same poem or the one book, of the private self and the public role.

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\footnote{Larkin 6.}
Worlds Apart: Nam Le’s *The Boat* and Ali Alizadeh’s *Transactions*

Lachlan Brown

Australian short fiction collections which are self-consciously and explicitly transnational have risen to prominence during the past decade. Nam Le’s celebrated collection *The Boat* (2008) has been followed by Ali Alizadeh’s *Transactions* (2013), Maxine Beneba-Clarke’s *Foreign Soil* (2014) and Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals* (2014).¹ All these books are ambitious, grand-tour collections, organising themselves in ways that emphasise disparate locations around the globe. They are marked by precocious writing styles, a predilection for distinct and distinctive voices, rapid or jolting movements between specific yet diverse situations, a thematisation of ‘the global’, as well as holistic or in some cases totalising structures. The collections by Le, Alizadeh and Beneba-Clarke are accompanied by metafictive frames which foreground the idea of writing as a creative and urgent act in a globalised world. Such transnational short fiction may find immediate precursors in writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, whose *Unaccommodated Earth* explores familial migrations and double migrations and Daniel Alarcon whose *War by Candlelight* depicts intense and specific locations from Lima to New York.

This essay examines two of these books of Australian short stories in more detail. Being part of the trajectory of Australian transnational short fiction, Nam Le’s *The Boat* and Ali Alizadeh’s *Transactions* initially appear quite similar, but on closer inspection they portray two very different types of globalised world. They do so because of a series of contrapuntal political stances, ethical considerations, aesthetic choices and maybe even a sense of rivalry. These overlapping and intractable issues do not coalesce or resolve themselves in any straightforward manner. Yet following some of their contours gives us a number of clues about the ways that the fissures and clashes of contemporary Australian transnational writing play out over various existing literary fault lines.

Nam Le’s celebrated 2008 work, *The Boat*, begins in Iowa with a metafictive story about a writer called Nam Le attempting to finish his final creative writing project.² Although instructors and agents subtly (and not so subtly) push him toward Vietnamese ‘ethnic’ fiction, he seems more interested in writing about other places (‘lesbian vampires and Columbian assassins, and Hiroshima orphans – and New York painters with haemorrhoids’ as a friend puts it).³ After the opening story’s ‘clever, if diaphanous, frame’⁴ the book’s remaining chapters deliver six of these global stories (without the vampires), set in places like coastal Australia, Columbia’s Medellin

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slums, and a refugee boat on the South China Sea. The reader is thrown from location to location and awed by the brilliant evocation of each new scene, along with the idiosyncratic and sensitive voice of its protagonist. Within this work, as Ken Gelder notes, ‘Australia is a kind of trace woven into a larger transnational fabric.’ The individual narratives are remarkably well developed, but they do not cross paths, except for that small moment of adumbration in the opening story.

Alizadeh’s 2013 book Transactions is a complicated series of overlapping and interweaving short pieces which range across the globe, doubling back to particular cities or locations. It portrays, in the author’s words, ‘an interconnected landscape of terror and exploitation … with lots of sex and violence.’ Gay Lynch describes it as ‘part thriller, part realist drama, part satire, part diatribe against global capitalism and every other patriarchal ism.’ Each story centres on a moment of global exploitation and most stories are connected to each other through small details, recurring characters or narrative hooks. The worst of humanity seems to be on show throughout. Jay Daniel Thomson describes the book’s ‘shocking brutality,’ Walter Mason observes its ‘brutish real world buffoonery,’ and Elizabeth Bryer notes that within Transactions humans become ‘expendable commodities.’ Australia’s contributions to this interconnected world include colloquial forms of swearing, Rupert Murdoch, and a genre of schlock-horror filmmaking called ‘Oz-Exploitation’ (with movie titles like Chopped Down Under). A female assassin stalks her way through many of these pieces, punishing capitalist profiteers, soldier rapists, human traffickers and even a CIA operative.

I wish to explore how a number of aesthetic, political and ethical differences play out in these two globalised works of Australian short fiction. But before doing so it is worth pointing out that Nam Le’s The Boat was released in the same year as Ali Alizadeh’s novel The New Angel (published by Transit Lounge). This timing was coincidental and yet Alizadeh’s book, an intertwining of catastrophic personal and national histories set in Tehran and Australia, has received only three reviews according to the AustLit database. Contrastingly, the responses to Le’s book were (and still are) legion. In a famous episode of The Simpsons a young Homer Simpson is excluded from a club called the ‘No Homers Club.’ When Homer asks the leader why they let in a yokel called Homer Glumpich, the leader replies: ‘It says no Homers. We’re

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12 Alizadeh, Transactions 45, 13, 152.
allowed to have one.\textsuperscript{14} Could this, at least from one perspective, have been the fate of \textit{The New Angel} as an Iranian-Australian novel published during the year of \textit{The Boat}? Were Australia’s literary gatekeepers prepared to accept one Iranian story (especially a playfully anti-ethnic one), but not a second? Of course, such questions may lead to gross simplifications, for there are many aesthetic, cultural and political reasons that account for \textit{The Boat}’s phenomenal success (I have outlined some of them elsewhere).\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, the relative standings of Le’s and Alizadeh’s publishing houses must be taken into account when considering differences in reception (Knopf as part of one of the global Big Four, and Transit Lounge as a relatively new independent Australian publisher). Also, \textit{The New Angel} may have been ignored on other grounds, including its anti-nationalist sentiment (in one scene the protagonist throws an uneaten meat pie labelled ‘Aussie Pride’ out of his car window into the bush).\textsuperscript{16} However this situation is still unsettling because Le’s book, with a single story about Tehran, eclipsed an entire novel that was actually written by an Iranian Australian and set in the same city. So it is one thing for Le to ‘out-Winton’ Tim Winton in ‘Halflead Bay’ or ‘out-Roth’ Philip Roth in ‘Meeting Elise’ in his playfully mimicry. But the scornful stance toward diasporic or ‘ethnic’ writing evident in \textit{The Boat}’s opening piece, alongside Le’s literary evocation of Tehran in ‘Tehran Calling’ at least raises certain questions about the collateral damage that one might cause when the play of diasporic authenticity meets specific locations (and writers who may have an attachment to those locations).

Such coincidental and poor timing merely reflects the dumb luck of the book publishing market, it could be argued. But these would probably be fighting words to a neo-Marxist like Alizadeh. In fact, Fereshteh the innocent love interest in \textit{The New Angel} is replaced by Fereshteh the violent anti-capitalist avenging angel in \textit{Transactions}. Furthermore, considering Alizadeh’s \textit{Transactions} as a rejoinder to Le’s transnational high literary cosmopolitanism or a type of anti-\textit{Boat}, makes this situation even more interesting. For it is clear that Alizadeh’s work criticises the particular version of the globalised world that \textit{The Boat} presents. The strident and consistently polemical tone of \textit{Transactions} stands in binary opposition to the empathic realism of \textit{The Boat}. To put it bluntly, \textit{Transactions} seems to argue that humanist transnational literary posturing fetishises ethnicities and locations, valuing them only for their aesthetic possibilities or their provisional place within the postmodern deconstruction of authenticity.

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Homer the Great’, \textit{The Simpsons}, season 6 episode 12, directed by Jim Reardon, written by John Swartzwelder, performed by Daniel Castellaneta (emphasis mine).

\textsuperscript{15} Lachlan Brown, ‘Globalised Fiction Becomes a Fact: Nam Le Launches \textit{The Boat}’ in \textit{Telling Stories: Australian Literature and Life 1935-2012} edited by T. Dalziell and P. Genoni (Clayton: Monash University Press, 2013) 566-572. Also, one should also note that Le’s writing career reads like a contemporary exemplar of Pascale Cassanova’s ‘World Republic of Letters’. that complex ‘map’ of literary capital and prestige which does ‘not completely coincide’ with ‘the political and economic world’ (11). So from Honours at Melbourne University to a place at the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop and eventually editing the Harvard Literary Review, Le manages to demonstrate a trajectory of literary success. Along the way, of course, he is praised by the contemporary ‘legislators’ or ‘consecrators’ (21). These figures include Michiko Kakutani in the New York Times, Junot Diaz on the book’s cover and the critic Peter Craven back in Australia. Le is also honoured with various international and national awards including a Pushcart Prize in the US and a Dylan Thomas prize in Wales (Pascale Cassanova, \textit{The World Republic of Letters} translated by M. B. DeBevoise [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004]).

\textsuperscript{16} Alizadeh, \textit{The New Angel} 129.
This might look like overstatement, but the more one explores specific differences between *The Boat* and *Transactions* the more convincing the thesis looks. For example, one can examine *The Boat*’s parataxis as structure or literary form that encodes within itself a certain stance toward otherness. What I mean by parataxis is that Le places ‘self-contained’ \(^{17}\) stories and events next to each with ‘no explanation for their proximity.’ \(^{18}\) So after the initial framing in Iowa, Le’s book shifts settings and characters without further comment or stated reason. No doubt part of this comes from those point of view exercises a writer may complete at a place like the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. \(^{19}\) Yet this kind of parataxis is a technique that ostensibly posits an artistic work as non-judgemental. It is a choice of form that says, ‘Let me lay these disparate things in front of a reader, allowing them to come to their own opinions about how and where they might connect.’ It is a technique that appears humble and coy about meta-structures or lines of association. The irony is that by holding his fictive worlds apart through parataxis, Le invites the kind of reader response that may imagine the world to be precisely the kind of McLuhanesque ‘global village’ which Alizadeh’s denounces in *Transactions*:

Yes Mum. We really are a global village. A simple village with only one dusty street flanked by friendly locals and their quaint huts. And our street leads to the hell of exploitation. Lies. Our friendly country folk are inbred vampires. Our pretty cottages, built upon layer upon layer upon layer upon layer of charred skeletons. \(^{20}\)

For its part, Alizadeh’s book organises its titles and characters around the Major Arcana of the tarot deck. The twenty-three short stories take their titles from the deck’s twenty-two cards (e.g. The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, etc.) with ‘The Fool’ repeated as an epilogue. This device acts both to bind the disparate stories together and to suggest an overarching telos. Along with the theme of retributive justice, readers are given a clear structure and a moral crusade. The use of the tarot also highlights the allegorical nature of the book and posits a deeper reality in which characters may play roles that are assigned to them. As John Scheckter’s recent review of Eleanor Catton’s *The Luminaries* reminds us, such ‘totalising structures’ always run the risk of becoming overbearing and/or satirical. \(^{21}\) But for Alizadeh this is precisely the point. \(^{22}\) Grand structures do govern the world: whether it be oil money in the Peruvian rainforest, literary prestige in Cambridge, England, or the CIA’s political influence throughout South America and the Middle East. Being overbearing, therefore, is not a liability for Alizadeh’s aesthetic program. Thus, if the style of *Transactions* is akin to sandwich-board apocalyptic prophecy then deterministic structuring devices are to be expected, particularly the kind of structure that enacts


\(^{18}\) Gelder 11.


vengeance against all other structures. This can be explained perhaps, as an inversion of the paratactic politeness of *The Boat* with its liberal humanist underpinnings.

Furthermore, Alizadeh’s book offers a globalised world where economic, geographical, religious, and ethnic influences are always intertwined in a dizzying array of transactions and counter transactions (often involving explicit sexual acts). Ukrainian escorts fly to Amsterdam to entertain Emirati businessmen. Danish aid workers set up a human trafficking network between Africa and Europe. An Australian film with a New Zealand lead is reviewed in New York, LA, Japan and New Zealand before being banned in Dubai and denounced by the Australian Film Corporation which funded it. This teeming airport lounge, which recurs in a number of the pieces, becomes the synecdoche for this kind of transnational interpenetration, the world both overrun and held to ransom by the tendrils of global capital and its countless lopsided power structures.

Laying bare these threads of connection is, of course, precisely the opposite of what occurs in Le’s work. For within *The Boat* we see stories that are less hybridised and scenes that are far more celebratory of monocultures. Le’s Hiroshima is Japanese to the point that it verges on a style which Craven calls ‘worked up-exoticism’. This can be seen in Mayoko’s voice which becomes as naïve mixture of desire, Japanese propaganda and immediate sense impressions: ‘The soybean rice is cold. When I open my mouth the cold air of morning comes in. Be filial to your parents, we chant together …’ In ‘Halflead Bay,’ Le’s coastal Australia is filled with Jamies, Alisons, Dorys and Lesters all yelling ‘C’arn’ and speaking in pitch-perfect vernacular (‘Leyland couldn’t be stuffed about footy’). Only the story’s edges are haunted by tales of Asian poachers. Le’s Colombian favelas with their child assassins and drug deals may be driven by Western interests somewhere in the distance, but readers are not required to ponder these larger forces. Instead the text uses Spanish insertions (*autodefensas, pipí, gallada, basuco, mocós* all occur in the first three pages) and grammatical repositionings such as, ‘he had only six years’ that are meant to evoke the world of the Medellin slums.

Remarkably, though, beside the opening story, the one piece in *The Boat* that is most explicit about complex cross-cultural or transnational intersections is partially set in Iran. ‘Tehran Calling’ sees Sarah, a thirty-five year old American woman, leave Portland, Oregon in order to visit her friend Parvin as she attempts to stage a political play in the Iranian capital. There are symbols of transnational crossing peppered throughout: the plane cabin as it lands in Tehran, or the remembered birthday party a sushi restaurant in Portland’s Chinatown, where the waitstaff sing ‘Happy Birthday in Japanese.’ Sarah and Parvin had previously run a radio program agitating for Iranian women’s rights which was recorded in Oregon, streamed online through the

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24 This is the opposite to the hopeful version of globalisation that Bianca Leggett sees in the airport’s interaction with the novel. Bianca Leggett, ‘Departures: The Novel, the Non-Place and the Airport’, *Alluvium*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (2012), accessed 24 June 2014, http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/alluvium.v1.4.03
26 Le, *The Boat* 95.
27 Le, *The Boat* 125.
Netherlands and broadcast into Iran via shortwave radio. 30 ‘Tehran Calling’ also dramatises the painful and complex difficulties of cross cultural (in)comprehension, through Sarah’s steps and missteps as a foreigner in a place that she can never fully understand. This cultural displacement is often figured as a problem of language, whether it is the Arabic script which looks to Sarah like ‘an alphabet refracted in water’, 31 or Mahmoud’s words in Farsi during a police crackdown which she cannot understand, even though she senses that they hold ‘they key to her life’. 32 Ironically, Iran appears as a complex, multilayered, even unrepresentable place within a book that actually aestheticises ethnicity in various quasi-authentic ways. Moreover, it is curious that this Iran, Sarah’s foreign and mediated Iran, proved to be more successful (at least by the crude measures of literary popularity) than the Iran of an Iranian writer like Alizadeh.

There is more that could be explored here, but perhaps it is worth examining writerly technique from another angle. Elsewhere I have written than Le’s book, particularly with its framing story in mind, is an extended rebuttal of the standard writers’ workshop directive to ‘write what you know’. 33 A second popular piece of advice in writing workshops is the injunction to ‘show not tell’. As Proust once wrote, ‘A work in which there are theories is like an object which still has its price tag on it.’ 34 J.M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello tucks a similar line into its opening chapter: ‘Supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves’ (4). In what has become a famous piece of writing advice, C.S. Lewis once instructed a fan to avoid adjectives: ‘instead of telling us a thing was “terrible,” describe it so that we’ll be terrified.’ 35 This kind of aesthetic value can also be found in the work of F.R. Leavis, and his distinction between ‘declamatory generality – talking about’ (which he casts as aesthetically weak) and a ‘quiet presentment of specific fact and circumstance’ (which he sees as much stronger). 36 For Leavis, showing and not telling allows a text (and in this case the text is Hardy’s poem ‘After a Journey’) to ‘carry its power and meaning in itself’. 37 Almost all of the stories in The Boat abide by these kinds of injunctions, resulting in what Hari Kunzru labels ‘well wrought’ fiction. 38 This is a technical facility which uses details to speak subtly, painting scenes and moods without necessarily explaining to a reader what is going on (or what should be thought). Indeed, Nicholas Jose’s sensitive reading of The Boat’s evocative details (e.g. a frozen

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30 Le, The Boat 191.
31 Le, The Boat 186.
32 Le, The Boat 222-223.
37 Leavis (via Segal), 252.

lake, distant firecrackers) testifies to the way that Le’s prose can be seen as suggestive and redolent within a particular aesthetic paradigm.\textsuperscript{39}

It is worth pointing out that this kind of writerly choice isn’t just about pleasant reading experiences or virtuosity per se, even though cynical readers may suspect this to be case. In fact, ‘showing not telling’ is bound up with the political impact of the text within that particular matrix of empathy and ennoblement that a scholar like David Palumbo-Liu wants to explain, problematise and ultimately refigure. In \textit{The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age}, Palumbo-Liu analyses examples of global contemporary literature in order to interrogate and complicate a certain literary-ethical framework that is predicated upon empathy and the imaginative reduction of ‘the gap between self and other’.\textsuperscript{40} The task of literature, from this perspective, involves ‘presenting the reader with otherness and thereby widening his or her narrow scope’.\textsuperscript{41} Although Palumbo-Liu pushes the model almost to breaking point, he never completely disavows the kind of hopeful thinking that sees literature as symbolising (or enacting) ‘that empathetic, imaginative and critical relation to the thing outside itself’.\textsuperscript{42} Obviously, showing and not telling is a common technique for eliciting literary empathy. For one thing, ‘showing and not telling’ seems to be the go-to literary device for a sensitive and non-judgmental literary portrayal of difference. It is meant to bring the other near without destroying their otherness and is a way of respecting the autonomy of various characters so that they are not merely ventriloquising the voice of the author. Le himself has stated that questions of voice and empathy are so connected:

> how do I populate this kid’s consciousness, and how do I give body and shape to her voice in a way that does justice to [her experience] but at the same time doesn’t permeate that voice of that diction with any of the judgments that I or most readers would bring to it . . . ?\textsuperscript{43}

Too much explanation or ‘telling’ renders the empathic framework useless, banal or illusory (because empathy isn’t the kind of thing that can be enforced). For Le’s book, this is important because the political or ethical weight of \textit{The Boat} seems to be built on precisely this kind of non-judgmental imaginative empathy (otherwise it is merely a brilliant set of vocal-exercises).

In a seemingly deliberate contrast to the aesthetics of imaginative empathy, one of the major preoccupations of \textit{Transactions} is judgmentalism.\textsuperscript{44} This is perhaps fitting in a book in which


\textsuperscript{41} Palumbo-Liu 22.

\textsuperscript{42} Palumbo-Liu 26.

\textsuperscript{43} Nam Le and Sophie Cunningham, ‘Interview: The Friction Zone, Sophie Cunningham talks to Nam Le,’ \textit{Meanjin}, vol. 68 no. 1 (2009) 137.

\textsuperscript{44} I do not mean this as a criticism in and of itself. For one thing, Alizadeh’s judgmentalism is neither flat nor one dimensional. In fact, within \textit{Transactions} the complexities of judgment are often on show. Characters judge one another according to various competing standards and relational obligations (e.g. ethically, morally, economically, even aesthetically in the form of literary prizes). And often the reader is forced into a position of judgment before being made to feel uncomfortable about their stance. Judgment is also ironised and problematised throughout the text (e.g. Zhang Lin’s mother’s judgments of her daughter, 30ff or Abdullah Bin Khalaib’s disgust at a Jewish

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capitalist exploiters and corrupt figures in power are judged for their crimes by a shape-shifting assassin. The narrator of the epilogue, for example, describes airport tourists overspending ‘on yet another trite holiday before returning to trivia and TV’.\(^45\) Passengers ‘sigh with derision and impatience’, because they know their burgers will not bring them satisfaction.\(^46\) Undocumented migrant cleaners carry ‘buckets brimming with a fusion of urine, liquefied faeces and industrial disinfectants from one toilet to the next’.

The strong tone of scorn doesn’t let up for the rest of the book. The world is variously described as ‘sickening’, ‘drowning in a whirlpool of greed and apathy’, ‘miserable’, ‘gruesome’, and ‘a fucked up place’.\(^48\) Severe and extreme judgments pour out of characters every few pages (‘Alizadeh does not allow his cast of zealots to prevaricate’ Lynch notes). The assassin writes to her mother about how the desires of ‘this world’s wretched occupiers’ have ‘turned the world into a grotesque wasteland’.

An online Middle Eastern persona instructs a web porn star to flush her favourite food down the toilet, because ‘thats what westerners done to our culture to our religion for like ten thousand years [sic]’.\(^51\) A self-hating Marxist poet in London works as a dishwasher and writes: ‘No hope in this place. Just work, drink work drink fuck drink work shit for what? Some arsehole academic critic editor of a worthless journal? Oh proletarian poet. People’s poet. Why give a fuck?’\(^52\) An Iranian asylum seeker in Amsterdam decries the West for living ‘happy comfortable lives in countries built on the wealth stolen from poor countries over hundreds of years’.

An Indian human rights campaigner condemns South Africa’s ‘rainbow society’ for ‘devastat[ing] the poor with its rapacious neo-liberal agendas and calamitous corporatism’.

On two occasions characters note their own preachiness but these are small counterfactuals in an endless tide of disdain and judgment.

What’s more, a reader of Transactions is consistently subjected to explanations that overrun the bounds of what one might consider a ‘balanced’ literary style. If Nam Le mainly shows, Ali Alizadeh mainly tells (and then tells some more). So the reader is given explanations of things like the history of Ukrainian varenyky dumplings, Chinese practices of online gold-farming, Danish Lutheran sacramental theology, the fetishisation of Peruvian indigenous culture and the differences between Concentrating and Photovoltaic solar power.\(^56\) Many of these moments jut out as awkward or rehearsed. It is as though annoying encyclopaedia-reading friend were constantly peering the reader’s shoulder, offering unsolicited ‘facts’ to adorn the narrative.

\(^{45}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 2.

\(^{46}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 2.

\(^{47}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 2.

\(^{48}\) Alizadeh, Transaction, 29, 175, 182, 184, 195.

\(^{49}\) Lynch.

\(^{50}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 10.

\(^{51}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 27.

\(^{52}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 83.

\(^{53}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 97.

\(^{54}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 177.

\(^{55}\) Alizadeh, Transactions 10, 198.

However this clunkiness may be precisely the point. For where Nam Le’s details seem slick and unobtrusively delivered (e.g. ‘Eba dumplings with ground wheat and mugwort grass and sugar’57), Alizadeh’s appear self-exposing and intentionally over-explanatory. Thus, Transactions offers a pointed and self-aware rejection of what Alizadeh has elsewhere called ‘the modern sacred cow of show, don’t tell’.58 And in doing so the book makes explicit the fact that mimetic authenticity must be created through arbitrary fictive techniques. In this way Transactions also pushes the reader to consider the entire representational project and its attendant difficulties ‘Representation is never a simple issue,’ Fiona Wright reminds us in her review of Maxine Beneba-Clarke’s Foreign Soil. It is ‘a risky business’ for those who wish to write a certain ‘inside’ from any position ‘outside’.59 And the unevenness of Alizadeh’s prose never allows a reader to settle or to be uncritically drawn into what occurs in his narrative. The ‘inside’ is never an easy position to occupy. This discomfort demonstrates (to appropriate Wright’s words) ‘how fraught, how problematic a matter of representation is’.60

Another way that Alizadeh inverts and subverts literary techniques can be observed in Transactions’ striking use of epithets. These are ubiquitous and laboured, introducing characters in a way that would make Dan Brown and his ‘renowned’ Harvard Symbologist Robert Langdon proud.61 Alizadeh’s epithets are found throughout Transactions: ‘The illustrious publisher and cultural pioneer turns around,’ ‘The supremely attractive woman speaks,’ ‘the ebullient foreign correspondent lurches to her feet,’ ‘Roger Rodriguez signals for the ex-porn star and budding “mainstream” actress Karina Wild, to come closer.’62

No doubt these kinds of description have explanatory value in a fast paced novel with a revolving cast of characters, but their deliberately heavy handed deployment adds to the work’s sense of satire and knowingly defies particular literary sensibilities. They are, as Sasnaitis puts it, an example of Alizadeh deliberately ‘parodying the clichés of action-adventure writing’.63 Indeed, it is almost as though these epithets are placed into the text like tripwires, designed to unsettle those whose literary-critical faculties have been trained to despise them. One is reminded, here, of Margaret Simon’s infamous 2005 essay ‘The Ties that Bind’, in which the inner city latte-drinking Melbournian travels to Fountain Gate shopping centre on a quasi-anthropological quest to engage with the uncultured classes (who all seem to vote for John Howard). When she arrives she is appalled that Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci code tops the best seller list:

57 Le, The Boat 170.
60 Wright.
62 Alizadeh, Transactions 64, 116, 133, 153.
We went into the newsagent and asked for the titles of their biggest selling magazines. *Girlfriend* and *Dolly*, I was told. The tabloid *Herald-Sun* was the only newspaper people bought in numbers, except on Saturday, when *The Age* carried jobs and car and real estate advertisements. We went to the bookshop and asked for the name of their bestseller. It was Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* – a tale of codes and secrets and hidden meanings and ancient religion. Nothing else came close to outselling it, we were told. Not even self-help books.64

Alizadeh, then, may be baiting the literary establishment. For the writerly composition of *Transactions* seems to deliberately ignore many of the so-called ‘rules’ of empathic fiction.65 It would appear that the author, to use the words of the book’s rich Emirati heiress, doesn’t ‘Give a Flyer’s Fuck’66 (45) about certain literary techniques, even if this may infuriate particular kinds of reader. My argument is that seems to occur partially as an alternative to the kind of ‘A student’ or ‘artisanal’ writing that Emmett Stinson describes in *The Boat*.67 But it is also bound up with the message of *Transactions*: that artistic endeavour is complicit in the very atrocities and power systems which it should be exposing.68

Hence in her first email *Transactions*’ avenging assassin writes that imagination is ‘A somewhat foolish way of processing truth, perhaps; but the only one at my disposal.’69 In fact, art (appearing in the book under the various guises of writing, filmmaking, game-making, play-directing, acting and poetry) is so compromised, so bound up with corrupt and competing power structures that it is almost entirely useless. On many occasions *Transactions* excoriates and satirises literary culture itself, with its midsummer festivals in Cambridge, capricious global literature prizes, myopic academics and pseudo-Marxist urban poets. Moreover, in three places *Transactions* mocks particular literary values alongside literary systems. So Momoko, a Japanese judge for the New York Global Voices Festival of literature praises the winning for work being ‘So full of wisdom and compassion and truth. Like a Johnny Cash album.’70 Dr. Jamal Abulqaaeder judges the same work highly because it ‘represents incontrovertible universal values such as family, respect, hard work and religion.’71 Earlier in a gender inverted version of *Medea*, the male actor recites the following lines after he strips down to a sequinned g-string and dances for his wife:

65 Alizadeh would no doubt be aware of such ‘rules,’ given that he teaches creative writing at Monash University.
68 As Alizadeh mentions in an interview with Chris Raja: ‘It seems to me that most contemporary literary fiction in Australia is being conceived and written to win literary awards given on the basis of the books’ supposed contributions to Australian culture. Great, radical art, on the other hand, ruptures culture, as Badiou would have it.’ Chris Raja, ‘[Interview With] Ali Alizadeh: ‘Iran My Grandfather,’ *New Parliament Magazine*, 11 February 2014, accessed 16 October 2014, http://www.thenewparliament.com/post/76223259369/ali-alizadeh-iran-my-grandfather-interview-with
70 Alizadeh, *Transactions* 207.
I want to make the world a better place. I want to write stories that make my readers have more respect for the environment, to love nature and care for all living beings, even for the smallest insects. Is it a crime to want to spread a message of love and harmony?  

This satirisation of earnestness and liberal humanist values in literature is striking because Nam Le’s opening story in *The Boat* is titled ‘Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice’ which is taken from William Faulkner’s Nobel Prize speech of 1950.  

Indeed the gormless judgment of Alizadeh’s character Momoko (‘wisdom and compassion and truth’) quite clearly evokes Le’s title. Le has also spoken in an interview of the reader’s ‘desperate longing to believe in something that is clear, unmediated and true’. Now I do not wish to categorically state that Alizadeh only has Le’s book in mind when he brings his critique together. For instance, Nam Le’s opening story has its own moments of irony and reversal (and one could argue that the ‘values’ espoused in Faulkner’s speech are precisely at issue here). But the correspondence between the two texts (i.e. *Transactions* and *The Boat*) cannot be ignored. It is clear that *Transactions* wants to pronounce judgment upon the naivety of the whole literary-critical humanist paradigm which emphasises a positive, ennobling vision for writing. As Alizadeh himself said at the Sydney Writers’ Festival in 2014:  

> My primary aim, I think, is to make people feel uncomfortable as readers. That to me is the task of art. Otherwise Plato would have no problems with artists; if artists were simply producing *nice entertaining cathartic simulacra* then he would leave them in the Republic.

Thus, embedded within Alizadeh’s brutal portrayal of a globalised world is an aesthetic position which attempts to expose some of the presuppositions of empathic realist literary fiction. In this way Alizadeh over-saturates the work with what Rancière would call ‘signs of politicity’. As a result *Transactions* becomes a blunt example of Rancière’s ‘Dissensus’: ‘the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself.’ Dissensus is opposed to consensus, which Rancière describes thus:  

> The consensus that governs us is a machine of power insofar as it is a machine of vision. It pretends to verify only what everyone can see by adjusting two propositions on the state of the world: one which says that we are finally at peace, and the other which announces the condition of this peace: the recognition that *there is only what there is*.

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73 Gelder 10 and Jose 5.
75 Ali Alizadeh and Maxine Beneba-Clarke, ‘Speaking Out’ (emphasis mine).
This consensus could well be a description of the kind of global picture that Le’s parataxis and his ‘artisanal’ writing techniques create. Parataxis, showing without telling, finding authentic voices for subjects: these could be seen as somehow complicit in the maintenance of the status quo. *There is only what there is.* But Rancière’s dissensus, as Todd May helpfully summarises, must necessarily disrupt any settled vision and reposition its subjects:

A dissensus is not merely a disagreement about the justice of particular social arrangements, although it is that as well. It is also the revelation of the contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order in which such arrangements are embedded.⁷⁹

Alizadeh’s book, it would seem, is exactly this kind of attempt, not only to rail against injustice, but to expose the given conceptual and artistic order by deliberately setting itself against those kinds of aesthetic and writerly choices that erase the traces of their own creation. Over determined structures, ‘clumsy’ explanations, pulp fiction’s epithets, even the endless violence of the novel: these aren’t necessarily ham-fisted attempts to point out global exploitation, they are a means of pronouncing judgment on the literary-aesthetic positions that make such exploitation possible. It is fitting then, that the book ends with the Emirati heiress Samia typing an inane and credibility-stretching commentary on her own assassination. The sword, or in this case Samia’s own Dior belt, is shown to be mightier than the pen.⁸⁰

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⁸⁰ Le, *Transactions* 226. One is reminded here of the quote (often misattributed to Lenin) about hanging the capitalists ‘with the rope they will sell us’.

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Inaudible Sons: Music and Diaspora in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*

Tamás Juhász

‘The exile is a stranger to his mother,’ writes Julia Kristeva,¹ and for anyone in pursuit of this idea, Ishiguro’s fourth novel may serve as a most complex commentary. In this text, masculinity is portrayed in ways that are, on the one hand, nearly textbook illustrations of certain basic concepts in contemporary studies in human sexuality and, on the other, highly original visions in their tight interlocking with notions of migration, displacement and ethnic difference. Main character and narrator Ryder arrives in an unidentified, presumably Central European town to give a much-awaited recital in his capacity as a world-famous concert pianist, and although he is treated as a visitor, an undecided degree of familiarity with the place also begins to emerge. The musician soon meets Gustav, Sophie and Boris whom he first perceives as strangers, but who turn out to be, uncannily, the story-teller’s father-in-law, wife and son (or at least likely candidates for these positions). With these contacts established, a central narrative strand details how Ryder fails to balance his far-reaching public commitments and the domestic responsibilities that are inherent in his marital and parental status. In the end, not only does the planned meeting with his mother and father fall through, but the pianist comes to be rejected by his son and wife as well. Yet the man continues, in an ironically still unshaken spirit, to pursue the compensatory rewards of travel and exile.

As Kristeva’s note implies, migrancy eradicates intimacy even in relationships where physical and emotional closeness was once at its maximum. Ryder’s inability to connect to his wife and son is supplemented by fantasies and memories about his own parents whom he cannot wait to see at his concert but who, it unfolds piecemeal, abused him as a child, instilled into him a sense of mediocrity, and never actually attended a single recital of his. Thus, ejected from bonds of love and denied parental recognition, the main character figures as an exile not only in the sense of someone actually living an unsettled, globe-trotting life, but also in the sense of occupying a peripheral position in potentially profound and nurturing human relationships. This intertwined emotional and geographical marginality is aptly expressed by Sophie who declares, in the coda of the narrative, to Ryder: ‘Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love. Now look at you. On the outside of our grief too. Leave us. Go away’ (532).² Away Ryder will go, but he does not feel particularly devastated. For him, the novel’s nearly hyperbolic representation of masculine independence reveals the sundering of ties, the newer and newer departures to be a set pattern, with movement invariably privileged over commitment and intimacy, a ‘nomadic existence over meaningful familial attachments.’³

Towards Sophie and their son, the allegorically named narrator acts as a stereotypical ‘real man’ who, numerous theorists of masculinity argue, is indeed a figurative stranger to his mother (or any motherly presences) in that his self-conception necessarily hinges on separation from the feminine and the childlike that motherhood signifies. Such negative definition is hinted at by the

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² All parenthesised references are to this edition: Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).
metaphorical quality of a particular childhood memory, emblematically resurfacing in the very first chapter. Looking at the hotel rug from his bed, the narrator recalls how once that same area of floor had been covered by a worn green mat, where several times a week I would set out in careful formations my plastic soldiers … one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers [and] a furious row had broken out downstairs. The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realized this to be of no ordinary row. But I had told myself it was nothing and … continued with my battle plans. Near the centre of that green mat had been a torn patch that had been a source of much irritation to me. But that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it had occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery – that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it – had been one of some excitement for me, and that bush was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated (16).

The recollected quarrel, its gendered dimension and equally gendered resolution are of note here. As shown by his enforced escape into denial and fantasy, Ryder as a child is traumatised by repeated conflicts between his parents. Playing (as it will be in a musical sense, too) is a coping strategy4 for him, but it is in retrospect only that the reader can grasp sexualised connotations within the just quoted section. The ‘bush terrain’ and the soldiers around it correspond to femininity and maleness not only because the motifs of hair and warfare are conventionally associated with female and, respectively, masculine identities, but because they are elements within a dynamic in Ryder and Sophie’s marital relationship. Observe how the term ‘irritation’, now describing the tear in the mat returns in comments about Sophie, a cause of ‘intense irritation [and] chaos’ (115). Similarly, in the same woman’s emphatically ‘long dark hair’ (30, 32), one may recognise that hostile area of femininity and mothering, that ‘bush terrain’ which the male protagonist finds it necessary, in the manner of the toy soldiers of his childhood, to evade or circumvent. This strategy is necessary because just like the bushy ‘blemish’ that threatens to ‘undermine’ the boy’s ‘imaginary world’, the disorder associated with Sophie ‘obliged’ Ryder to ‘compromise’ his ‘usual standards’ (115). In other words, a calculated distancing of the feminine is necessary for the preservation of the narrator’s unblemished, homogeneous male imaginary world, a realm, to borrow Hélène Cixous’s expression, of the self-same.5

4 In A Thousand Plateaus, which continues to elaborate on its authors’ key concept of deterritorialisation, Deleuze and Guattari write the following: ‘A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself, with his little song, as best as he can.’ In a broad sense, music is then a form of reterritorialisation, always threatened by the ‘danger of breaking apart at any moment.’ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987) 311.

5 Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’, The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethic of Generosity edited by Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997) 150. Note how closely Cixous’s wording is paralleling the direct, and gendered, militancy in the narrator’s words: ‘there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman … she must disappear, leaving [the man] to gain Imaginary profit, to win Imaginary victory’ (Cixous 151). This male program applies only too well to Ryder and Sophie’s relationship.
Indeed, the book’s at once powerful and painful theme of ‘disconnection’ assumes — as is implicit in the very notion of ‘connection’, spatially conceived — the narrator’s intense awareness of various border zones. It is as if the main character was in some constant need of warding off the unspecified yet imminent danger of the onrush of the feminine and childlike. The related acts and attitudes include denial (so when Ryder first meets the official or organiser of his visit, he finds ‘There was something about the way she uttered [a] remark that made it difficult for me to respond entirely frankly’ [11]) and male inexpressivity: ‘for all my resolve to make my feelings known to her, I had remained silent’ (96), Ryder reports of his impeded communication with Sophie; and even when he is, towards the end of the story, ‘on the brink of tears’, he ‘made an effort to control [his] emotions’ (389, 391). If only in flashes and incomplete gestures, testing and initiation are also a recognisable part of a spatially organised ideal of gender. Ranging from the feat of dancing with heavy boxes in hand through various training sessions to the motif of a book on DIY helping an adolescent into adulthood, a consistent pattern in the novel associates masculinity with some sort of a threshold to be crossed. And what is left behind — that bush terrain of female, motherly or childlike chaos — is best left forgotten. Ryder’s losing his schedule, as well as his failure to remember not only his current appointments but also important scenes of his life with Sophie and Boris (looking at the old apartment ‘aroused no memories … at all’ [13]), read as consequences of, and narrative variants on, his compulsion to separate himself from any threat to the carefully, and so narcissistically, constructed contours of his male self-ideal.

There is a type of marital, and especially parental, failure among these insistences to keep a distance that deserves particular attention. In The Unconsoled, the theme of male self-sufficiency appears to be intriguingly supplemented with the motif of improper listening. While the portrayed attitudes of calculated deafness and self-separation might be attributed to mere heartlessness or some other deficiency, Bruce Robbins appropriately notes that to blame impeded communication on some general ‘blockage of emotion’ between the troubled characters — a standard idea in related criticism — allows only limited access to the complexities of Ishiguro’s fiction. Minds fail to meet through a distinctly auditory medium, a phenomenon whose exploration can, in turn, facilitate the understanding of not only the novel’s general interest in sound effects, but also its concern with gendered and geographical boundaries.

From such a perspective, speech and music can be treated together because a number of shared conceptual as well as representational traits connect them, producing what Stephen Benson defines as ‘literary music’ in his identically titled book. One of the most memorable examples occur when, in Hoffman’s suggested blueprint for Ryder’s concert, the recital is preceded by an absurd questions and answers session on stage. Here, in what has also been read as a parody of contemporary celebrity culture, Ryder is requested to answer questions from the audience, with the words repeated through an amplifier and even transcribed on an electronic scoreboard. Curiously but characteristically of the novel’s tendentious blurring of speech and music, the plan sort of omits the latter entirely in that after Brodsky’s briefly mentioned recital

Inaudible Sons: Music and Diaspora in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*. Tamás Juhász.


‘Mr Brodsky will emerge. He will perform ... he will then perform’ [380; ellipsis in original]), it is clearly the verbal part that is meant to be the highlight of the concert night: after the listing of the most nuanced details on about two pages, Hoffman just stops contentedly, without having said a word about Ryder’s contribution at the piano. In this case, it seems words can completely replace music, while elsewhere, through its traditional and in the novel particularly poignant association with emotions, music becomes a dialogue or ‘paradigmatic communication’.9

Relevantly for the novel, Benson finds that such a conversation can take place specifically ‘between parent and child’ (148). One can indeed, consider, in Ishiguro’s work, three parent and son relationships with particularly blocked communicative patterns. Renowned musician Ryder displays symptoms of near-deafness when alone with Boris, and in a central narrative analogy, musically refined Hoffman just does not hear the superior quality of his son Stephen’s playing. These relatively detailed visions then converge in the more sporadically outlined, but for the novel as a whole cohesive, account of how Ryder means to focus all his artistic energies in his upcoming recital in order to please his own parents who have, in fact, never attended any of his concerts, and fail to show up for this occasion, too.

Thus, in an emblematic scene, Boris turns to his father:

‘Which [board game] are we going to play?’ he asked.

I pretended not to hear and went on reading. I could see him at the edge of my vision, first turning towards me, then, as the realization dawned on him that I would not reply, turning back to the cupboard. (285)

Ryder, who is at one point actually derided as being ‘deaf’ (223), does of course have sharp enough ears: his not hearing is part and parcel of his programmatic unresponsiveness. So when he watches Boris’s actions, he finds they are performed ‘For some reason best known to himself’ (34), when sharing the same room with the boy, he ‘decided to say nothing to him’ (284), causing, in turn, Sophie to say, ‘You’re very quiet’ (24). And when Ryder makes occasional efforts to initiate conversation with the adolescent, Boris’s silence is directed at the inconsiderate, mechanic manner in which dialogue is solicited. In the small family, only Sophie can secure flowing, easy communication for the boy (‘I could see Boris explaining something to Sophie and the two of them laughing happily’, 255), but by now, Ryder is so hardened in his lack of empathy that he does not experience even envy at the sight of a harmonious mother and child relationship.

Comparably, when Stephen plays the first few bars of a magnificent recital, Ryder is witness to the following consequences:

there was some surprise when he went into the explosive opening of *Glass Passions*, [yet later] something seemed to catch Stephen’s eye and his playing lost all intensity, as though someone had pulled out a plug. His gaze followed something moving through the crowd … he was watching a couple of figures leaving the auditorium … Hoffman and his wife disappearing. (477-8)

The flabbergasted youth first leaves the stage and then returns to complete the piece and earn ‘general astonishment’ (481) as well as ‘enthusiastic applause’ (482), but his parents are absent

Throughout. When he confronts his father, Hoffman wickedly insinuates that although Stephen’s playing is good, it is not good enough, a sorry fact he and his wife never had the heart to tell their son. Ishiguro crafts these passages in such a way that they reflect an analogy between the parent’s inability to hear music in its full beauty, and to accept Stephen in his full humanity. Thus, emblematically of his own deafness, Hoffman refuses the very possibility of responsiveness in saying: ‘No, no, don’t interrupt, I’m trying to tell you something I should have said long ago’ (479), only to add more bitter words about not being heard properly: ‘Why won’t you listen to me? Don’t you realize this is bringing me great pain? It’s not easy to speak so frankly, even to one’s own son’ (480).

These instances of not listening properly are brought to their logical narrative conclusion through the circumstances of Ryder’s own, never actually executed concert. Because the pianist’s parents do not attend the culminating event, their withdrawal or symbolic deafness is not shown directly. Nevertheless, mishearing remains a vital part of Ishiguro’s preoccupations with absence, family and a defining sense of boundaries. So Ryder explains to Miss Stratmann:

\[\text{the fact was, I was sure that this time, at last, [my parents] would come. Surely, it wasn’t unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time? After all, I am at the height of my powers now. How much longer I am supposed to go on traveling like this? … They must be here somewhere. Besides, I heard them. When I stopped the car in the wood, I could hear them coming, their horse and carriage. (512; emphasis added)}\]

By now, the reader senses the ultimate oneness of several male characters in the novel\(^\text{10}\) (with special regard to Stephen, Brodsky and Ryder), therefore one knows that the rejection on the part of Ryder’s parents is a narrative extension, or completion, of Stephen’s parents’ walking out of the auditorium. The two incidents are, in turn, a variant on the emotional unresponsiveness and figurative deafness that Ryder displays towards his own son Boris. The apparently contagious inability to hear the manifestations of a unique individuality (whether expressed in music, words or otherwise) erects its walls among the characters who choose, instead of the risks of love or any responsible interpersonal involvement, to turn, walk or simply stay, away.

Yet these scenes of unrealised contact dominate the novel alongside a remarkable variant. A particular rhetorical pattern in the story serves, in its compelling smoothness, not only as a supplement, or counterpoint, to unproductive dialogues, but also as a crucial clue for grasping the simultaneous significance of the auditory, the gendered and the exilic. Paradoxically in a story where so many experience the bitterness of finding no genuinely interested listeners, willing ears and flowing, eagerly received words present themselves with an almost rhythmic recurrence. To take an early example, Miss Collins tells Ryder, immediately after his undelivered speech at the banquet, the following placatory words: ‘you’d be welcome to visit me for tea some afternoon. I’d be more than happy to talk over whatever happens to be on your mind. You’d have a sympathetic ear, I can assure you … I’ll listen to you with sympathy’ (146). Unexpectedly, even a complete stranger on a bus ride will resort to similar language. For nearly two pages, this man details why Ryder and his son should not worry about finding a lost toy in

\(^{10}\) It is a standard idea in the criticism of the novel that in Ishiguro’s unorthodox scheme of characterisation, several individuals function as reflections and commentaries on one another. In Brian W. Shaffer’s formulation, these figures are ‘to be understood as extensions, versions, or variations of Ryder himself’ (94).
the old apartment that they are about to visit. The speaker’s hypnotic discourse reproduces the slow, natural rhythm of breathing through the anaphoric use of the word ‘and’, confirming thereby the overall message of ‘all will be well’. The fellow passenger’s final words read as if they had been spoken to pacify a sad or neurotic child: ‘Of course, it may not happen precisely like this, but from what you’ve told me, I feel sure, by and large, that’s how things will turn out. So there is no need to worry, no need at all’ (209). Hoffman, too, is associated with similar rhetoric when he explains, again in careful details and at some length, how Ryder’s parents will be received on the night of the recital:

By that time in the evening the clearing in the front of the concert hall will be bathed in lights, and all the prominent members of our community will be congregating there, laughing and greeting one another … And then … there’ll come from the darkness of the woods the sound of approaching horses. The ladies and gentleman, they’ll stop talking and turn their heads. The sound of hooves will get louder, coming all the time closer to the pool of light. (379).

Towards the close of the narrative, Miss Stratmann also offers her version of verbal consolation. Showing the picture of a building that looks like a ‘fairy-tale castle’, she explains all the satisfactory details about how practically everybody ‘would have immediately gone about helping’ Ryder’s parents, how the couple sojourned in an ‘idyllic hotel’ (514). Invariably, these instances of incantatory, soothing discourse succeed in securing, if only temporarily, a tranquilising effect on the dejected narrator.

Part of the relevance of these utterances is that they place the pianist in the position of a child – a fact which will, in turn, be argued to have key implications for the novel’s concern with exile. Ryder is spoken to as an upset child would be by a kind adult in terms of emotional approach, rhetoric and imagery (note the reference to fairy-tales and the allusion to Santa Claus), and the direct subject matter of such speeches is either about the musician’s own parents or the parental care he himself has provided for Boris. So even when neither is the case and Miss Collins offers to just listen to the troubled celebrity like a sort of therapist, she is in fact ‘doubling for [Ryder’s] beloved mother.’ In addition, there is a slightly different episode confirming the conceptual link between childhood and the phenomenon of irresistible, flowing, must-be-listened-to speech. Relying on the consistent way in which Ishiguro uses his male characters interchangeably (thus, as has been suggested, the neglect Boris suffers is a narrative-visionary version of the neglect that was once inflicted upon Ryder), one may say that on one occasion the father speaks, as it were, instead of the young boy. If only mentally, Ryder forms the following sentences about Sophie’s unsatisfactory culinary performance on a rare, potentially intimate get-together of mother, father and son:

She had not thought to provide, for instance, any sardines on little triangles of toast, or any cheese and sausage kebabs. She had not made an omelette of any sort, or any cheese-stuffed potatoes, or fish cakes. Neither were there any stuffed peppers. Not those little cubes of bread with anchovy paste on them, nor those pieces of cucumber sliced lengthways, not even wedges of hard-boiled egg with the zig-zag edges. And afterwards, she made no plum slices, no buttercream fingers, not even a strawberry Swiss role. (288)

The real subject of Ryder’s ridiculous complaint about his wife’s cooking is, of course, not the itemised delicacies themselves, but the lack of Sophie’s unlimited, absolute attention. Hunger for food is hunger for love. It is demand in that it ‘bears on something other than the satisfactions it calls for’, in that it is about the ‘presence’ or ‘absence’ of ‘the Other’, a remodelling of a ‘primordial relation to the mother.’\(^{12}\) Unable to recover from the loss of his own mother, and self-barred from the good verbal rapport between Sophie and Boris, Ryder rehearses the kind of speech that a cranky, possibly neurotic child would produce to command the undivided attention of a parent figure.

But, as has been noted, the significance of the above, contrasting and yet supplementary, models of listening and not listening goes well beyond the novel’s otherwise extensive interest in gender and psychology. A geographically constituted rift too seems to shape the way in which language is used and music is performed. To elaborate on this dimension of the novel, I would like to cite two comments offered by Ishiguro in interviews. The first provides a broader, indirect context for the issue of communication, while the second reflects on linguistic choices specifically. Thus, in a conversation with Maya Jaggi, the novelist talks about his awareness of an alternative life – one that he never actually lived, and does not even regret not living, but which nevertheless allows him an insight into what it would have been like to grow up in his country of birth:

‘This [in England] is the only life I’ve known. I had a happy childhood, and I’ve been very happy here. But … the strong emotional relationships I had in Japan … were suddenly severed … I’ve always been aware that there was this other life I might have had.’\(^{13}\)

On another occasion, in a conversation with Gregory Mason about the use of his Oriental origin in his fiction, the novelist rejects the restricting ‘Japanese writer’ label and suggests critics should stop hunting down predictably ethnic motifs in his works, because they are just not there: his Japanese is ‘like a five-year-old’:\(^{14}\)

In the present reading, these words are charged with meanings that may not have been actually intended by Ishiguro, but which his novel nevertheless appears to warrant. To speak like a five-year-old, or to listen to the other like a five-year-old would – acts with a magical capacity to reproduce affection and relatedness, where nothing is yet ‘severed’ – is to revert to the discourse of a lost home, this ‘other life’. Like Japanese, emotional-auditory rapport in The Unconsoled is a vanishing, half-remembered language, and Ryder displays fascinated susceptibility to it. Whether he listens to ‘full’ – kind, dreamlike and incantatory – speeches or he makes his own attempt at a sort of irresistible because so childish, discourse, the condition of being understood on the linguistic-musical level coincides with the condition of having returned home, being unconditionally loved.


Indeed, in spite of its general lack of accurate geographical-national reference, *The Unconsoled* contains a number of scenes where the motif of remaining unheard – together with other modes of being ignored – appears in contexts of origin and identity.¹⁵ For example, globally distinguished Ryder is curiously muted when Hoffman drives him to a banquet. Here, though the pianist is assured of his special standing as a guest of honour, he soon has the sense he is not identified at all but, instead, outright ignored (‘although heads would turn and greet my hostess she made no effort to introduce me to anyone. Moreover, although some people smiled politely at me from time to time, no one seemed especially interested in me … no one seemed to recognise me’ [125, 133]). Under these circumstances, it is almost predictable that the speech Ryder is prompted to deliver will remain, in spite of a farcical formal start, unrealised (‘Thrown into confusion, I hesitated for a second then sat back again. Almost immediately, a woman stood up across the room and said [something] stridently’ [143]). It happens on a similar social occasion that the musician, after being actually asked his thoughts on a particular issue, must experience his efforts to articulate a view in public being consistently stifled. When he first speaks, ‘a woman interrupt[s] him (270) immediately, and when he ‘began again heatedly’, a man cuts in, saying something more ‘firmly’ than himself was capable of (270). Elsewhere, in the idiosyncratic surrealism of Ishiguro’s vision, Ryder alternates between not being heard and being assumed not to hear. So, when two journalists convince him to leave his son in a café and join them for a photo session, the flow of words and sounds is suddenly out of control: ‘Letting out an exclamation, I went up to them, but curiously the two men continued their discussion without looking up at me.’ A few seconds later, he hears what he is not intended to when the men call him, within his earshot, a ‘difficult shit’ (166) and a ‘touchy bastard’ (167). (Note also the role of bias and hearsay in the journalists’ attitude. They despise Ryder not because he does anything particularly nasty towards them, but because they rely on another journalist’s account – a detail which allows Ishiguro to explore identity politics through a perspective broader than the merely psychological. The narrator is a visitor, and just as certain ethnic or racial stereotypes travel ahead of exiles who are individually not known, a notorious precondition precedes the pianist.)

So where does Ryder come from? Ishiguro never tells us directly. Furthermore, he systematically undermines possibilities of easy classification. Initially, the main character’s Anglo-Saxon name, his recollection of a Manchester home and his encounter with a former schoolmate position him relatively firmly in England as a place of origin and identity. Yet the reader soon senses the unreliability of these coordinates: Ryder’s name is an allegory rather than a proper family name, his memories of a childhood habitat are absurdly shifting and fragile, and there is the sheer improbability of spotting a former schoolmate not among the tourists, but among the locals far from the UK. Moreover, the main character’s claims on Britishness are questioned, as well as thoroughly recontextualised, by the various, and again auditory, details of his renewed contact with Sophie and Gustav.

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¹⁵ An insistence on the simultaneous presence and absence of engagement with ethnicity punctuates a large segment of Ishiguro criticism. Cynthia Wong, for example, contends that ‘ethnicity is not intended as the main subject of [Ishiguro’s] books’ and suggests, elsewhere, that the novelist’s ‘own status as an immigrant writer in the early years of his life … probably shaped the emotional life of his characters’ (6). Cynthia F. Wong, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Tavistock: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2000) 9, 6.
Unsettled and itinerant, Ryder is related to a wife and a father-in-law who appear to possess a migrant background themselves. Note how a version of the motif of the pianist being ignored in public is repeated, after being supplemented with the ethnic clue ‘gypsy’, when Sophie suffers comparable humiliation. Thus, ‘Sophie, in a dark crimson evening dress, [was] standing awkwardly by herself in the centre of a crowded room, while all around her people stood laughing and talking in little groups’ (259). This is the recollection of an earlier event, but when the woman attends, in the main plot, a party with her husband and son, nothing changes:

Sophie was standing a few steps from where I had originally left her, quite isolated, not talking to anyone. A feeble smile hovered on her face, though there was no one to display it to. Her shoulders were hunched and her gaze seemed to be fixed on the footwear of the group of guests nearest her. (277)

This is not how the wife of a celebrity is normally treated, but this may well be what happens, in the novel’s multiple surrealist visions, to a visibly different nomad in a racially uniform company. Therefore, it is relevant that dark-haired Sophie strikes even her own husband as a ‘gypsy’ (32), an association reinforced by her worries about their not having an appropriate home, and in general, permanence. Sophie’s father too appears to have migrated to his present residence. Gustav’s Hungarian origin is never actually stated, yet it is a strong narrative probability. He is one of the senior regulars at the Hungarian Café, and when the porters’ dance episode takes place, a crowd gathers, and an unspecified ‘section of it’ (406) begins a high-intensity Hungarian song which in turn spreads quickly among the spectators.

This particular language choice is only one of the reasons why, in the present interpretation, the location of The Unconsoled is treated as a postmodernist revisioning of the ethnically highly diverse Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Apart from the various markers of an Austrian landscape, the local community’s nostalgic-declinish attitude (the monarchy’s cultural and political significance around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be overestimated) and the apparent, often-mentioned Kafkaesque qualities of the narration are further, possible support for this idea. But it is reliving the cultural memories of a once glorious state from a contemporary ethnic margin that connects with the central character’s experience with particular poignancy. In this context, Ishiguro’s choice for ethnic otherness – Hungarian – in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy is significant precisely through its relative insignificance. Historically, Hungarians constituted the second largest population in this dual state, so as a consequence, to be Hungarian entails no conspicuous deviation from the majority. But at the same time, the status of Hungarians as second class citizens was apparent even during the final decades of the monarchy when the relations between the two dominant nationalities were, after numerous confrontations, the most balanced. On Ishiguro’s fictive territory of an increasingly global, yet post-colonially burdened contemporary Europe, the alternation between showing the narrator as an insider and an outsider meaningfully supplements the presentation of characters who are just like the locals, yet whose slight ethnic difference remains a powerful, if residual and indirect, element in their identity.16

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16 Ishiguro will use the Hungarian motif next in his Nocturnes. Five Stories of Music and Nightfall (2009) where, similarly to The Unconsoled, the Hungarianness of one of the title characters in ‘Cellists’ is subject to uncertainty (Tibor is mistaken for a Russian) and a subaltern position (the young player’s economic vulnerability is not only

Inaudible Sons: Music and Diaspora in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Unconsoled. Tamás Juhász.
This, of course, is not to claim that Ryder himself is a travelling Hungarian, even if, during the dance scene, he narrates that ‘I began to sing, making up words I thought sounded vaguely Hungarian. For some reason, this worked surprisingly well – I found more and more such words pouring out of me with gratifying ease – and before long, I was singing with considerable emotion’ (408). The combination of such ethnic possibilities with narrative suggestions that clearly contradict them – to the effect that Ryder is a genuine Englishman – signals, instead, that on this terrain of the surreal and the pronouncedly psychological, individual uncertainties about nationhood and ethnicity are allegories of a broader, and general, immigrant predicament. In other words, the main character’s mobility and indeterminate origins are not only reflective of several other characters’ migrant backgrounds but also of what it takes, typically, to be caught between locations, conflicting identities, even languages. Therefore, details in the novel about foreignness ‘no longer designate […] just a concrete] narrator or a character but an assemblage that becomes … all the more collective because an individual is locked into it in his or her solitude.’

So, for example, when the narrator conjures up his parents’ arrival at his concert, the old couple’s description (‘looking at the strange city around them … while cars and lorries roared past them and commuters rushed by’ [176]) is, as Shao-Pin Luo registers, ‘perhaps a universal [image] of immigrants arriving in a new city where they do not know a soul.’ Or when we become aware of Gustav’s, Sophie’s, Boris’s and Ryder’s possibly non-English origin, the incident of the street thugs’ repeated, and then successfully warded-off attacks no longer reads simply as the wish-fulfilling fantasy of a teenage boy but as a particular rendition of racial attacks against ethnic minorities. Similarly, the motif of the Sattler monument – through its embarrassing, communally so divisive effects, its Germanic character and especially the never-specified radicalism associated with it – easily evokes memories of Nazi race ideology. Besides these examples of actual racial abuse, yet further details indicate how the represented community stereotypes, or outright ignores, its non-native members. Thus, proceeding on the assumption that Gustav and possibly his fellow porters too are from a different country, one can suspect that the pride they display and the urgency in their protest against public misperception are not only professionally motivated, as they appear, but they are also rooted in their ethnic standing. They are a ‘close-knit group’ (7), to whom, as Gustav puts it, no one is actually rude, but the ‘politeness and consideration’ he mentions reads in his speech rather as polite condescension, a sign of the fading ‘respect’ (6; emphasis in original) about which he does complain explicitly. An immigrant in the service industry, he resents the suggestion of inferiority that at one point another character’s words carry when calling an enemy, maliciously, a mere ‘bell-boy’ (458; emphasis in original).

As implied in this slur, the condition of being a specifically male foreigner is an integral part of the novel’s vision of the diasporic predicament. From a gendered perspective, it is Brodsky, Christoff and Hoffman whose troubled masculinity – mirroring, once again, Ryder’s own

linked to his East-European background but it is also orchestrated by the sumptuous Western setting and the condescending attitude of a wealthy American couple).


anxieties – appears to be burdened by their non-local origins. Thus, Brodsky, whose general ‘recovery’ (57) perhaps most substantially recapitulates Ryder’s ‘recovering lost ground’ (376), is a figure originally from Poland or the Ukraine, and his sexually deprived condition seems to be in some remote, yet quite real relationship with this background. We learn that his loss of a limb, symbolically so resonant, occurred in a distant region and in the distant past, but the person whose heart he tries to win is an emphatically local woman: Miss Collins, the reader is told, has ‘[never] even left the city’ (364). This might seem to be an isolated example were this motif not repeated in description of fellow fallen music idol Christoff. A kind of successor to Brodsky, Christoff too is originally a newcomer (106), and he too focuses his sexual attention on a pronouncedly ‘local girl’ who is ‘one of [them], grew up with [them]’ (104). After both Brodsky and Christoff are deposed, the town-dwellers envision a new idol who ‘shared our values’ (113; emphasis in original). In Hoffman’s case, there is no suggestion of geographical relocation, yet the maritally miserable man conceptualises his perceived inferiority as a matter of the difference in talent that lies between two genealogies: while his wife ‘comes from a long line of talented people’ (346), he himself shows only ‘mediocrity’ (354). One way or another, outsiders as well as newcomers appear to be disadvantaged in sexually competitive situations.

Furthermore, anxieties about displaced masculinity are focused in the leitmotif of music and speech. In Ishiguro’s vision, the ability to strike the right notes (or the right tone) signals the promise of admission into the community from which one has been cast out before. It is because of this conceptual pattern that, comically and originally, music features in the city dwellers’ life so significantly. To make the appropriate auditory gestures is both an act of compensation (as Kristeva notes, ‘The foreigner is the one who works’19) and homecoming. Thus, although Ishiguro never explicitly relates music to foreignness, various indirect statements imply that any well-done performance is instrumental in securing a much coveted act of return. The longest, and most straightforward articulation of this idea occurs in Chapter 15, where Ryder tells Boris the following:

I’d like nothing better than to stay at home with you and Mother … But … it’s not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips because … you can never tell when it’s going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip … It’ll come soon … then … I’ll be able to relax and rest … I could stay at home … we could enjoy ourselves, just the three of us. (217‒18)

The very special concert is, of course, the one that Ryder is currently invited to give, so he explains the same idea to Sophie in these words: ‘I promise, I won’t be travelling much longer now. Tonight, if it goes well …’ (446). Several of the various narrative-psychological projections of the pianist are correspondingly beset by the idea of having to earn a home, even love, via excelling on the auditory level. So from Stephen (who hopes his satisfactory recital on the concert night will restore affection and intimacy in his family) through Christoff (who fell out of grace with his wife as a direct consequence of his declining professional prestige) to Brodsky (who aspires to win back his former lover’s affection through revitalising himself as a composer), a variety of characters reinforce the concept of music as compensation and interpersonal dynamic, especially serviceable for the displaced or marginalised. Efforts of this

19 Kristeva 17.

kind are necessary; otherwise the barriers that time, insensitivity and heartlessness have erected remain in place – one can notice how the titles Ishiguro has chosen for several of the fictitious pieces of music appearing in the novel are expressive of distance, division or impenetrability. Thus, when Ryder hesitates between the compositions called *Globestructures: Option II* and *Asbestos and Fire* (339), a sense of his exilic restlessness as well as various concepts of boundaries are conveyed. When Stephen switches from an earlier idea to play *Glass Passions* (477) to regain the affections of his less than loving parents, the name choice hardly seems accidental. Immersed in the highly specialised, elitist production of contemporary music, the at once mad and brilliantly focused Brodsky can only play something that is titled *Verticality*.

Finally, in this particular musical context, Ryder’s just quoted definition of their family (‘just the three of us’) may bear additional relevance for the novel’s intertwined notions of gender, migrancy and auditory relations. Here and elsewhere in this indeed Kafkaesque, claustrophobic story, the family is invariably nuclear: there is no suggestion of any larger number of relatives living together; the housing estate that Ryder revisits with Bori accommodates small, isolated families, where only one child is the norm. This configuration, which lends itself to the conventional designation Oedipal, may explain the fear that imbues Ryder through the anti-Oedipal perspective of Deleuze and Guattari. For the French theorists, the too tight association between the nuclear family and Oedipus offers a restrictive, in a sense false, view of how desire actually operates: ‘It is not a question of denying the vital importance of parents or the love attachment of children to their mothers and fathers. It is a question of knowing what the place and the function of parents are within desiring-production, rather than … forcing the entire interplay of desiring machines to fit within … the restricted code of Oedipus.’ Desire, which is multiple and nomadic, cannot be pinned down to two binary subject-positions only: ‘We pass from one field to another by crossing thresholds: we never stop migrating, we become other individuals as well as other sexes.’

Ryder’s actual migrancy, and especially his music, may be construed as a way to reclaim (or, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, reterritorialise) that which has been lost. The ‘cold’ titles of music listed above file not only a sort of complaint about repressed love and sexuality, but the description of their performance also relates music to a sort of protest against the normative or the majoritarian (including the Oedipal). Note the link between the sexual and the spatial in the following comments on the playing of Brodsky (that is, Ryder himself): it was ‘push[ing] into ever stranger territories’ (492), ‘tak[ing] things too far’ (494), yet producing an ‘unnerving but compelling’ effect (492), and before coming ‘unstuck’ (496), it ‘veered … towards the realm of perversion’ (494). This gesture too produces a variant on the inaudibility theme in that in the audience’s failing to follow him, ‘disaffinity’ (494) and non-comprehension grow between them and the musician.

To conclude, the novel’s concentration on the divisive effects of language and music remodels less explicitly portrayed, yet for the narrative definitive, anxieties about the notion of home and community. Specifically, the experience of displacement becomes focused in the motif of inaudibility. This holds true even for otherwise officially celebrated music. While music represents a form of cultural power, Ishiguro stresses how its truly profound moments can go ignored by familial as well as non-familial audiences. This condition of remaining unheard being

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Ryder’s plight and legacy, he now hands it down to his son: notwithstanding his particular gift for auditory excellence, the pianist remains invariably deaf to the emotional needs and signals of others. Ryder is not the only such person in this fictive town of musical connoisseurs: many shared attributes imply a symbolic identity to the pianist with other men and other migrants, reinforcing thereby an artistic link between male restlessness and mobility on the one hand and, on the other, socially conditioned fears, even phobias, concerning the feminine. For this reason, *The Unconsoled* can be read as the composite story of actual foreigners, unloved children and inarticulate, emotionally troubled men, where music and conversation feature as promises of reconnection.

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Both Charleston, South Carolina, and Kyoto, Japan, are internationally popular tourist destinations rich in history and culture, which share an obsession with bloodlines, a heightened sense of decorum, and a pervasive nostalgia. Both cities are also home to an elite core of society, and both present formidable barriers to outsiders, reflective of deeply ingrained racial prejudices.

In comparing the novels *A Southern Girl* by John Warley, the story of an international adoption in upper-crust Charleston, South Carolina, and *Ichigensan*, by Swiss writer David Zoppetti, about a foreign student of Japanese who falls in love with a young blind woman in Kyoto, these traits come to the fore. In this paper, I will illustrate these similarities in culture as portrayed in these two works of fiction, and also show that both novels cross borders and break with established literary tradition.

**Background**

From 794-1868, Kyoto was the imperial capital of Japan, an enduring source of local pride verging upon snobbery. Japan’s literary tradition harkens back to the courts of Old Japan, where Lady Murasaki penned *Tale of Hikaru Genji*, widely considered to be the world’s first novel. Courtiers such as Onono Komachi communicated via poetry or kept diaries, such as *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagan*, while beyond the castle walls, illiterate peasants laboured in the fields. The city has also inspired many modern poets and writers such as Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata, who chose Kyoto as the backdrop for his novel *The Old Capital* and other works.

Many foreign writers have also employed Kyoto as a setting in their novels, including Arthur Golden, whose best-selling novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, was written after the author interviewed a veteran of the rarefied world of Kyoto teahouses. Liza Dalby also managed to penetrate Kyoto’s inner sanctum by conducting anthropological studies as a geisha-in-training. She utilised this experience in the writing of the nonfiction tomes *Geisha, Kimono: Fashioning Culture*, and her novel *The Tale of Murasaki*, in which she re-imagines the life of the twelfth-century scribe, which are all composed in English and directed at a Western audience. David Zoppetti’s novel, *Ichigensan*, discussed later in this essay, is unique in that it is a novel of Kyoto written in Japanese by an ‘outsider’ for a Japanese audience.

As for Charleston, the history of its literature is intertwined with figures representative of an American aristocracy. The Antebellum South came to life in the works of plantation owners such as Mary Boykin Chestnut and Eliza Lucas Pinckney, avid correspondents and diarists. In 1920, Pinckney’s descendant Josephine Pinckney would help found the Poetry Society of South Carolina along with Dubose Heyward, another descendant of a seventeenth-century founding family of South Carolina, and other elites with the goal of building a ‘constituency for literature.’

The hallmarks of Southern literature, as outlined by Heyward, were a love for land and family. He declared that Southern writers ‘have nature, history, folklore, legend, tradition;...”}

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they will express their old homeland about them with its long roots reaching into the past.\(^2\)

Even after the Civil War, Reconstruction, and various financial disasters, the former planters still held sway in Charleston. Many blacks still lived in servants’ quarters, and were denied education and opportunity. While the rest of the South was in the midst of a progressive movement, the defeated but proud Charlestonians resisted change for as long as they could.\(^3\)

Charleston writer Dubose Heyward gained national fame with the publication of *Porgy*, the story of a black man which was later made into a musical by George Gershwin. Fellow Poetry Society member Josephine Pinckney’s comedy of manners *Three O’Clock Dinner* was a national bestseller and optioned for film. The book provided Americans with a glimpse of the last of Carolina aristocrats.

Pinckney was also a founding member of the Society for the Preservation of Spirituals, an exclusive all-white group consisting of members who were ‘plantation bred, or plantation broken’\(^4\) intent on preserving the Gullah dialect which developed among coastal South Carolina slaves and their owners. Pinckney, Heyward, and others, such as Julia Peterkin, and Gamel Woolsey, incorporated Gullah songs, poems, and phrases into their novels, giving evidence of both their liberal-mindedness regarding race relations and their blue-blooded beginnings.

More recent novels set in Charleston, such as those by Dorothea Frank, Mary Alice Monroe, Pat Conroy, Sue Monk Kidd, and Margaret Bradham Thornton also focus upon families of means and pedigree and often concern their involvements with slaves or family servants who are descendants of slaves. Even in the realm of young adult literature, two contemporary series – *Beautiful Creatures* by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl and *Compulsion* by Martina Boone -- are set on South Carolina plantations. Regional literature has flourished over the past century but has remained mostly impervious to the influence of new immigrants to the South.

In particular, Asians and Asian Americans are largely absent from literature set in the American South, in spite of their historical presence. As Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi write:

> The figure of the Asian American is perceived to be discrepant in and antithetical to the U.S. South. Within the American imaginary, the Asian American as perpetual foreigner and alien is always seen as a recent immigrant, and therefore associated with contemporary times, while the South is perceived as an anachronistic and isolated region.\(^5\)

Meanwhile, American literature in general has been reinvigorated by immigrants writing in English as a second language. Major writing awards have gone to Junot Diaz, who was born in the Dominican Republic and wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel in a mix of English and Spanish; Chinese-born writer Yuyin Li, who was named a MacArthur Fellow, and Ha Jin, whose novel *A Free Life*, about Chinese immigrants struggling in Atlanta, Georgia, is one of few examples of transnational literature out of the South, and one of few novels representing Asians or Asian Americans in the South.

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\(^2\) Bellows 46.
\(^4\) Bellows 69.
Ichigensan’s Kyoto
Geneva-born David Zoppetti won the Subaru Prize for Literature in 1997 for *Ichigensan*, his first novel, written in Japanese. The novel was also nominated for the Akutagawa Prize, Japan’s most prestigious literary award, and was praised by the *Japan Times* as ‘a beautiful love story’ and by *Kyoto Shinbun* for being ‘refined and sensual.’

According to his biographical notes, Zoppetti studied at Doshisha University in the 1980s, then went on to work in broadcasting as the first full-time foreign employee of a Japanese television network. He also became the first employee of the company to claim paternity leave. He later decided to devote himself to writing, and thus produced *Ichigensan* (*The Newcomer*), his first of four books so far. The title refers to the policy of refusing first time customers who attempt to enter an establishment without a proper introduction, which is still intact at some of Kyoto’s more exclusive geisha teahouses and restaurants.

The book was made into a film, and translated into English by Takuma Sminkey, who has also lived as a foreigner in Japan. As Sminkey writes in his afterword to the book, *Ichigensan* ‘has sometimes been categorized as *ekkyo bungaku* (border-crossing literature), a genre that includes other non-Japanese writers of Japanese literature, such as Hideo Levy, Arthur Binard, Kaneshiro Kazuki, and more recently Yang Yi and Shirin Nezammafi.’6 These writers have been singled out for their seemingly extraordinary ability to write in Japanese, a notoriously difficult language for speakers of English, and for their insights into a country often deemed impenetrable and unknowable to outsiders. According to Sminkey, *Ichigensan* questions the validity of the *kokusaika* (internationalisation) paradigm, in which international exchange is always seen in terms of national identity, and the difference between insiders and outsiders is assumed to be obvious.7

In writing about the novels of Zoppetti and other recent foreign-born writers of Japanese, Chinese scholar Li Jiang points out that ‘border-crossing’ suggests an illegal act:

There is probably no denying that the word *ekkyo* [border-crossing] has a negative overtone. The word implies that the action is illegitimate. No one speaks of the foreigners who are staying in Japan legally as border-crossing aliens. The word only refers to people who cross borders without the documents required by law. The term indicates a sense of possession: a certain language belongs to a certain group of people, and if a member of another community uses the language, he/she is perceived as committing an illegitimate act. And the same holds true, it seems, for cultural borders.8

It is especially significant, then, that Zoppetti’s novel begins in ‘Dejima’, a lounge for foreign students at a university, nicknamed for the artificial island constructed for foreign traders off the coast of Nagasaki in the seventeenth century. For many years this was the only site where cultural exchange was legally permitted in Japan.

The narrator is idling in this oasis for foreigners when a Japanese woman wearing a kimono, and her blind daughter, appear. They are entering this foreign space in search of someone to read literature to the daughter. After overhearing their exchange in Japanese, the narrator learns that

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7 Sminkey 102.
they are willing to employ a foreign student, ‘even if he makes a few mistakes or has an accent’\(^9\) and offers himself up for the job.

The relationship between the student and Kyoko unfolds through literature. The first book that the narrator reads to Kyoko is *The Dancing Girl*, Mori Ogai’s novel about a Japanese medical student abroad who falls in love with a young German woman. For Japanese readers, this is clearly an unsuitable and ill-fated union. Next, the student reads Mori Tatsuo’s *Kaze Tachinu* (which has not been translated into English, thus clueing Japanese readers in to Zoppetti’s literary sophistication), about a designer of planes who falls in love with an invalid. Gradually, they proceed to Henry Miller’s erotic *Henry and June* – Kyoko’s choice, and an obvious attempt at seduction-by-literature. And she succeeds.

As a European in Kyoto, the student’s appearance makes him a constant source of curiosity. However, when he attempts to behave normally, he is rebuffed, as in this exchange while using public transportation:

> a businessman might sit down beside me and, after the train started moving, begin asking all sorts of questions in English. I felt as if I were being interrogated by the police.

> If I answered his questions in Japanese, he’d stand up while I was in the midst of my explanation and change his seat – as if to say, ‘I don’t have time for foreigners who speak Japanese.’ Flabbergasted, I’d be left there with my mouth hanging open, looking like a complete idiot. I thought communication was a two-way street. Besides, we were in Japan, so shouldn’t we have been speaking in Japanese? (I 19)

With Kyoko, the young blind woman, looks don’t matter. She is more interested in having access to Japanese literature than in marveling over the oddity of a foreigner in Japan. In her presence, he can relax and observe, without being observed himself.

Kyoko was born in Kyoto, but as a person with a disability with limited financial means (her father died when she was a child) she is on the fringes of mainstream society. She attended a school for the blind and a college in Tokyo. Although she is considering a job offer in Tokyo, she is currently unemployed and thus not part of any group. Therefore, the access to inner Kyoto that she can provide to the student is limited.

Kyoko’s lifestyle represents yet another culture – that of the blind. She navigates her world via sounds, scents, and touch. Although the disabled are often seen as innocent and asexual, Kyoko is most certainly not. The student, meanwhile, is unabashedly intrigued by her habits – ‘Hey, don’t you use one of those white canes when you go out?’ (I 19), he asks as they set out for dinner in town – and often surprised by her interests and capabilities: ‘Needless to say, I was rather surprised the first time Kyoko suggested we go see a movie’ (I 20). Oddly, the student seems unaware of the parallels between his amazement at Kyoko’s abilities as a non-sighted person in a sighted world, and the amazement of Kyoto denizens over his Japanese linguistic ability and cultural fluency. To the reader, however, this is apparent.

On one of their outings, they go to a karaoke bar with a song list heavy on the Beatles. Although patrons regularly listen to Japanese singing in English while drinking American whiskey, they express surprise when the student sings ‘Tombo’ in Japanese:

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\(^9\) David Zoppetti, *Ichigensan (The Newcomer)* trans Takuma Swinkey (Birchington, UK: Ozaru Books, 2011) 4. Subsequent references to this novel will be included in parentheses in the text.
When the song was over, the bar erupted in applause that bordered on overkill. The man sitting nearby leaned from his stool and slapped me on the back. ‘You’re absolutely incredible! Truly amazing! Out of this world!’

‘It’s thanks to Uehara-san,’ I explained. ‘He lets me practice here whenever I want.’ But the man wasn’t listening. He had already turned away to harangue someone else with his monologue.

‘Truly incredible! Never in my life have I heard a foreigner sing like that! Unbelievable! Japan has really changed!’ (I 43)

As the evening proceeds and alcohol is consumed, Kyoko’s and the student’s fingers become entwined – a visible demonstration of their cross-cultural romantic relationship seen by some as a transgression. The student is aware of the potential reaction of the others in the bar and feels uncomfortable, but Kyoko, who cannot see, is oblivious until ‘the fat middle-aged man who had sung enka glanced over at [them] and then sarcastically muttered, ‘You really gotta wonder where our country’s heading’ (I 45).

Eventually, the student’s inability to integrate wears him down and he decides to leave Kyoto ‘in search of sceneries that would quell the yearning in my heart.’ As he explains to Kyoko:

Last autumn, when I saw the fall of the Berlin Wall on TV, something changed in me that can never be reversed … On that evening, I realized I was facing two walls. One was the wall that the people were knocking down … The other wall was more abstract. It was this haunting wall that I kept running into in my everyday life here in Kyoto. It also occurred to me that Kyoto is a city of walls. Earthen walls. Bamboo fences. Bamboo blinds. Lattices. All these things I’d once considered beautiful began to look like symbols of the walls in the hearts of the people here. (I 97)

Kyoko departs alone for Tokyo where she has accepted a job in an office. The narrator watches her walk away from him, tapping her cane as she goes and remarks, ‘I strongly felt that beyond those gates, a bright and tangible future was awaiting her’ (I 99). Thus, both are seemingly exiled from impenetrable Kyoto.

**A Southern Girl in Charleston**

Like Zoppetti, John Warley, author of *A Southern Girl*, has transnational bona fides. He was born in South Carolina, attended The Citadel in Charleston, the crucial main setting of this novel, and has also lived in Mexico. Furthermore, he and his wife adopted a daughter from Korea. Though his novel mostly concerns the exclusivity of Charleston society, it also falls into the category of *ekkyo bungaku*, or border crossing literature, as the author enters the minds and landscapes of his Korean characters.

*A Southern Girl* is told from several points of view, including those of the Korean birth mother, the Korean orphanage worker who first takes charge of the baby, Soo Yun, and the baby’s adoptive parents, Coleman and Elizabeth Carter.

In the first chapter, Jong Sim, a young Korean woman, abandons her newborn daughter, Soo Yun, in a conspicuous place where she is likely to be found. Although she is filled with love for her infant, she is unmarried and her elders have forbidden her to keep the baby.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Carter is longing to adopt a Korean girl. She and her husband already have three sons, and they are capable of having more children, however she wants to do something good. As she explains in the letter to the adoption agency, which makes up the prologue of this novel:
My own upbringing came with a liberal dose of alienation, and I know firsthand how painful that can be. A child adopted into a strange culture in a land foreign to her birth may feel that same alienation, particularly here in the South. I can relate. I can ease that pain. I can make the difference. I know I can. Somewhere out there is or will be a girl who with my help will grow up safe and secure and with the same sense of belonging our sons feel. 

Reading between the lines, one suspects that Elizabeth, who was born in the Midwest and is not a part of her husband’s Old South, is lonely and hoping for an ally.

Her husband, Coleman, on the other hand, may have married outside his tribe, but he is not much of a rebel. At the beginning of the novel he is a lawyer at a prestigious firm in Virginia, a guy with a Country Club membership who enjoys his golf. During a round, when he announces the adoption to his partner, he makes little effort to challenge his companion’s ethnic slur. In fact, he concedes that he’s not entirely on board with the adoption:

‘Frankly, I think it’s dumb.’
‘Then why –’
‘Don’t ask. Anyway, we’re doing it and I hope it makes Elizabeth happy, because I know two senior citizens in Charleston, South Carolina who are going to go ballistic.’ (ASG 40)

As Coleman predicts, his parents are virulently opposed to the adoption. His mother tries to talk Elizabeth out of her folly by taking her on a walk around the Battery, a seaside park in the most historic, upscale part of Charleston. Like the drunken enka singer who can’t stand to see a white guy with a Japanese woman, Sarah is invested in maintaining the status quo. She tells Elizabeth:

Some of the finest families in the world live here. People think they’re snobbish, and I suppose they are. But their clannishness is an effort to protect what so many people in this country seem to want to tear down or dilute. I admire them for it. Coles grew up here, and he can walk into any house on the South Battery and be the equal of anyone inside. That’s a valuable heritage that Coleman enjoys and your sons will too. But this child will never be a part of that world. (ASG 61-2)

Neither will Elizabeth be part of the world, but she has accepted her position. She tells Coleman that she will go through with the adoption alone, if she has to. Even after her father-in-law has a stroke, presumably brought on by the shock of his son’s announcement, Elizabeth insists on her desire to adopt a Korean baby girl. Finally, Coleman gives in, if only to keep a promise to his wife. They fly to Korea, adopt Soo Yun, and rename her Allie. Later, they move to Charleston, bringing up their daughter with all of the attendant privileges of their class, while ignoring her Asian heritage. Although ‘culture-keeping’, or the practice of bringing up internationally adopted children with an awareness of their birth countries’ cultures, is common now, in the 1970s, when this novel takes place, immediate immersion into the adoptive culture was the norm. According to literary critic Leslie Bow’s theory of ‘racial interstitiality’, Allie’s parents attempt to negotiate a white identity for her in a region which has yet to move beyond the black-white binary. However, not everyone agrees that Allie is white, which results in the conflict at the heart of the novel. The characters are forced to confront their previously unexamined prejudices concerning race and bloodlines. As Bow writes, ‘Asian racial difference … becomes a
catalyst for reimagining the often arbitrary boundaries of belonging.11

Elizabeth, too, struggles to belong. She is relieved to have discovered that her adopted daughter has no ‘signs of impairment, mental or physical’ and is, in fact, a gifted scholar; Allie is on her way to Princeton. Meanwhile, she details her efforts to conform to Charleston’s codes of conduct:

Coleman had warned me that folks here believed ‘nothing should ever be done for the first time,’ and how true that proved. I gave and attended teas. I took my turn on the garden tour and the open houses. I resisted the urge to crash after-dinner drinks in wood-paneled libraries thick with cigar smoke and men. I fussed over debutantes … To feed my inner rebel I relished tiny acts of defiance, venial as they seemed, which kept something within me alive. (ASG 151)

Like the unnamed student in Zoppetti’s novel, Elizabeth is an ichigensan – a newcomer pounding on a door that will be forever closed to her in spite of her best efforts. Her marriage to a Charlestonian permits her to hover on the fringes, like Kyoko, who although born in Kyoto, is only partially involved in Kyoto society due to her blindness. However, whereas the student eventually becomes exhausted and disillusioned by Kyoto and leaves for a more welcoming place, and Kyoko departs for Tokyo to take up a job, Elizabeth escapes through cancer.

The final section of the book is told entirely from Coleman’s point of view. Gone are the birth mother, the compassionate orphanage employee, and the devoted, liberal mother. Now a widower, Coleman is eighteen-year-old Allie’s sole ally. But he also remains loyal to the city of his birth.

Allie has been raised as a Charlestonian. As such, she expects to attend a ball held by the St. Simeon Society, which Coleman describes as ‘one of a diminishing number of anachronisms deliciously southern’ (ASG 186). Coleman’s great-great-great-great-grandfather was a founding member of this exclusive society which confers membership only through bloodlines. Coleman assumes that his daughter will be invited to the ball. When she is not, due to the society’s long-standing exclusion of adopted children, Coleman does not share in the reader’s moral outrage, and neither does his mother, Allie’s grandmother, who maintains that Allie ‘has a great respect for tradition, even when that tradition excludes her’ (ASG 167).

Although fictional, the St. Simeon Society is reflective of the many social clubs that have existed in Charleston since the 1700s, such as the St. Andrew’s Society, founded in 1729 by Scottish residents of what was then called Charles Town, as an organisation to ‘assist all people in Distress of Whatsoever Nation or Profession.’12 The St. Cecilia Society was formed by Charleston’s elite in 1762 as America’s first musical organisation, and evolved into a social cotillion with an exclusive membership and “a passion for anonymity,”13 much like the St. Simeon Society.

The remaining chapters of the book involve Coleman’s attempts to garner an invitation for his daughter to the ball without upsetting the status quo. For an outsider, the Charlestonians in this novel may seem infuriatingly loyal to the traditions passed down by their slave-holding ancestors. Those born outside South Carolina’s Republican stronghold would most likely be

12 Walter J. Fraser, Jr., Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City. (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 56.
13 Fraser 456.
more inclined to side with the ACLU lawyer who volunteers herself for Allie’s defence. One suspects that at least some Charlestonian readers would, however, be satisfied with Coleman’s refusal to sue the St. Simeon Society for racism, and his attention to decorum.

In the end, Coleman finds a loophole allowing occasional invitations to be granted to guests of ‘royal descent or distinguished birth’ (ASG 280), and with some lawyerly persuasion, finagles an invitation to the ball. The society’s bylaws remain unchanged, however. The reader assumes that once Allie has entered the less constrictive world of Princeton, her return to live in Charleston is unlikely.

**Asian Americans in South Carolina**

Until very recently, ‘multicultural’ literature out of South Carolina has referred almost exclusively to novels depicting relations between African Americans (often the descendants of slaves), and Americans of European descent. Although Asian immigrants have lived in the South since before the Civil War, albeit in small numbers, few Asian American characters appear in literature out of the state. Even fewer Asian Americans from South Carolina have put pen to paper themselves. When Asians or Asian Americans do appear in fiction, they are often portrayed as the inscrutable ‘other’. For instance, Josephine Pinckney’s 1945 novel *Three O’Clock Dinner*, set in Charleston, features a refreshingly diverse cast of characters including a German immigrant family, the bourgeois Hessenwinkles, and the African Americans who live in close proximity to the pedigreed Redcliff family. At one point, Lucian Redcliff muses about the various cultures represented in his neighborhood:

> For life was richest when it was dappled, paradoxical, in flavorsome layers running counter to each other. August Hessenwinkle had pleased Lucian’s palate mightily today. Take the old German families … they had managed to preserve their viewpoint, their taste in food, their Schuetzenfests, and he cherished them for it. He even liked the O’Dells for their gaiety and impudence (and the hard materialism underneath) and for the high fluted columns of the Hibernian Hall … And take the Negroes, the earth-color, the ochre and ocher in the canvas; the high unbridled laughter and the cutting scrapes, the art with which they elevated the commonplace, translating shrimp and mullet into food for Neptune’s table as they cried it through the rivery streets.14

Thus, from Lucian Redcliff’s perspective, at least, the novel celebrates the diversity of the city and the backgrounds of its inhabitants. The only mention of Asians comes during a talk about the possibility of war, during dinner. Speaking of her daughter who lives on the West Coast, Etta Redcliff declares, ‘Marianna says they think out in California that we are going to have to fight Japan … I’ve always hated those nasty little yellow men.’15 There is no authorial comment upon her blatantly racist remark, and the conversation drifts breezily to the possibility of a vacation in California. Although Etta is a fictional character, it does not seem a stretch to assume that she is representative of Pinckney’s social peers and of the attitudes of Charleston denizens in general.

Etta Redcliff’s views closely resemble those of Coleman’s mother, Sarah, in *A Southern Girl*, who says, ‘The Oriental mind is all the same. They come from a common genetic cesspool. They are vicious and merciless and heathen’ (ASG 59).

South Carolina statesman Strom Thurmond also expressed reservations about Asians. He attempted to delay the passage of Hawaiian statehood with the argument that Hawaii’s ‘Eastern

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15 Pinckney 104.
heritage – one that was “not necessarily inferior, but different” – would forever prevent a true fusion of Hawaii and the United States.\footnote{Ellen D. Wu, The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) 229.} As voters kept Thurmond in office until he died in 2003 at the age of 100, it’s safe to assume that his views were reflective of those of his constituency.

While large communities of Asian Americans have long existed on the West Coast and in some Northern cities such as New York’s Chinatown, Asian Americans in South Carolina have typically lived in isolation. Also, unlike many blacks, whose ancestors were brought forcibly to South Carolina to be enslaved, Asian Americans in the state may have originally come in order to escape anti-immigration laws in effect in the West, or in search of economic opportunity or adventure, much like Westerners who go to live in Japan. More recently, white families in South Carolina have adopted children from Asian countries and brought them up as ‘white’, as in the case of Coleman’s family and his daughter Allie.

As one who was adopted as a baby from an orphanage in Korea, Allie shares Zoppetti’s narrator’s ‘lack of nostalgia about “home” and the partially self-chosen escape from various forms of “we”’ which distinguish these writings ‘from the large body of diaspora, minority or immigrant literature elsewhere, which is also born out of transnational experiences but for which “home” or a “community” remain more central.’\footnote{Rumi Sakamoto, ‘Writing as out/insiders’, Popular Culture, Globalization and Japan (New York: Routledge, 2006)149.}

In contrast to descendants of slaves or refugees, the student can return to his country whenever he likes, and Allie has no memory of her country of origin, thus no nostalgia for a lost Korea. When she grows up, she is allowed to leave to live in a more progressive area and she decides to go to Princeton. The stories of Asians in South Carolina (and Westerners in Japan) thus become more about individual identity than immigrant subjectivity.

One previous novel set in Charleston features an Asian protagonist. Joe Porcelli, who was adopted from Korea by Caucasian parents and brought up in Charleston, produced the 1995 novel The Photograph, about a young Korean boy who is adopted by an American Army officer after his family is killed in the war between North and South Korea. Although the book received mixed reviews, the sheer novelty of an Asian protagonist in Charleston is noteworthy.

The overall lack of Asian or Asian American representation in the literature of South Carolina (and in Charleston, in particular) is no doubt due to the small Asian American population. According to the 2010 U.S. census, the Asian population of Charleston was 1.6% (compared to 1.3% in South Carolina, overall). More recent data indicates that the state’s foreign-born population is steadily rising (from 1.4% in 1990 to 4.7% in 2011) and that Asian-owned businesses in South Carolina had sales receipts of $2.7 billion and employed 19,977 people in 2011.\footnote{New Americans in South Carolina, accessed December 10, 2014. <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/ipc/images/infographics/SouthCarolina2013.pdf>} The presence of Asians and Asian Americans in South Carolina is increasingly significant.

**Crossing Borders in Literary Japan**

During the period known as Sakoku (1633-1853), which translates as ‘chained country,’ Japanese nationals were not allowed to go abroad, and foreigners were not allowed to enter the country under penalty of death. Needless to say, this isolation did not encourage mutual understanding. Additionally, in postwar Japan, scholars have perpetuated the concept of...
Japanese uniqueness through a body of writing known as *nihonjinron* which presupposes that the Japanese are radically different from other races and cultures not only due to linguistic, sociological, and philosophical, but also physical differences. Due to their supposed uniqueness, some Japanese think themselves unknowable to those of other races and cultures.

In Japan, especially, language is linked to national identity. While Americans tend to expect new immigrants to master English in order to participate effectively in society, many Japanese believe that their language is so unique and so difficult as to be impossible for foreigners to master. In fact, there are separate terms for Japanese as a mother tongue (*kokugo*) and Japanese which is taught to foreigners (*Nihongo*). A foreigner writing well in Japanese would seem to be a threat to national identity. This does not seem to apply to other Asians. Previously, during Japan’s colonisation of neighbouring Asian countries, Manchurians, Koreans, and Taiwanese were expected to forsake their native languages and speak only Japanese. Likewise, ethnic Ainu and Okinawans were forced to speak Japanese. While there have been ‘literary transgressions by Korean, Taiwanese and Manchurian writers writing in Japanese, it was only during the 1990s that the practice of writing cross-culturally came to be widely recognized in Japan as a fundamental challenge to the myth of the national literature.¹⁹

Since colonised Asians were ordered to learn Japanese and adopt Japanese names, their literacy could be seen as a Japanese success – so thoroughly had they been dominated, they became Japanese. The same relationship does not exist, however, between Japan and the West. As Rumi Sakamoto writes in her discussion of *Ichigensan* and other works:

*Partly because of Japan’s historical position as a late-nineteenth-century colonizer which attempted to both resist and to emulate Western imperialism, and partly because of the multi-directional movements that characterize today’s globalization, the relations of domination and subordination that inform *ekkyo* writings are multiple and complex. It is not clear who the ‘master’ is when a white male author writes in Japanese about being ‘racially’ excluded from mainstream Japanese society while gaining literary prominence by critiquing Japanese homogeneity from the position of the ‘authentic in-between’. (140)*

Western culture has long served as a reference point in the development of Japanese society. In the post-Meiji era, the Japanese were eager to imitate Western innovations. More recently, during the economic bubble of the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which Zoppetti’s novel is set, Japan had the means to buy up expensive and culturally significant properties in Hawaii and New York. The West became obtainable and conquerable.

While Japanese is often a challenge for Westerners, it is possible for non-native speakers to learn the language as Swiss-American writer David Zoppetti has proven. Zoppetti is the second Western novelist to have won a major Japanese literary award for a work in Japanese, following American Hideo Levy whose *A Room Where the Star Spangled Banner Cannot Be Heard* won the Noma Literary Award for New Writers in 1992. Levy’s novel is the story of an American boy caught between cultures as he lives in Yokohama with his American diplomat father, Chinese step-mother, and Chinese-American half-brother. In contrast, the unnamed main character of Zoppetti’s *Ichigensan* is in Japan by choice. Additionally, as a European adult, he was not forced to become Japanese or adopt a Japanese name or to learn the language as in the case of colonized Asians or ethnic populations within Japan. The student is secure in his identity; he does not necessarily want to become Japanese, but he has studied the language, is possibly more familiar

¹⁹ Sakamoto 138.

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Sister Cities: Border Crossings and Barriers in David Zoppetti’s *Ichigensan* and John Warley’s *A Southern Girl*. Suzanne Kamata.


with Japanese literature than the average Japanese person, and is familiar with Japanese culture. Throughout the book, Zoppetti uses Japanese, and his novel is clearly written for a native audience familiar with unexplained references to works of Japanese literature that have not been translated into Western languages. However, as a gaijin (literally ‘outsider’) he is ‘a marginalized “Other” of the cultural construction called Japan’.20

While Zoppetti’s novels are not yet classified as ‘Japanese novels’, his success has helped to pave the way for other foreign-born writers who may wish to write literature from inside Japanese culture. His novels, starting with Ichigensan, have also helped to introduce the concept of Japanese multiculturalism in a county where there is ‘no general recognition for the existence of ethnic minorities.’21

Conclusion
Warley’s A Southern Girl is unique in that it introduces and realistically portrays Asian and Asian American characters in a novel set in Charleston society. In writing about a prominent white Charlestonian family and their daughter who is adopted from Korea, Warley goes beyond the black and white paradigm which has been the primary focus of discourse and literature on race in Charleston until now. Furthermore, in choosing to write from the point of view of a Korean woman, he crosses racial, gender, and national lines. By setting parts of this story in the Korea of Allie’s birth and in Vietnam, where Coleman served in the military, Warley illustrates Charleston’s connection with the wider world. While his themes – love for land and family and a deep respect for tradition – are typical of Southern literature, A Southern Girl expands the boundaries of regional literature, and even moves beyond them to be a novel which could be considered ‘transnational’.

Zoppetti, too, transcends cultural expectations by writing from within Kyoto as a Swiss-American. His novel Ichigensan demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the supposedly impenetrable city, while his writing skill is evidence of his mastery of the Japanese language. Though the Japanese literary establishment has yet to claim him as one of its own, Zoppetti has successfully bridged both linguistic and national borders.

Both Charleston and Kyoto, as evinced in these novels, have a great reverence for history and tradition. Both cities value their culture heritages. However, literary traditions in both places have tended to ignore the presence of minority populations. However, if imagination is the first step toward realisation, then the creation of minority characters as significant members of society is a step toward acceptance and integration. A Southern Girl and Ichigensan push the boundaries of their respective literary traditions, creating an important precedent for future border-crossing novelists from these regions.

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20 Sakamoto 144.
Reconciling Identities: The Diasporic Bengali Woman in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

Reshmi Lahiri-Roy

Avtar Brah writes, ‘At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey.’¹ It is this journey that leads to the translation of the persona into the immigrant self. It is a journey that lies at the heart of Jhumpa Lahiri’s book *The Namesake*, set in the United States of America in the late 1960s and covering the lives of the Ganguly family over three decades. This paper focuses on the three Bengali women from two generations, Ashima Ganguly, who arrives in USA as a new bride in the winter of 1967; her daughter-in-law Moushumi and Sonia, Ashima’s daughter and American-born second child. The paper explores the transitive processes shaping the identities of these three Bengali women living different versions of life in the diaspora. James Clifford observes that diasporas ‘follow and express distinct maps/histories – linking first and third worlds … national or transnational margins or centers.’² (Clifford in Okamura 1998: 121) Lahiri’s migrant women, whose origins lie in the third world, are placed by her on the periphery of the first world; as is most visibly observed in case of Ashima. Moushumi appears to be seeking a centrality in the first world which eludes her, as she is constantly renegotiating her identity within the paradigms of her conflicted personal history. Only in Sonia, Lahiri’s American born ‘not confused’ diasporic protagonist does the reader observe the diasporic identity shifting into a transnational centre at the heart of the host nation.

Ashima personifies what Brah terms ‘the homing desire of the migrant’.³ The novel commences with the writer portraying Ashima as a ‘reluctant migrant’ of ‘fixed origins’.⁴ (ibid). Ashima’s initial hostile reaction to her host country is rooted in the culturally discursive alienation that is a quotidian experience of her life in America. A Hindu Bengali middle class woman would not have experienced any sense of assimilation or belonging in urban middle class Massachusetts in the late 1960s. The white-collar Asian minority living in 1960s USA, although highly educated and labelled as ‘model’, faced severe disadvantages as documented by several scholars.⁵ For a sheltered, middle class young woman like Ashima, with very limited exposure outside the Bengali socio-cultural discourse, a sense of exile would be predominant. The need for constant translation in her daily existence, within an environment where cultural connectivity cannot be accessed, is a process that often leaves Ashima floundering, in the initial stages of her migrant sojourn. Such a feeling of ‘foreignness’ is further aggravated as she conceives her child on this alien soil. The transformation in her body mirrors the transformations she experiences at an emotional and socio-cultural level:

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³ Brah 180.
⁴ Brah 180.
For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realise, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect.6

In using the term translation with regard to the three female protagonists in Lahiri’s narrative, I refer to Rudiger and Gross’s definition of translation as ‘a wider term covering the interaction of cultures, the transfer of cultural experience, the concern with cultural borders, the articulation of liminal experience, and intercultural understanding.’7 But Ashima’s is a tale of resistance. She later admits it to herself, pondering over ‘the life she had resisted for so long’ (NS 280) as she is about to move on to inhabit yet another space outside the structures she has occupied for three decades. In this new journey, she is unaccompanied by Ashok as she had been when she had first come to America as a new bride on her own, boarding a plane for the first time in her life, to join her waiting husband in a foreign space. But at the end of the first journey, Ashima strongly resists the transformation of the cultural identity within which she has been nurtured all her life. She adjusts over the years by recreating Calcutta in the social space of her life in a New England town. The concession made by her over the years as a migrant is the renegotiation and translation of her gendered Bengali middle-class identity into a gendered middle-class Bengali-American one. The translation of her Bengali identity into a Bengali American one takes the form of being a focal point for new Bengali migrants and ensuring that adjustment to American life never translates into assimilation. As Clifford points out, it is selective accommodation, the need to stay and be different simultaneously and in the process identity becomes syncretic. 8

Ashima enters the narrative as a nineteen year old, Bengali college student about to undergo a traditional bride-viewing. Being a conservatively raised girl from a middle class Bengali family of North Calcutta in the mid-1960s, she does not resist the process. It was an era in which foreign based grooms were widely sought after and as Kalpagam observes ‘in the 1960s and 70s, diasporic alliances were settled through personal, kin and friendship networks’.9 As a daughter, within a traditional Bengali cultural discourse, Ashima is expected to marry a suitable man chosen by her parents. Her acceptance of the discourse is intermingled with a gentle curiosity. As Ashima tries on the shoes of her prospective groom, Ashok, which she finds placed outside the main door of her parents’ apartment and slips them on, ‘a pair of men’s shoes that were not like any she’d ever seen’ (NS 8), the alien look and feel of American-made shoes is immediately discernible to her. As the reader observes, it is not a resigned acceptance of an arranged marriage; Ashima is willing to try new things, albeit slowly and cautiously.

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Vijay Mishra’s analysis that ‘All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way’ provides an insight into the situation of Ashima, the new mother, who after marrying Ashok and moving to cold Massachusetts, longs for family and pleads with Ashok that she does not wish to bring child up alone in a foreign country (NS 32-3). As Mishra observes, Ashima appears to fear a loss, a contamination of her cultural history due to interaction with other cultures. But Ashima capitulates when Ashok refuses to return to India, citing the future benefits and inevitable economic progress for their child. Many of the post-1965 generation of white-collar Asian migrants to the USA made the very difficult move due to economic reasons. While they were well-qualified they also sought the economic benefits associated with a move to the USA. In Ashima’s reluctant compliance with Ashok’s planning, the same rationale is observed. Ashima’s alienation is most explicitly detailed by the author in the scenes dealing with the birth of her first child, where the longing for family and familiarity is seen at its most acute. ‘Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like almost everything else in America feels somehow haphazard, only half true’ (NS 24-5). But it was a situation which several Indian women migrants of that era faced as part of the transformation process which dubbed them ‘Asian Americans’ and then ‘South Asian Americans’. Bakirathi Mani observes, ‘to identify as “South Asian” more often than not invokes a post-1965 history of immigration in which South Asians are consistently named the “model minority”, immigrating to the United States as skilled professionals’ (118). In Lahiri’s creation of Ashima, one observes the emotional and psychological costs borne by the women belonging to this group and the conflicts of identity experienced by them. No diaspora is uniform and the group of professional middle class Bengalis who came to USA post-1965 carried their own distinctive socio-cultural discursive hegemonies across nations with them. Nalini Iyer highlights this:

I wish to demonstrate that diasporic works need to be understood within the historical and cultural realities of migration to North America post-1965. I show that reading Indo-American texts solely as Indian literary works leads to critics overlooking the writers’ engagement with various literary canons – American, bhasha, postcolonial.

Lahiri’s narrative is infused with strong autobiographical elements as is seen in her interview in The New Yorker:

Unlike so many immigrant groups, she says of her father and his peers, it wasn’t war, famine, persecution or anything like that driving them out. Nothing drove them out: it was a choice. But I think it was a conflicted choice. And it wasn’t a particularly romantic choice in the way that friends of mine have moved to Europe, moved to Paris. Just wanting another kind of life - it wasn’t that either. It was a combination of hunger for new experiences, perhaps wanting a better quality of life, and furthering one’s education. But it

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11 Mishra 7.
was accompanied by a certain sense of misgiving. They were leaving behind their families, essentially for personal gain. So, a hard decision to make.\textsuperscript{14}

Lahiri’s fiction, therefore, outlines Ashima as a diasporic Bengali woman located within a socio-cultural discourse which she never dislocates or misplaces. Ashima’s socialising is always within a peer group of other Bengali migrants who are located within a specific class and culture status. ‘They all come from Calcutta and for this reason alone they are friends’ (NS 38). It is undeniable that the idea of diaspora is an occasion for positive identification for many, providing a powerful sense of transnational belonging and connection with dispersed others of similar historical origins.\textsuperscript{15} (Ang 2003)

As Ashima’s son Gogol observes, every weekend they visit other Bengali families and this creates the network that Ashima requires. It is a network that substitutes for her family, the people she longs for in a home country. Clifford states that diasporas, being transnational in nature, have ‘ways of conceiving community, citizenship and identity as simultaneously here and elsewhere’. (Clifford in Okamura 1998: 122)\textsuperscript{16} For Ashima, India, and Calcutta in particular, is very definitely home and her children’s identification of America with home disturbs her; for in all her years in America: ‘She still does not feel fully at home ... on Pemberton road’ (NS 280).

Ashima’s almost predetermined life choices shape her identity. It is an identity whose roots lie within a strongly Bengali non-Westernised discourse, which in turn is formed on what Stuart Hall terms ‘the exclusion of others’ by tightly knit communities.\textsuperscript{17} Migrants such as Ashima, validate Hall’s analysis of the position of cultural identity,

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history.\textsuperscript{18}

The reader is left with the impression that Ashima’s only concession to the American-South Asian discourses within which her children are located is her reluctance to vocalise her protest against her son Gogol’s relationship with Maxine, his American girlfriend. Her later acceptance of her daughter Sonia’s relationship with Ben, a mixed race American, can be read empathically, as further translation of her identity as a mother after Ashok’s death; signifying her efforts to connect with the discursive socio-cultural and emotional locations of her children. But it can also be subversively viewed as a fostering of a patrilyn where the son’s wife has to be of the ‘right’

\textsuperscript{16} Clifford in Okamura.
\textsuperscript{17} Stuart Hall, ‘Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities.’ \textit{Culture, Globalisation and the World System} edited by A. King. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991)
origin, not so much the daughter’s husband. As Gwendolyn Foster observes, ‘the term translation is rife with signifiers ... Identity is also a form of translation ... from who one is to who one is perceived to be.’

When Ashima reconciles herself to Sonia’s relationship with Ben, who is half Jewish, half Chinese, there is something almost wistful in her musings on the younger generation’s ability to seek personal happiness without being overwhelmed by the pressures of socio-cultural hegemonies and refusal to prioritise family desires above all else. Ashima appears to be admiring their unwillingness to accept ‘something less than their ideal of happiness’ (NS 276).

In Lahiri’s work the extended family acts as a point of rootedness and not so much of discord. Lahiri’s skill lies in keeping the extended family peripheral yet visible in almost every scene. To Ashima, America is always a place that has ‘hosted’ her; albeit a hosting that was neither reluctant nor hostile, perhaps indifferent to some extent. Ashima’s identity is created and renegotiated within the choices made for her by family, by husband and later by his death. ‘A lifetime in a fist’ (NS 279), as she ruminates. But Lahiri points out in her interview that Ashima’s gentle, preordained existence was the prevalent migrant discourse within temporal space of the narrative. Ashima, therefore, is very much a cultural insider within the diasporic Bengali middle class discourse of that era. ‘My parents had an arranged marriage, as did so many other people when I was growing up. My father came and had a life in the United States one way and my mother had a different one, and I was very aware of those things’ (Chotiner 2008).

Kalpagam’s analysis also highlights the place occupied by arranged marriages within the creation of diasporic transnational identities:

The study of evolving community-specific matrimonial strategies in what are generally understood as ‘arranged marriages’ is not merely interesting in itself, but indeed essential for understanding how habitus constructs gendered identities and how diasporic opportunities redefine social status within cultural groups through the acquisition of both symbolic and economic capital.

But within the fictional discourse Lahiri also locates Ashima as the migrant whose yearning for the discursive spaces of the home country remain unassuaged for years. As Gogol observes, on their visits to Calcutta, Ashima is a ‘bolder, less complicated version of herself’ (NS 81). It appears that the conflicted sense of identity and exile in America often blurs the sharp outlines of the essential Ashima. Ashima initial resistance to the onslaught of diverse discourses that come her way in USA never fully abates. But Ashima succeeds in creating a new discourse for herself as a diasporic woman within a country that is always a host never a home. Her talent for renegotiating her identity is seen in her ability to recreate Calcutta in socio-cultural terms in the little New England town. Ashima’s organising of the religious and holiday festivities and reaching out, translates her into symbolic fixture around which a particular section of the

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22 Kalpagam 98.
Bengali diaspora gathered. ‘The wives homesick and bewildered turned to Ashima for recipes and advice’ (NS 38) as the diasporic community sought familiarity and discursive stability within a home away from home. Ashima has become a pointer for the younger groups of Bengalis, a fixed point in a dangerously bewildering ground where the ‘violation of boundaries’, according to Min Ha Trinh takes place. She is a constant with her advice for the younger migrant women, who as Amit Shah puts it, face ‘the duality of the immigrant reality, the slow dwindling of rootedness, the new avenues and the roadblocks of assimilation and belonging’.

The dominant identity for Ashima, the one she is comfortable to be fixed in, is that which is defined by her marriage to Ashok. Over the years, Ashima moulds and remoulds herself as wife, as mother, as widow and then a woman alone. Towards the end of the narrative, Ashima’s moulding and re-moulding of herself leads her to observe her own face as ‘A widow’s face ... For most of her life, a wife’ (NS 278). This is Ashima’s view of herself after Ashok’s passing. Ashima has translated herself from the pragmatic young girl who had stoically accepted an arranged marriage with a young academic living abroad to a woman deeply in love with that husband. America can be read as the nurturing site of this translation of an arranged marriage into a love relationship. As she prepares to depart from her present space and newly step into another old space, Ashima muses that ‘She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband’ (NS 279).

In sharp contrast to Ashima is one whose exile is perhaps never resolved: Gogol’s ex-wife Moushumi; a Bengali girl, born in London and brought to America at a young age, longing for Paris, not settling in New York, not comfortable married to a Bengali and loving the Russian Dimitri. Moushumi is the ‘twice displaced’ migrant child. She rejects her triad of Bengali, British and American identities to embrace a fourth – a European one. Yet from a socio-cultural perspective, such a French identity can be construed as a subversive influence based on her original Bengali identity. Like Russia, France exerted a vivid cultural and ideological influence on the postcolonial Bengali psyche. It could also be construed as an upper middle class British admiration for a supposedly more sophisticated French culture. Like Ashima, she too, rejects USA as a ‘host’ country. The narrative raises the question of which is Moushumi’s ‘home’ country – England, France or India? As Brah observes “home” is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination and Moushumi’s imagination appears to be still in search of that mythic, perfect home where she can cease her wanderings and ‘belong.’

Within the lives of Ashima and Moushumi and the narrative structure itself, the issue of home is a primary one. Moushumi and Ashima both have seamless, borderless existences. Ashima’s name itself is used by the author to denote her as ultimately the ‘one without borders’ (NS 81). Ashima’s translations of identity and her final renegotiation of herself as woman comfortable in straddling two worlds evolve over time, using strategies drawn from the strength of discourses within which she locates her own self. She is never over-emphatic on what constitutes her essential identity. This lack of emphasis on part of Ashima is cleverly used by the author as foil for Moushumi’s over-emphasis on her French identity; her refusal to be taken as a tourist in

24 Amit Shah, A Dweller in Two Lands: Mira Nair Filmmaker’ Cineaste 15.3 (1987) 22-33 in Foster 111.
25 Brah 192.

Paris is also a rejection of America as symbolised by Graham, who had rejected her. In rejecting America, she also rejects her parents’ choices for her. It is a rejection especially of the Bengali-American identity of her mother; a woman who ‘cannot drive after thirty-two years abroad’ (NS 247) yet has an Honours degree in Philosophy from Presidency College. Lahiri’s subtle introduction of Presidency College into the narrative locates the work within a Bengali socio-cultural discourse which is very specific in its intellectual assertions. Presidency College as an institution functioned as a focal point of resistance to prevalent political discourses of the time and occupies a vital place in Calcutta’s postcolonial narrative. Moushumi’s mother’s conformity to traditional Bengali discourses sharply negates the historical and political discourses within which her education must have taken place.

Moushumi and Ashima both enter into marriage within their community. But Ashima’s marriage to Ashok is not a statement of defiant compliance with or resigned acceptance of a culturally dominant discourse. Ashima’s marriage might have commenced as an exercise in curiosity as does Moushumi’s with Gogol. Moushumi, always the rebellious cultural outsider, appears almost curious to experience the settled feeling of a culturally accepted marital discourse. But the outcomes of the two marriages in no way mirror each other. Moushumi describes meeting and marrying Gogol as a ‘courtship in a fishbowl’ (NS 250). But when she is with her lover Dimitri, she can translate her identity into one of anonymity. His apartment where they meet and conduct their illicit affair makes her feel further ‘inaccessible, anonymous’ away from defining and creating herself as either American or Bengali. A relationship with Dimitri, ‘small, balding, unemployed, middle-aged’ (NS 264) – in effect, the complete ‘cultural outsider’ – is her final act in translating her identity into one completely outside the heteronormative discourse of the Bengali-American white collar diaspora. Kate Flaherty acknowledges the ‘paradoxical capacity’ of Lahiri’s novel to voice the general experience of displacement. Its rather eclectic blend of cultural remnants – Russian, Bengali, American – and its very immediate sensuality, lend palpable force to the typically nebulous experience of heterogeneity. *The Namesake* gives vivid particularity to the sense of being held in perpetual relation to a distant original, of wearing a garment of unknown proportions, of having a name, the imaginative legacy of which, you can never fully inhabit.26

Moushumi’s uneasy relationship with her parents, only briefly redeemed by her short marriage to the eligible Bengali bachelor Gogol, does not leave much scope for mutual admiration. But ‘one thing about her parents’ lives she admires – their ability to turn their backs on their homes’ (NS 254). What Moushumi perhaps does not realise is that her parents’ choice is as ‘conflicted’ as her own, in the continual shifting and transcreating of herself between continents.

Bandana Purkayastha comments,

According to South Asian Americans, the notion of a superior culture is based on the superior achievement profiles of this group in the United States. Linking high levels of achievement (in education and occupations) as the outcome of South Asian values – hard

work and strong families which are tied by strong bonds of love and obligation – South Asian parents place an ‘unusual’ emphasis on getting good grades and building upper-tier careers.\(^{27}\)

Purkayastha’s further analyses are also highly relevant in the context of Lahiri’s narrative in helping the reader locate and understand Moushumi’s conflicted and tense relationship with the narrow and highly structured boundaries of her upbringing. Purkayastha’s contention is that ‘immigrants and their children try to integrate by following the educational, occupational, residential patterns of the white middle class’ as one of the many routes to integration and that ‘transnational literature, in many ways, has started to document this process.’\(^{28}\)

It is a method of integration that Moushumi has adopted and then renegotiated halfway through her journey as a ‘twice displaced migrant’. Embracing a Francophile identity, Moushumi, in search of a new home, negates both the Bengali and American sections of her identity. With her divorce from Gogol, she places herself completely outside the diasporic upper-middle-class Bengali discourse.

The narrative strongly emphasises issues of belonging and assimilation in the lives of its protagonists. As Ashima is assigned the position of a protagonist without borders by the author, the reader is left cogitating whether the diasporic experience has left Ashima rootless, floating disjointedly in a diasporic vacuum or whether there has been an unconscious translation of Ashima’s deeply rooted Bengali identity into what Trinh calls the ‘doubly exiled, walking the “in-between zones”’\(^{29}\) which can often be experienced by the dislocated, gendered migrant. Ashima thinks of herself as ‘belonging everywhere and nowhere’ (NS 281), but never as ‘American’. In this Ashima strongly mirrors the discourse of the first post-1965 generation of Indian professionals and their wives who came to the US for economic and academic progress and were sure of their transient location within the American cultural discourse. Lahiri’s parents who came to the USA via England in the late 1960s ‘never thought of themselves as American, despite the fact that they applied for and received citizenship.’\(^{30}\)

Sonia, Lahiri’s youngest protagonist, functions as a signifier for the smooth transitioning and renegotiating of transnational identities without experiencing excess angst. Brah says, ‘Clearly the relationship of the first generation to the place of migration is different from that of subsequent generations.’\(^{31}\) In Sonia, the reader observes the antithesis of the supposed ‘ABCD’, namely American Born confused Desi (NS 118); a derogatory nomenclature often used for second generation South Asian migrants. Sonia is neither confused nor at any stage worried about her position within the mainstream American discourse or society. Sonia occupies a place of comfort within the narrative structure; maybe as an aspired self for the author herself who has confessed in an interview with Isaac Chotiner that ‘there is sort of a half-way feeling’ of being

\(^{27}\) Purkayastha 91.
\(^{28}\) Purkayastha 176.
\(^{29}\) Trinh 70.
\(^{31}\) Brah 194.
American. Sonia does not have issues of divided allegiances. The transnational identity of Sonia is quite strongly created by the author almost as an ideal for a Bengali migrant child. As Stuart Hall observes,

Cultural identity, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.33

Sonia’s life translates easily from that of a typical South Asian American teenager in small town USA to becoming a capable young attorney in Boston. Like her life, her identity negotiation is portrayed as running along a smooth track. In her case ‘bonds of ethnic ties and the fixity of boundaries have been replaced by shifting and fluid identity boundaries ... that alter the ethnic landscape’.34 Unlike Moushumi and Ashima, Sonia as a young girl or adult woman does not struggle with notions of displacement. Her engagement and relationship with Ben, who straddles a half Jewish half Chinese racial identity within mainstream American discourse, can be read as the ultimate translation of the diasporic Bengali, feminine identity. This relationship may be read as translating to one of multicultural assimilation within the cultural melting pot that is the USA or may also be subversively decoded as the unification of two ethnic minorities living on the fringes of white America’s hegemonic discourse. Ben is himself a product of two ethnicities which have deeply felt the pangs of exclusion in USA prior to diasporic assimilation with the passage of time. These people are excluded by white America as ‘racial/cultural outsiders’; this exclusion brings them into what the tightly knit Bengali-American diaspora of the 1960s and 70s would consider as unnatural unions. In her film adaptation of The Namesake, Mira Nair portrays Ben as a white American, maybe transcribing this relationship as the reason for Sonia’s inclusion into white mainstream America.

Over the years, Sonia has learnt to cook the food she had refused to eat as a child and she and Ashima have ‘developed a surprising companionship’ (NS 279). Both Ashima and Sonia reach out and negotiate newer identities and closer bonds using the bridges provided by the culture embedded in Bengali cuisine. Sonia’s is the face of the diaspora which is not unhappy, but not rooted in cultural traditions either. But the roots of ingrained values and future happiness are very visible in her existence. Moushumi, on the other hand, leaves the reader speculating as to how this particular Anglo-Bengali American Francophile will finally translate herself.

33 Hall, Cultural Identity 224.
34 Clifford, Sites 18.
Unlike Moushumi’s inability to root herself anywhere, Ashima is rooted by her very seamlessness. Ashima, who has yet to feel at home in her house of the last twenty five years, will now return to India ‘with an American passport’ (NS 270). But for six months every year she will be in America as well, ‘slipping from one culture to the next’ (NS 279) for the rest of her life. Ashima’s is the ultimate story of acceptance with grace after initial resistance and rejection of the new; a translation into understanding, never assimilation. Ashima’s character appears to signify the transcension of a new Bengali-American identity; what Vijay Mishra analyses as ‘creative reconstitution of a new hybrid empowering self.’

The Namesake begins and ends with the journeys undertaken by Ashima Ganguly. Ashima Ganguly née Bhadury arrives on a cold winter’s morning in January 1967 to join her young husband Ashok Ganguly in the United States of America. At the narrative’s end, Ashima Ganguly, widow of Professor Ashok Ganguly, prepares to leave the United States to undertake another journey to her place of origin. But now, the once reluctant migrant exhibits strong attachment to the ‘host’ nation. Ashima, though not calling herself American, is not really completely and only an Indian any more, she is truly Ashima, ‘the limitless, borderless one’ (NS 26).

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35 Mishra 193.
Autofiction and Fictionalisation: J.M. Coetzee’s Novels and Boyhood

Shadi Neimneh

How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections?

J.M. Coetzee, ‘He and His Man’

Introduction: Coetzee’s Fictionalised Trilogy

Boyhood (1997), like Youth (2002), is J.M. Coetzee’s fictionalised ‘autobiography’. In this work, Coetzee – in a novelistic fashion – uses third-person narration and present tense to trace the development of his protagonist, John Coetzee, from boyhood to youth and question the formative impact of such years on the protagonist’s identity. The relationship between Coetzee the writer and Coetzee the character in the autobiographical memoirs is one of psychological doubling or mirroring. Therefore, and to borrow the title of Coetzee’s 2003 Nobel lecture, ‘he and his man’ are paired in a problematically intricate relationship evading, yet inviting, parallels.

In his memoirs, Coetzee takes us through his protagonist’s school years in Worcester and Cape Town in South Africa, family upbringing, religious and political anxieties, social hesitations, and university years in Cape Town. Moreover, Coetzee traces his protagonist’s life in London as a computer programmer, attempts at writing poetry and reading literature, attempts at researching the works of the English novelist Ford Maddox Ford, and failed love affairs. In Boyhood, we see Coetzee’s boy as a school student between the ages of 10 and 13, struggling against his mother’s influence and her stifling love and internalising the shame and guilt of his family’s racist prejudice. The use of the third person to recount life details – with possible modifications to effect a middle ground between fiction and the search for self inherent in autobiographical writing – means using paradoxical styles. The term literary theorists use in this regard to describe this form of fictionalised autobiographies is ‘autofiction’. The term was coined in 1977 by French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky with reference to his novel Fils. Recently, this term has been used by critics like Karen Ferreira-Meyers to indicate the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction in texts.

I suggest in this article that Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs can be called ‘autofiction’ just as his novels can be seen as somewhat autobiographical. Applied broadly, the term ‘autofiction’ can be used as a label for such genres, autobiographical novels and fictionalised autobiographies or memoirs, in the case of Coetzee. Although the term ‘autofiction’ is better applied to fictionalised or autobiographical memoirs, Coetzee’s fictions treating autobiographical themes also partake in this genre, though to a lesser extent.

Since Youth and Summertime (2009) – as autobiographical works – are less relevant to my study, I concentrate more on Boyhood. In Youth, we see Coetzee’s protagonist as a young man in his late teens and early twenties seeking a university degree in English and Mathematics at Cape Town University and then working as a programmer for IBM and International Computers in

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London while writing a Master’s project on Ford and pursuing other literary interests. Although Coetzee’s fictionalised memoirs like *Youth* and *Summertime* are as stylistically rich and thematically dense as his fictions, what I attempt in this article is an account of the interrelationship between *Boyhood* in particular and a representative sample from Coetzee’s other fictions by way of suggesting intertextual links between autobiographical and fictional writings.

In *Summertime*, by contrast with the other two memoirs, John Coetzee, the character, is reportedly dead and different people who have known the late author give multiple accounts of his personality to a fictitious biographer, most of which turn out to be harshly critical of him at the personal level. This work is a portrayal of Coetzee’s life in the 1970s in South Africa through interviews and fragments from Coetzee’s notebooks. Whether we consider them memoirs, histories, or fictional autobiographies, *Youth* and *Summertime* – regardless of their truth or fiction values – are thematically less relevant to my focus. Nevertheless, and to draw on the work of Wayne Booth, *Boyhood* and *Youth* differ from *Summertime* in that they evoke the same ‘implied author’ or a similar author image. These works can be seen as two consecutive parts or volumes of the same memoir. By contrast, the multiplicity of voices in *Summertime* and its distant perspective of composition after the death of John Coetzee (the author/character) suggest a different implied author.

**Autobiography vs. Autrebiography**

Readers of Coetzee’s biography can easily see the relevance of these two works to Coetzee’s life. What might be disturbing, however, is that Coetzee does not resort to past tense and first-person narration in these two works. Instead, he significantly uses present tense and third-person narration to recall his past as a lived experience in the present and fictionalise himself as an alien John Coetzee. Coetzee describes this distant or detached narrative technique, in an interview with David Attwell, as ‘autrebiography’), and Margaret Lenta is one critic who explored this technique as one of ‘delicate strategies of distancing’. To elaborate, the narrator in *autrebiography*, is not close enough to the autobiographical *I* essential to autobiography. When this closeness is achieved, the result is autobiography in the first person rather than *autrebiography*. This might mean that Coetzee is avoiding a direct confessional mode in the first person. However, Coetzee does communicate a truth about himself in the very act of conveying his reflections about his protagonist in the third person, which again reveals something about Coetzee the writer. The author, therefore, tells us something essential about ‘his man’ in such thinly disguised autobiographies. The essence of autobiographical writing, according to E. Stuart Bates, is ‘a self-revealed personality, after thorough reconsideration’. Autobiographies are not expected to exactly reproduce the writer's past, for a degree of fictionalisation enters the best autobiographies. Commenting on the relationship between autobiography and fiction, Bates argues that there is ‘no dividing line between autobiography and fiction’. Facts, Bates adds, are ‘disputable and open to manipulation’ because writers write about the self in a fictional manner

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4 Coetzee, *Doubling* 394.
6 Bates 9.
and select and organise things, reshaping some life material through recollection. A degree of life fictionalisation enters autobiographies when life details are not exactly reproduced. And when writers draw on personal experiences and influences in their fictions, one expects to find autobiographical elements in their novels or stories.

The work of the famous biographer Hermione Lee has established and consolidated the overlapping relationship between fiction and different kinds of biographical writings. In an interview for The Literateur, Lee argues that memoirs are but one aspect of ‘life-writing’, other forms being letters, diaries, biography, and travel writing. Lee argues that biography in general as life-writing and as a genre is becoming ‘much more fluid, and various, and less constricted by convention.’ There is a sense of overlap between different kinds of life-writing, especially between memoir and biography on the one hand and fiction on the other hand. As Lee contends, ‘the whole huge wave of interest in memoir writing has obviously affected the way that biography does its stuff.’ Asked about whether biographies can be read the way fiction is read, Lee answers: ‘We do look at biographies the way we would look at novels. We talk about procedures, endings and beginnings, tense, structure, the way in which characters are described … It’s fascinating to see the biography as a constructed narrative, as of course it is.’ In another interview for the Paris Review, Lee contends that such genres and narratives making up life-writing and listed above ‘can be thought of as distinct genres, but they can also overlap.’ This can account for the fictional potential of Coetzee’s memoirs and the autobiographical relevance of his fictions.

Therefore, if we cannot ascertain the historical or factual truth of Coetzee’s narrative in the third person and the present tense, we can definitely follow Derek Attridge in his contention that the ‘truth that Boyhood offers, then, is first and foremost that of testimony: a vivid account of what it was like to grow up as a white male in the 1950s in South Africa’ who absorbs and internalises his country’s political and social milieu. The same logic applies to Youth in that it can be read as a ‘testimony’ of life in Cape Town and London in the 1960s, what it means to leave a mother country for another country, what it means to resist a life in computer industry to pursue an artistic vocation, what it means to be frustrated in love or in art, etc. The blurred distinction between truth and fiction in Boyhood and Youth can be thought of as an extension of Coetzee’s treatment of this theme in novels like Dusklands (1974) and Foe (1986). In Foe, for example, Susan Barton wants her life story to be told as a memoir, i.e. as a truthful or historical account of her adventures on an island. The writer Foe, on the other hand, wants to add imaginative scenes of encounters with cannibals, quests, and reunions. In his 2003 Nobel Prize lecture, the story ‘He and His Man’, Coetzee also explores the intimate relationship between the writer and his fictional creations or the real people a writer would base their story on. Coetzee problematises our understanding of the relationship between the self that writes and the self being written into fiction. Writer and character here are paired. Both write different accounts and reports. He, Crusoe, writes of island adventures after he gets back to England while his man, Defoe, writes of London life, ducks, death machines, and the plague. In a sense, both writers become different sides of the same person or the same profession, not converging but moving in

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7 Bates 11.
11 Attridge 160
parallel lines. This affinity between Daniel Defoe the writer and Robinson Crusoe the character Coetzee plays with – against canonical eighteenth-century British fiction – can be suggestive of another intimate relationship between J.M. Coetzee the writer and Coetzee’s alter egos populating the memoirs.

Though there is no room for further exploration of possible connections in this regard, I think that Coetzee – in most of his fictions – is essentially pursuing an earlier preoccupation concerning the interplay of life versus art or fiction. Part of his writing project can be a life-writing attempt as I have already mentioned using the work of Hermione Lee. In Coetzee, life becomes material for fiction, for creative novelistic fictionalisation. This interplay between life and fiction is effected through a process of thematic doubling and mirroring, which this article attempts to elucidate.

Coetzee, it seems, manifests his reluctance to write about himself directly by writing in the third person in Boyhood and Youth. Because such an act makes these potential ‘memoirs’ more like novels, it gets difficult to ascertain their biographical accuracy. In this regard, Coetzee asserts in Doubling the Point that ‘all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography’. Hence, all fiction is autobiographical because writers include part of their personal experiences and life details into their writing. This should justify his resort to the third person in giving an autobiographical account. It is also axiomatic that Coetzee’s narrative technique of present tense and third-person narration gives a sense of immediacy and erases his adult or mature perspective on what is narrated. Moreover, Coetzee’s assertion indicates that his own novels as instances of writing are autobiographical in a sense; at least they are novels with autobiographical elements as this discussion will reveal in analysing themes of body/desire, animals, and farm life.

On the whole, one can safely claim that Boyhood and Youth have autobiographical value. From another perspective, Coetzee is continuing his earlier concern with the relationship between life and art as I stated earlier. If he fictionalised the Russian novelist F. Dostoevsky in The Master of Petersburg (1994) and, to a lesser extent, the English novelist Daniel Defoe in Foe (1986), he now turns to fictionalizing himself in Boyhood and Youth as an aspiring writer fleeing Cape Town to London.

Fiction (Novels) and Fictionalis (Autobiographical Memoirs): Textual Doubling

Autobiographies account for and justify the self in question. According to H. Porter Abbott, ‘the pre-eminent peril of autobiography’ is an ‘orientation toward selfhood’. Our life stories, Abbott contends, should not be read ‘as if they were historically true, conveying to ourselves an image of wholeness and completion that we never had, screening from view what we don’t want to see.’ Instead, autobiography for Abbott should be read ‘as a kind of action, taking place at the moment of writing, responding to the complex play of our desires, always changing, always incomplete’. Like novels and stories, autobiographies can be creative in terms of selecting, presenting, and ordering materials. Their historical truth is beyond the point, and thus their fictionalised treatment of their subject matter is relevant. If autobiographies have novelistic elements, it is no wonder that novels can also mirror and write back to autobiographies.

12 Coetzee, Doubling 391.
14 Abbott 36.
15 Abbott 36.
In ‘Confession and Double Thoughts’, Coetzee argues that confessions, whether fictional or autobiographical, have the motive of telling ‘an essential truth about the self’. Confessions characteristically double life histories. For Coetzee, such modes of writing are different from other genres like the memoir and the apology due to this motive of telling an essential truth about the self. As Coetzee explains in a footnote drawing on Francis Hart, memoirs are historical, apologies are ethical, and confessions are ontological in terms of their treatment of the self. Confessions treat the nature of the self and its being, memoirs try to reclaim the historicity of the self, and apologies attempt to articulate the integrity of the self. Since Coetzee fictionalises his works, he adds to the historicity of the memoirs ethical and moral dimensions. Regardless of the truth they tell about Coetzee or his fictionalised heroes, the works have a human dimension and a universal relevance beyond their reproduction of vague or specific details in Coetzee’s life. Coetzee’s fictionalised memoirs attempt to tell a truth about the self and do have a substantial autobiographical value. They construct a life story and, thus, build a history in terms of life details.

Highly important is the autobiographies’ relationship with other Coetzee works and how they help us read Coetzee the writer of works like *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999). My study of the relationship between Coetzee’s autobiographical memoirs and novels is not the first of its kind. For instance, Pieter Vermeulen considers *Boyhood* and *Youth* ‘autobiographical novels’ but reads them against the critical opinion influenced by Coetzee’s own statements on the topic regarding confession and autobiography. Thus, he uses *Disgrace* to prove that the novels have ‘pedagogical and poetical’ dimensions similar to those in *Disgrace* and that they reconfigure a ‘Wordsworthian program’, He tries, therefore, to discuss the relation between Wordsworth and Coetzee and autobiography and fiction. However, my study attempts a new direction of research, extending the analysis to particular aspects of three representative novels and drawing thematic parallels among them and *Boyhood*.

**The Theme of Animals**

Coetzee’s *Boyhood* can be used to explain the preoccupation with animals, the problematic relationship of desire and the body, and the prominence of the farm theme in the fictions. In a sense, such a thematic fictional cluster interpreted in the light of the fictionalised memoir *Boyhood* endows the fictions with autobiographical import. Regardless of the truth value of this memoir, of what it says about Coetzee’s childhood and his relationship with his parents, what we have is a sensitive boy being shaped by school experiences, religious encounters, friendships, childhood games, political views, etc. He dreads being beaten in class; and he is sensitive to teachers’ canes based on family stories he would hear. Such memories are recollected just as the agony of toothache is remembered (SPL 27), together with what he likes or hates about his father’s personal habits (SPL 37).

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16 Coetzee, ‘Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky,’ *Comparative Literature* 37.3 (1985): 194.
18 Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) 8. This volume includes the three books *Boyhood*, *Youth* and *Summertime* in one publication. It will be referred to hereafter in parentheses in the text using the abbreviation SPL.
In addition, the memoir treats three main themes I project in this article, and such themes are echoed in the novels treated here. The value of such themes is not only autobiographical but ethical and moral as well because they relate to the body and the otherness embodied in animals. For example, the memoir has the boy see his mother cut out the horny shells under the tongues of some hens after an advice from her sister that they can return to laying eggs after this. The boy comes to witness the suffering of such birds and develops an aversion to meat as well: ‘The hens shriek and struggle, their eyes bulging. He shudders and turns away. He thinks of his mother slapping stewing steak down on the kitchen counter and cutting it into cubes; he thinks of her bloody fingers’ (SPL 3). He likes meat, ‘yet after seeing Ros slaughtering sheep he no longer likes to handle raw meat’ (SPL 85). Like the vegetarian Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee’s novel of that title, the boy develops an aversion to processed meat and factory animals. Besides birds and animals, other insignificant forms of life attract the boy’s attention just as they do in the case of Michael K in Life and Times of Michael K: ‘There are ants in Worcester, flies, plagues of fleas… He has a ring of fleabites above his socks, and scabs where he has scratched’ (SPL 4). One day a car hits a dog before the eyes of the observing boy. Because the dog’s hind legs become paralysed, it ‘drags itself away, yelping with pain’ (SPL 26). Even dogs in family photo albums suffer and die. For example, in one exchange between the boy and his mother over family photos, the mother explains that her dog in one picture died of poisoned meat the farmers put for jackals (SPL 41). Another dog his mother has eats ‘the ground glass someone has put out for him’ (SPL 43). The dog suffers and dies although the boy runs to bring him medicine. He then helps bury him. As a result, the boy ‘does not want them to have another dog, not if this is how they must die’ (SPL 43). Diseased and crippled animals, especially dogs, are the victims of much violence in Coetzee’s Disgrace. Most these animals are disposed of via lethal needles and then incineration. Lurie gives up a crippled dog at the end of Disgrace. He opens the cage and carries the dog with the ‘crippled rear’ in his arms ‘like a lamb’. Such crippled dogs and sacrificial animals in the memoir and the novel testify to the fact that Coetzee might be drawing on autobiographical elements in his fictions.

The boy watches one day the event of taking the inside parts of the sheep just as he watches the castration of lambs and cutting their tails (SPL 83). He watches as the lambs ‘bleat in terror’ and each is left with ‘a bloody stump’ (SPL 83). Lambs get castrated before his eyes: ‘At the end of the operation the lambs stand sore and bleeding by their mothers’ side, who have done nothing to protect them. Ros folds his pocketknife. The job is done; he wears a tight, little smile’ (SPL 83). Such portions of the text can be read against relevant ones in Disgrace and Elizabeth Costello: both novels treat cruelty to animals and mass slaughter for factory production of meat.

The boy is concerned for the farm sheep and their fate. His concern for animals becomes an ontological one: ‘He does not understand why sheep accept their fate, why they never rebel but instead go meekly to their death’ (SPL 85). In Disgrace, David Lurie thinks in similar terms. Lurie develops sensitivity to animal life because he works in an animal clinic. He is so concerned about the fate of two sheep his black neighbour will slaughter for a party. Just like the magistrate eying the buck he is about to hunt in Waiting for the Barbarians, Lurie examines the sheep: ‘He stands before them, under the sun, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign’ (D 126; my emphasis). It is because ‘A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a

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19 Coetzee, Disgrace (New York: Viking, 1999) 220. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation D.
field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him’ (D 126). In Boyhood, the boy wonders why buck run to save their lives while sheep submit to their fate submissively (SPL 85): ‘They are animals, after all, they have the sharp senses of animals: why do they not hear the last bleatings of the victim behind the shed, smell its blood, and take heed?’ (SPL 85). The sheep Lurie is concerned about and which Petrus, Lurie’s neighbor, will kill to feed his guests are described as ‘slaughter-animals’ (D 126), which robs them even of the capacity pondered by the boy to resist their fate. During a hunting encounter with a waterbuck in Waiting for the Barbarians, the magistrate and the animal gaze at each other. Both are paralysed for a moment. The magistrate is not able to bring himself to shoot the ram: ‘Behind my paltry cover I stand trying to shrug off this irritating and uncanny feeling, till the buck wheels and with a whisk of his tail and a brief splash of hooves disappears into the tall reeds.’ Unlike the slaughtered animals in Disgrace, Boyhood, and Life and Times of Michael K, the buck here is spared the disgrace of death. Such encounters between humans and animals are a thematic link between the memoir and a number of Coetzee’s novels. Like the fictions, Boyhood the memoir offers ‘an intricate account of the interrelationship between the animal and the human’. Therefore, influence relations between Coetzee’s fictions and memoirs welcome an intra-comparative, intertextual approach that pays attention to their autobiographical elements and ethico-political concerns.

Every Friday the boy’s uncle and family members slaughter a sheep and flay and skin it (SPL 82-83). In Life and Times of Michael K, K finds wild goats at the farm in Prince Albert and instinctively chases them with his knife, possessed by the ‘urgency of hunger’. Unlike the boy in the memoir and Lurie in Disgrace who develop an aversion to slaughtered meat, Michael K catches one goat near the dam and drowns it under the mud, hurling ‘the whole weight of his body upon it’ and pressing through until he ‘could feel the goat’s hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms’ (LTMK 53). Driven by the urgency of hunger, it suddenly comes to his mind that ‘these snorting long-haired beasts, or creatures like them, would have to be caught, killed, cut up and eaten if he hoped to live’ (LTMK 52). The lesson he learns from this experience is ‘not to kill such large animals’ (LTMK 57), which triggers Michael K’s interest in what we can call ‘minor forms of life’. In the earth around his fire pit in the mountains, Michael K finds that minor forms of life thrive, ‘a multifarious insect life drawn by the benign, continuous warmth’ (LTMK 115). In the silence of the mountains, he pays attention to the ‘scurrying of insects’ around him, the buzz of flies (LTMK 66-67), and the twitter of birds in the trees (LTMK 69). Like Michael K, the boy in the memoir is a keen observer of farm life with all of its minute details. In this regard, the socio-political and moral ramifications of the use of animals in Coetzee’s fictions build on and revise the biographical content of Boyhood, the memoir and the life experiences of Coetzee the boy.

20 Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians (London: Vintage, 2000 [1980]) 43. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation WB.
22 Coetzee, Life and Times of Michael K (London: Vintage, 1998 [1983]) 55. Further references to this novel will be included in the text using the abbreviation LTMK.
Desire and the Body

Besides the rich insights we can get from this memoir regarding the theme of animals, we can find a rich ground for the theme of desire and the body that permeates Coetzee’s fictions. For example, the boy in the memoir has to deal with the puzzle of bodily desires: ‘Of all the secrets that set him apart, this may in the end be the worst. Among all these boys he is the only one in whom this dark erotic current runs; among all this innocence and normality, he is the only one who desires’ (SPL 48). In Disgrace, Coetzee projects the issue of sexual desire that blights Lurie at the very beginning of the novel. The body is presented as the protagonist’s main problem. The novel’s first sentence reads: ‘For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well’ (D 1). As the novel proceeds, David Lurie is often presented as a man who pleads the authority of Eros over his life, a man whose heart ‘lurches with desire’ (D 20). After charges of sexual harassment, Lurie presents himself to the university committee investigating the case as ‘a servant of Eros’ (D 52). The boy in the memoir is fascinated by his own body and its ‘dark desires’ (SPL 51). While sexual desire for the boy in the memoir is a secret unknown realm he vaguely knows about from rumours from friends and books (SPL 125), Lurie describes himself as desire’s servant. By contrast, the magistrate has a desire problem with the barbarian girl: ‘From the beginning my desire has not taken on that direction, that directedness’ (WB 36). Unable to penetrate the body of the other, he visits prostitutes. ‘Occupied in these suave pleasures, I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body’ (WB 45). The magistrate is not able to understand his vague desire for the barbarian girl his distance from his own bodily desires: ‘There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her’ (WB 46). The body with its desires is as problematic in the memoir as it is in the fictions. Such diverse texts belonging to different genres mirror each other in their treatment of the body and the problem of desire.

In Boyhood, Aunt Annie, the boy’s great aunt and godmother, does not seem to be aware of his revulsion for bodily processes and aging: ‘She does not seem to be aware of the disgust he feels for her, wrinkled and ugly in her hospital bed, the disgust he feels for this whole ward of ugly women. He tries to keep his disgust from showing; his heart burns with shame’ (SPL 98). This shame of ageing and bodily functions that Mrs Curren in Age of Iron feels and the titular Elizabeth Costello faces recurs here. It is also the shame of ageing experienced by the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians who complains: ‘I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast’ (WB 87). The magistrate further complains, ‘I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy’ (WB 93). When he flees his cellar and enters a room of lovers and hides under the bed while they make love, he sinks ‘further and further into disgrace’ (WB 105). What he shrinks from is ‘the shame of dying and befuddled as I am’ (WB 103). Seeing sleeping naked bodies on a bed and comparing their youth with his ‘heavy slack foul-smelling old body’ (WB 106) makes the ‘tide of shame’ sweep over the magistrate ‘with redoubled force’ (WB 106). Reduced to a body and bodily functions, the tortured magistrate says: ‘In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. Little of what I call suffering is even pain’ (WB 126). The magistrate experiences ‘agonies of shame’ when made ‘to come out of [his] den and stand naked before these idlers or jerk [his] body about for their amusement’ (WB 128). The state of disgrace dogs die in and encounter in Disgrace and the humiliation of mass emasculation lambs encounter in Boyhood are mirrored in the fate the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians meets when he is tortured by the Empire he serves for treason: ‘There is no way of dying allowed to me, it seems, except like a dog in a corner’ (WB 128). As with the fictions, the boy in the memoir becomes aware of the shame contingent on embodiment and aging. He feels
shame at his revulsion from the normal ageing process of others. By contrast, the fictions often stage the main character’s shame about getting old and humiliated. Lurie, the magistrate, Elizabeth Costello, and Mrs Curren are clear examples of the disgrace of embodiment and getting old treated in the fictions.

**The Farm Theme**

Like Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K* who finds in farms an escape from civil wars and bad politics, the boy in the memoir finds in family farms a sanctuary. The boy’s grandfather’s farm, called Voëlfontein (Bird fountain), is a place he loves: ‘he loves every stone of it, every bush, every blade of grass, loves the birds that give it its name’ (SPL 67). On the farm, he is one with nature: ‘He wants to be a creature of the desert, this desert, like a lizard’ (SPL 70). Like the starving Michael K, the boy is ‘proud of how little he drinks’ (SPL 70). He is surprised that ‘On the farm, it seems, there is no decay’ (SPL 70). Water, meat, pumpkins stay fresh. Near the farmhouse is ‘a stone-walled dam’ (SPL 70) providing water for the farm and the garden through a wind-pump. The boy feels secure there and believes that no harm can happen to him (SPL 70). In the boy’s imagination, ‘Voëlfontein is a kingdom in its own right. There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love’ (SPL 77). We can read the abundance of flowing time in *Life and Times of Michael K* against such a quote. In the mountains, Michael K loses track of time. He ‘had kept no tally of the days nor recorded the changes of the moon’ (LTMK 115). Time is ceaselessly poured on him from all directions. In each case, farm life does not seem to conform to much of life’s tensions and frustrations. Moreover, the hard soil trampled in *Life and Times of Michael K* finds an echo here in the memoir in the following quote: ‘The Kraal walls ramble for miles up and down the hillside. Nothing grows here: the earth has been trampled flat and killed forever, he does not know how: it has a stained, unhealthy, yellow look’ (SPL 77). When shearsers arrive on the farm, the boy is surprised by their thick accent and strange native-like looks. He wonders: ‘Where do they come from? Is there a country deeper even than the country of Voëlfontein, a heartland even more secluded from the world?’ (SPL 78). This reminds one of Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* with Magda dwelling on a remote South African farm in the heartland of the Karoo. Moreover, the ‘old, slow ways’ of the farm in the memoir (SPL 80) after a hectic time of shearing also remind us of the routine life on a deserted Karoo farm in the novel *In the Heart of the Country*. However, the positive form of belonging to the farm in the memoir – ‘The secret and sacred word that binds him to the farm is belong’ (SPL 80) – is juxtaposed against feelings of loss and being adrift on the part of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*. Under the negative influence of her father and her utter solitude, Magda – unlike the boy in the memoir – fails to find a counter to life’s disorientations through which the farm emerges as an identity builder.

The farm in the memoir is viewed by the boy as what consolidates one’s identity. It exists ‘from eternity to eternity. When they are all dead, when even the farm house has fallen into ruin like the kraals on the hillside, the farm will still be there’ (SPL 81). The boy has conflicting feelings of belonging to his mother and the farm and it ‘does not escape him that these two servitudes clash’ (SPL 81), whereas Magda belongs to her father and the farm. While the farm serves as the mother for the motherless Magda, the farm similarly serves as a second mother for the boy. He thinks how he has ‘Two mothers and no father’ (SPL 81). Therefore, it is
no wonder that Michael K finds fatherhood a strange idea in this camp area that is ‘the heart of the country’. Michael K

thought of the camp in Jakkalsdrif, of parents bringing up children behind the wire, their own children and the children of cousins and second cousins, on earth stamped so tight by the passage of their footsteps day after day, baked so hard by the sun, that nothing would ever grow there again. (LTMK 104)

Interestingly, the boy wants to be buried on the farm if he dies (SPL 82) or – if he is denied that – ‘to be cremated and have his ashes scattered here’ (SPL 82). This is what actually happens with Michael K’s mother once he takes her ashes from the hospital and returns to her birthplace. In Stellenbosch and en route to the country of Prince Albert, Michael K’s mother becomes very sick, and he takes her to a hospital. The hospital nurse gives Michael K a parcel containing his mother’s ashes and tells him that his mother was ‘cremated’ that morning (LTMK 32). Once he is living on a farm in the country, Michael K distributes ‘the fine grey flakes’ of his mother’s ashes ‘over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful’ (59). In the memoir, the veld is the boy’s passion and a formative influence on him. Dams, trees, bees, and sheep dominate the boy’s farm experiences just as they do for Michael K in the novel.

In the memoir, poor rain in the veld killed grass and bushes. The boy’s uncle begins to fence it and cut it to smaller camps so that the land is given time to recover: ‘He and Ros and Freek go out every day, driving fence posts into the rock-hard earth, spanning furlong after furlong of wire, drawing it taut as a bowstring, clamping it’ (SPL 84). In Life and Times of Michael K, one farmer Michael K works for during his stay in the labor camp commends K’s fencing ability and tells him that ‘There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what’ (LTMK 95). As Michael K flees the camp and sees fences everywhere around him – an image of socio-political stratification – he finds it difficult to ‘imagine himself spending his life driving stakes into the ground, erecting fences, dividing up the land’ (LTMK 97). Captured for not having a permit, Michael K is driven in a train to the railway yards along with other strangers. They passed miles of ‘bare and neglected vineyards circled over by cows’ (LTMK 41). The labour camp Michael K is sent to is described as an impenetrable landscape, a ‘stone-hard veld’ (LTMK 95). The land is fenced, and Michael K wonders if ‘there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet’ (LTMK 47). Under apartheid, land was demarcated, manipulated, and surveyed. Michael K finds a special pleasure in tending the seeds he has planted near the dam, a pleasure in making ‘this deserted farm bloom’ (LTMK 59)

A simple gardener, Michael K takes his sick mother to a farm in Prince Albert, fleeing from a future South Africa torn by civil war where ‘the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet’ spoil people’s lives to return to the countryside where ‘if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies’ (LTMK 8). This life – which is a dramatisation of life conditions under Apartheid and the emergency years of violence in the years following the novel’s publication – is the opposite of the freedom country life can provide. The contrasting images of freedom and imprisonment highlight the divisions and limitations of stratified political systems like Apartheid. By contrast, farm life in the memoir stands for freedom, openness of vision, and wholeness. If the land is fenced or kraaled in the memoir, it is to restore vitality and health.
Coda

In fictional works which are autobiographical, the percentage of truth to fiction is likely to be less than what we would expect in fictionalised memoirs. However, we cannot deny such genres their autobiographical content. I have tried to highlight the autobiographical slant of Coetzee’s fictions – an aspect of his works many critics have often ignored – and the fictionalised, autofictional nature of Coetzee’s memoir Boyhood. While many critics have studied the fictions – apartheid or post-apartheid, less attention has been given to Coetzee’s trilogy of memoirs. I tried to blend them with an eye to better understand the fictions which outnumber the memoirs and exceed them in critical reception. In other words, I have tried to suggest a new model for interpreting Coetzee’s novels in the light of the memoirs, using in particular Coetzee’s first memoir Boyhood and a cluster of interrelated themes: the body and desire, animals, and the farm.

In depicting his protagonist in Boyhood and Youth as a socially marginal, yet sensitive, figure at odds with his parents’ materialism and the political scene of his country, Coetzee seems to be following the autobiographical tradition of James Joyce’s artist figure Stephen Dedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). Common themes include troubled family relations, being at odds with one’s country and its ideologies, artistic ambitions, self-exile, etc. While Joyce uses the past tense in his autofictional portrait of himself as a young artist, Coetzee uses the present tense to allow for this contrast with Joyce and continue his experimentation in narrative technique.

My approach is not exactly historical-autobiographical. Although I read Coetzee’s autobiographical memoir against the novels, my goal has not been determining authorial intention or historical contexts. I tried to show how the works are one whole and are better read alongside each other. In a sense, my approach is new critical in a formalist sense. For the critic Lois Tyson, ‘the complexity of a literary text is created by its tension,’ which can mean the ‘linking together of opposites’. This tension is created

by the integration of the abstract and the concrete, of general ideas embodied in specific images. … Tension is also created by the dynamic interplay among the text’s opposing tendencies, that is, among its paradoxes, ironies, and ambiguities.  

I would like to extend this argument to tension existing at the level of texts rather than a specific text. In reading Coetzee’s novels against his fictionalised memoirs, one should see intertextual relations among such texts as instances of tension whereby Coetzee grapples with notions of body and desire, farm life, and the lives of animals.

Coetzee’s apparent autobiographical preoccupation with such themes is an attempt to account for and justify personal convictions. Reading Coetzee’s Age of Iron, Rachel Ann Walsh argues that Mrs Curren’s epistolary and confessional narrative is an attempt ‘to account for herself and offer a response to a historical juncture that demands violent justice’. Similarly, confessional writing is a means of accounting for the self for the author just as it is for the character. Gillian Dooley suggests that in such books as Elizabeth Costello, Here and Now, and Diary of a Bad Year Coetzee might ‘provide a set of opinions that we can now ascribe’ to him, given the

continuity of those opinions between these fictional and non-fictional works. A concern for animal life, farm life, and the body is frequently found in Coetzee’s works to an extent that gives it autobiographical value when considered as an extension of or a development from the memoirs. In such a case, we have to consider the fact that, although *Boyhood* was published in 1997, it stages a time in Coetzee’s life when he was a school boy and a teenager. The formative impact of its details on the boy in the memoir logically precedes the conception of ideas covered in the fictions. Overall, Coetzee’s project seems to be one of creating tension among his autobiographical and fictional texts, ‘writing interdependent texts and interrogating the relationship between life and fiction’. An intra-comparative approach yields much to Coetzee’s readers, and the autobiographical element in Coetzee’s fictions is worthy of more investigation.

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44. [www.mediatropes.com](http://www.mediatropes.com)

Retelling Nature: Realism and the Postcolonial-Environmental Imaginary in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

Gayathri Prabhu

Since its publication in 2005, *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh has been the privileged vantage point that has defined the intersection of the large fields of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.1 Its thematic concerns – such as the interplay of land use, academic scientific enterprise, the long history of colonial settlement, state policies of environmental conservation, migration and refugee settlement, the overlapping of religious and state boundaries of Hindus and Muslims, subaltern and indigenous populations – have made it the originary text for scholars to work through key debates and ‘mutually constituted silences’2 between the two influential fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism.

As Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee puts it, this novel ‘tells the tale of belonging through a meditation on the issues of language, representation and mimetic techniques that can be read as a meta-textual commentary on the form of his postcolonial novel itself.’4 Where this current essay seeks to be different from the existent large scholarly corpus on *The Hungry Tide* is through shifting from a theoretical accounting of the novel, to a more internal aesthetically attuned reading. The elements of this essay negotiate the questions of how the complexity of such a rich historical situation can only be captured by a complex amalgam of realism, narrative, historical

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3 Though their disciplinary emphases are primed for alignment, the scholarship within postcolonial studies on the one hand, and ecocriticism on the other, have often skirted around the critical interplay of landscape and historical narratives. Postcolonial discourse has been criticised for a ‘wilful neglect of causation, context and chronology’ (Dane Kennedy, ‘Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory’, *The Decolonisation Reader* edited by James D. Le Suer [New York: Routledge, 2003] 15), a tendency to be ahistorical and for conducting reductionist readings that resolve into a rigid binary of colony and metropole. In response, postcolonial critics have pointed out that ecocriticism and environmental literary studies, as a predominantly Caucasian US-centric movement, tend to overlook colonial imperatives and are ‘arguably lacking the institutional support-base to engage fully with multicultural and cross-cultural concerns’ (Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* [New York: Routledge, 2010] 703). Considering that colonisation changed the very categories within which nature and society were conceived (William Adams and Martin Mulligan, eds., *Decolonising Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era* [London: Earthscan, 2003] 5), the emerging discipline of ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’ has been decisive. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that it performs ‘an advocacy function’ that ‘opens up for contemplation of how the real world might be transformed’ (13).

fiction, myth, intertextuality, and linguistic texture.\textsuperscript{5} The essay thus moves beyond suggesting that there is a simple representation of a range of multiple voices (the traditional social realist mode of representing everything from the metropole to the forest), to recognising that this representation of multiplicity will never be able to entirely overcome hierarchy. The Hungry Tide succeeds to the extent that it can represent, within the mode of a stretched social realism, both multiplicity and hierarchy. The many competing micro-narratives in the novel resist universalisation into the modes of either the ‘global-scientific’, or the generic ‘regional-subaltern’. I argue that it is the representation of this range of competing aesthetic and narrative registers that form the key political point of the novel – that the multiplicity of subaltern narratives are neither reducible to each other (the interest of the refugee is not the interest of the fisherwoman), nor can they be meaningfully universalised against a global, singular Other (be it of capitalism, or science, or the State).

\textbf{Nature as the Absence of History?}  
Amitav Ghosh has often voiced his discomfort with the term ‘postcolonial’, calling it an essentially negative one and preferring to replace the word ‘postcolony’ with ‘place’, and discusses how typically a terrain gets defined as ‘nature’ and thus ‘the absence of history’.\textsuperscript{6} But where the place is burdened by colonial history, the negotiation between the two can be a slippery one. Set in the Sunderbans, The Hungry Tide explores one such compelling cusp of place and history. The Sunderbans, a tropical moist forest ecoregion located in the eastern fringes of India and extending into Bangladesh, which literally translates into ‘beautiful forest’, is an archipelago that hosts the largest estuarine mangrove forest in the world, a unique ecosystem of tidal waterways and islands that is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, including a large population of tigers. Listed on UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites and declared a Biosphere Reserve for its exceptional biodiversity, the Sunderbans is also a fascinating geohistorical location, a landscape steeped in a plurality of narratives that encompass collective memory, oral traditions, mythologies, colonial legacies, scientific ventures, nationalist politics and environmental concerns.\textsuperscript{7}  

Situated in this vortex of nature, history and imagination are the protagonists of The Hungry Tide, characters from disparate worlds gravitating to each other: an American scientist, an urban Indian translator and entrepreneur, and a local fisherman, each having to contend with issues of identity and the forces of nature within the confines of this place. Piya, an American cetologist of Indian origins, has freshly arrived at the Sundarbans to conduct research on a rare species of river dolphins, the Irrawaddy dolphins, and sets off on her journey into the tidal labyrinth accompanied by a guard from the forest department who turns out to be unsympathetic,

\textsuperscript{5} Hamish Dalley discusses how certain literary modes, such as the investment in realism and plausibility, require readers to negotiate heterogenous structures of reference, and reads the historical novel as a kind of allegorical realism. See Hamish Dalley, ‘Postcolonialism and the Historical Novel: Epistemologies of Contemporary Realism’, Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry 1.1 (2014) 51-67.


\textsuperscript{7} Annu Jalais writes about different interest groups and their investment in the rhetoric of Sunderbans as an exotic site of nature, deliberating negating the lived reality of its human inhabitants. See Annu Jalais, ‘The Sunderbans: Whose World Heritage Site?’, Conservation and Society 5.3 (2007) 1-8.
opportunistic and a barely veiled sexual threat.\textsuperscript{8} His job of protecting the environment seems devoid of any emotional connection with it, a stark contrast to Fokir, a local fisherman they encounter. This fortuitous meeting convinces Piya to proceed with Fokir as her guide, his use of personal experience and traditional knowledge to locate these shy marine mammals opening new and exciting possibilities for Piya’s research.

Piya also meets Kannai, a New Delhi-based translator and language expert who has been summoned to the Sunderbans by his aunt Nilima to collect a manuscript addressed to him by Nirmal, her late husband. Kannai is attracted to Piya and offers his services as a translator. As Piya, Kannai and Fokir set out together in search of the dolphins, they are reminded by the constantly morphing landscape of the \textit{bhatir desh}, the tide country, that they are at the mercy of the elements and wild animals. Piya observes that ‘except at sea, she had never known the human trace to be so faint, so close to undetectable’ (72). The entire dramatic action of the novel is contained within the ecological region of the Sunderbans, where the mangrove forests are a challenge to place-consciousness as the tides reconfigure the landscape on a daily basis for ‘they do not merely recolonise land; they erase time’ (43). This characteristic of the tide and the forest as a colonising and decolonising force, stronger than human intervention, echoes through \textit{The Hungry Tide} like a leitmotif and attains fruition in the climax. It is a narrative webbed with such interminable colonial projections, that Ghosh’s hesitation to define his work as ‘post’ the colonial experience becomes significant. If we are to read this in the light of Sluyter’s approach to colonisation as a process of conflict between natives and colonisers over and through landscape,\textsuperscript{9} then the only way to approach place or nature is through the plethora of historical narratives, both by colonisers and the colonised. History is simply this plethora of narratives, not a singular narrative that privileges the dualism of oppressor and oppressed. Nature is linked to history as a chaotic, irreducible multiplicity of tellings and re-tellings.

\textbf{Living the Scotsman’s Dream}

Traditionally considered an inhospitable terrain by the local population due to the constant erosion and deposition of land by the tides and a high density of predators, the tidal islands were repopulated by a Scotsman, Sir Daniel Hamilton, who bought ten thousand acres from the British government in 1903. This systematic and large-scale colonisation put heavy pressures on the fragile ecology of the Sunderbans. The end of colonial rule in 1947 did not end the colonial policies, which continued in the Indian administration’s conservation efforts,\textsuperscript{10} and the region has continued to struggle with highly controversial land encroachments by refugees from Bangladesh and intensified human-tiger conflicts. The anthropologist Annu Jalais has referred to this time (the nineteen fifties to the seventies) as one ‘when tigers became “citizens” and refugees “tiger-food”,’ and tigers became the excuse to exterminate people. To the islanders,

\textsuperscript{8}Amitav Ghosh, \textit{The Hungry Tide} (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) 30. Further references to this work will be included in the text as page numbers in parentheses.


\textsuperscript{10}The national park management in India, according to Gadgil and Guha, has borrowed two axioms of the Western wilderness movement: ‘gigantism’ (cordonning off large areas) and ‘hands off nature’ (believing that all human intervention is bad for nature). See Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, \textit{This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India} (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1993) 235.
tigers preying on humans is a direct outcome of the state violence against refugees, combined with the importance given by the State to the tiger (India’s ‘national’ animal) compared to impoverished refugees from Bangladesh.  

Relatively speaking, all human habitation in the Sunderbans being so recent, its inhabitants, whether from India or Bangladesh, are ‘refugees’. In exploring the relatively recent history of human inhabitation in the ‘treacherous’ mangrove ecology, Ghosh juggles with the twin tropes of Wasteland and Utopia, both emerging from colonial encounters with landscapes. Sir Daniel Hamilton encouraged local people to repopulate the Sunderbans in the early twentieth century. In the novel, he is depicted on the prow of a liner during a reconnaissance of the mangroves asking, ‘why is this valuable soil allowed to lie fallow?’ (43), thereby representing the colonial ethos where ‘the existence of vacated (or empty) landscapes, “new lands” and a frontier between them and settled, sown and developed country was important to the national psyche.’ Land became a wasteland when it did not serve the colonial motivations of profit, and this idea is reflected in Hamilton’s logic and rhetoric in the novel. “Look how much this mud is worth,” he said, “a single acre of Bengal’s mud yields fifteen maunds of rice. What does a square mile of gold yield? Nothing” (42). Hamilton was not the first man to set foot in the Sunderbans. The islands showed signs of previous habitation by humans who had abandoned them due to the combined threat of weather and predators. By encouraging people to return and harness the natural resources, and by giving rewards to those who killed crocodiles and tigers, the new ‘owner’ of the land inscribes a new history upon it.

This arrival of the coloniser at a foreign landscape has generated the romantic myth of a virginal landscape offering itself to the newcomer’s identity and aspirations. ‘Under ethnohistoricism, the precollonial landscape thus remains largely pristine, a wild nature that determined the characteristics of natives and only became ordered when Europeans arrived to tame it.’ 13 While the validity of such an interpretation in deconstructing colonial influences is irrefutable, it also is in danger of overlooking individual compulsions. As Ghosh takes pains to elaborate, Sir Daniel Hamilton’s motives in the Sunderbans are not entirely mercenary, but come from a passionate belief in a Utopian society where people could be free of the social inequalities and rigid caste distinctions deeply embedded in Indian society (44). While Ghosh may be critiqued for being insufficiently critical of the benign paternalism of the Scottish entrepreneur, the larger point to be gained may be that the novel, by giving historical depth, allows the reader to nuance the temporalisation of colonialism. For, far from being demonised by the natives, ‘the visionary Scotsman was, if not quite a deity, then certainly a venerated ancestral spirit’ (66), and this is acknowledged by characters like Nirmal and Nilima, who are familiar with both the burden of colonialism as well as the discourses of nationhood.

Nirmal is a schoolteacher, an idealist and a believer in revolutions, whose Naxalite politics lead to a relocation to the Sunderbans where he works for the welfare of the local community with his wife Nilima. He is predisposed to read Hamilton in the light of his own idealism, especially Hamilton’s vision of an egalitarian society, of Sunderbans as ‘a model for all of India;
it could be a new kind of country’ (45). But do Hamilton’s good intentions absolve him from the damage caused to the tidal ecology by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and the assaults on non-human life forms? A natural corollary to this dilemma of colonial motives is the question of whether the colonised are all that different from the colonisers in how they wish to appropriate these ‘wastelands’. In 1978, another large wave of human encroachment and settlement in the Sunderbans took place when political refugees from Bangladesh occupied Morichjhapi island, a critical dramatic event in The Hungry Tide. The novel forces the question of an invisible colonial hierarchy in human claim over landscape, as Nilima argues with Nirmal that allowing the Bangladeshi refugees into ‘government property’ would put their ecosystem at risk. She wonders, ‘What will become of the forest, the environment?’ while Nirmal would rather ask whether the dreams of the settlers were less valuable than those of Sir Daniel just because he was a rich saheb while they were impoverished refugees (177). Nirmal’s decision to write down these thoughts, to record history as it is being created in the Sunderbans, becomes an act of resistance against the injustice being meted out to these homeless people. The trope of a diary within a novelistic narrative, recovered by a later generation, allows the instantiation of several temporal modes (of resistance, of diversity of subaltern perspective, as well as existential spiritual and romantic quests).

It is difficult for Nirmal to overlook the fact that these refugees are being persecuted because they occupy a land that has been declared a national park, and because they have a different national identity – Bengalis like him, but Bangladeshis instead of Indian. The constant shifting of the mangroves between a state of land and a state of water provides an objective correlative for the unstable past of its human residents. Irrespective of the geopolitical fencing, the people of the tide country had shared their knowledge of the swamps, whether for livelihood or spiritual sustenance, with more to fear from natural predators and ravages of weather than political leaders.

The Hungry Tide engages at length with the decision of the Indian government to relocate the Bangladeshi refugees in settlement camps in Central India, a completely different ecoregion, ‘more like a concentration camp or a prison’ (99). Unable to adjust to the unfamiliar conditions, many of them decide to move back to the Sunderbans, but still within Indian territories where they feel safe. They tell Nirmal about this lure for the familiar – ‘rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood’ (137) – and he understands why their return to the tidal islands is inevitable. The shared identity was of a bioregion, a common way of life and a common sensibility shaped by characteristics of the natural environment rather than by manmade divisions, hence more compelling and cementing than political borders or boundaries of a national park. ‘They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood’ (137). Nirmal’s optimism about shared destinies is shattered when the Indian administration decides to forcibly evict the settlers, leading to a massacre. The tragedy of Morichjhapi, as Ghosh dramatizes it through Nirmal’s notebooks in The Hungry Tide, is shown as stemming from a complete disregard of bioregionality and environmental consciousness. It is ironic that the Utopian ideals of Hamilton that promoted the harnessing of natural resources as an impetus to leveling social inequalities become instrumental in the persecution of the

14 Graham and Tiffin 187.
inhabitants of the tide country. Stylistically, the novel plays up the dynamism and entrepreneurship of an earlier colonial period, only to serve as foil for the later historical unfolding of forced migration, disruption and death.

Human–Tiger Coexistence and Conflict

The claims of different political and social groups over the landscape is further problematised in the novel by the conflict between the human and non-human life forms which, as Adams and Mulligan point out, is an aspect of colonisation that we are less accustomed to acknowledge.15 For people living in the Sundarbans, and for the characters of The Hungry Tide, the constant threat of man-eating tigers is a grave problem that cannot be ignored or escaped. Not only is there a viable population of tigers in the Sundarbans, these tigers are known to have a predilection for human flesh, unlike in other reserves where tigers attack people only in unusual circumstances.16 While there is no consensus about the reasons for this in the scientific community, the tiger is seen as a constant threat by those living in the Sundarbans.

Piya and Kanai, visitors from distant cosmopolitan centres, struggle to comprehend this reality. Piya, in particular, is prone to romanticising the connection that the local people have with their environment. Watching some fishermen and dolphins work together in rounding up a school of fish, Piya thinks to herself that it is the most remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals that she has ever seen (140). Her attraction to Fokir is based on an admiration of his knowledge of the outdoors, his ability to observe and follow the paths of the dolphins that she is desperate to track. But as the story unfolds and their journey takes them deeper into the tide country, Piya realises Fokir’s connection with his environment exceeds her simple idealisation of ‘man at one with nature’. This is especially foregrounded when the real threat of predators (tigers) has to be factored in.

Nilima warns Kanai about this and shows him records to prove that on both sides of the border ‘a human being is killed by a tiger every other day in the Sundarbans – at the very least’ (199). In fact, the tiger is a sustained presence through The Hungry Tide, either by suggestion – a pug mark, a distant roar, a rustle in the bushes, a hallucination, a recollection – or through direct encounter.17

The tiger in India, particularly the man-eating tiger, had taken on a mythic status during British rule. John M. MacKenzie writes of how ‘the British and the tiger seemed in some ways to be locked in conflict for command of the Indian environment’, making it one of the species that was defined as ‘vermin’, which meant that it would be ‘singled out as a prime enemy of mankind, its destruction might nonetheless only be undertaken by certain hands.’18 The foundation of this notion of ‘protecting’ the tiger, whose eradication not so long back was

15 Adams and Mulligan 52.
17 Rajender Kaur considers the tiger in the novel ‘a Blakean archetype of an awesome natural force that is amoral as much as the people who are pitted against it in an eternal battle of survival that expands our understanding of the indigenous and cosmopolitan beyond socialized spaces to hint at the elemental’ (Kaur 136).
reserved only for the ruling class, thereby became suspect. Following independence, as India’s national animal, the tiger has become a flagship species for conservation efforts and has also taken on the populist rhetoric of nationalist pride, its flagship status coming, perhaps unsurprisingly, at the time of its extinction. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the tiger population in India was estimated at 40,000 and by 1973 it had been reduced to less than 2000. In that year, the Government of India launched Project Tiger, and the tiger population has doubled since then.\(^{19}\) Reports have shown a simultaneous increase in the clashes between the people living in proximity to the national parks and the park authorities, as well as fatalities from animal attacks, for which most people are not compensated or are given only paltry sums.\(^{20}\) The resentment in the local populace, mostly poorer sections of agrarian society eking their livelihood from these areas, over their interests being considered subordinate to that of the national park and the predators, has been vividly captured in *The Hungry Tide*.

Nevertheless, for dramatic purposes, Ghosh’s novelistic form requires an initial alignment between the characters of Kanai, Piya and Fokir. This lulls the reader into thinking the novel has a vantage point from which to describe an objectified notion of the problems of environment and development. But the surprise and strength of the novel is that this initial alignment is shattered in a visceral way due to an episode of tiger-killing. Suddenly, the three protagonists realise they are not on the same side at all, and have radically different positions. This visceral dissonance is never resolved in the novel, and haunts its structure henceforth, as explained below.

As Piya, Kanai and Fokir travel through the waterways of the mangroves, they come across a village where a mob is attacking a tiger trapped in a livestock pen with spears and staves. Priya tries to intervene but Fokir forcefully carries her away from the wrath of the resentful crowd. The livestock pen is set on fire and the tiger is burnt alive. Piya is horrified and cannot believe that both Kanai and Fokir are so accepting of such brutality. Kanai tries to pacify her by explaining that the tiger had been preying on the village for years, killing livestock and people. But that can never be a valid explanation for Piya who tells him categorically that he can’t take revenge on an animal. Kanai’s refusal to interfere with the mob does not trouble her as much as Fokir’s betrayal does. Having idealised him as a man sensitive to his surroundings, she had expected him to understand her distress rather than accepting the killing by saying that ‘when a tiger comes to a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die’ (244). This kind of pragmatism does not fit into her romantic notions of his eco-sensibilities. She has to accept the truth when Kanai tells her, ‘Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He’s not. He’s a fisherman – he kills animals for a living’ (245). Fokir had represented to Piya the possibility of a harmonious relationship between human and non-human species, and the value of ‘the imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matters except ourselves’ (249). That line is crossed for her when she is a helpless witness to the tiger’s death. She points out to Kanai that the violence caused by such entitlement as a species would not stop at killing the tiger, but would eventually lead to the killing of people, precisely the poor and disadvantaged people that he is advocating for.


\(^{20}\) Guha and Gadgil, 234.
The dramatic treatment of the scene reiterates that there are no easy answers, that all voices have validity. Yet, the form of the novel precludes the view that they have ‘equal’ validity – for the construction, synthesis and juxtapositions of the varied subject positions (including that of the non-human world) suggest that there is no escape from taking responsibility, even if each subject-position requires a different understanding of what ‘responsibility’ means in each case. For Kanai, ‘the horror’ was not just the number of people being killed weekly but also the fact ‘that we can feel the suffering of an animal, but not of human beings’ (248). He is willing to accept that people like him, Indians of his class, are complicit in what he calls ‘genocide’ by ignoring the suffering of the poorest of the poor ‘to curry favor with their Western patrons’, and blames it on people like Piya who disregard human costs while pushing to protect wildlife (248-9). Inadvertently, the tiger becomes a scapegoat, a sacrificial symbol of violence, for the past-and-present sufferings of humans and is implicitly presented as being expendable.21 These macronarratives22 of colonisation addressed by Ghosh in The Hungry Tide, whether of Hamilton’s project or the fate of the tiger in national parks, continue to shift between the repercussions of past human actions and the continued violations. The complexity of guilt in these narratives involve everyone – Piya the foreigner, and Kanai the native – as, in different ways, both are indoctrinated in an education that has its roots in the colonial heritage.

**European Science and Native Agency of Faith**

Science, as employed by the colonisers, and its inherent compulsion to conquer the non-human subject by way of documentation and classification, is a strong theme in The Hungry Tide. The Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcella brevirostris*, the subject of Piya’s research work, was discovered and named in India. To follow in the footsteps of the men of science who had written the earliest scientific records of the river dolphin, is something akin to a pilgrimage for her (188). She visits Kolkata’s Botanical Gardens where naturalist William Roxburgh wrote his famous article on the ‘discovery’ of the world’s first river dolphin and where Roxburgh’s assistant John Anderson adopted an infant Gangetic dolphin that he kept in his bathtub for several weeks. As Piya narrates the story of the race between different naturalists to identify and study the two kinds of dolphins, those that live in fresh water and those that live in sea water, both found to be anatomically similar even though they did not mix, the deeply embedded colonial motive to name in order to claim is foregrounded.

Kanai also shares a similar story of scientific discovery with Piya, that of Henry Piddington, a shipping inspector who invented the word ‘cyclone’. Piddington was the first to insist that the mangroves were protecting Bengal from the fury of the sea by absorbing tidal surges. His prediction that denuding the forests would endanger the whole ecosystem was proven right in a few years when a tidal wave destroyed the British administration’s plans to build a great port in the Sundarbans, an act of nature asserting itself over human agency, and an ominous precursor

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21Huggan and Tiffin 190.
22 Walter D. Mignolo conceives of macronarratives ‘as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies’ without which it would be impossible ‘to displace the “abstract universalism” of modern epistemology and world history.’ The emphasis that this concept of macronarratives places on the connectivity and reciprocity of various local histories is indispensable for any study of colonialism that seeks to be interdisciplinary. See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 22.
of the novel’s climax. The pleasure in anecdotes about great scientific breakthroughs is a clear bond between Piya and Kanai. Given the novel’s detailed recounts of this hagiography of the Heroic Scientist, it would seem key to Ghosh’s novelistic construction. This pleasure is not entirely lost even if, as happens in the novel, nature overturns some of science’s best-laid plans.

Piya clearly sees herself as inheriting and continuing the work of the British naturalists who had found the cetaceans in the Gangetic waters. ‘It had fallen to her to be the first to carry back a report of the current situation and she knew she could not turn back from the responsibility’ (247). Science thereby becomes a personal responsibility. Piya’s contemplation of the ‘silence’ in the years between the work of the colonial men of science and her own efforts expose the dominance of scientific discourses. In the novel, this plays out in the realm of the historical, where recorded and remembered events question the concept of objective scientific truth while privileging social and cultural subjectivities.

For Piya, nonetheless, there is the lure of finding ‘a hypothesis of stunning elegance and economy – a thing of beauty rarely found in the messy domain of mammalian behaviour’ (104). The domain of nature is ‘messy’ because it does not easily serve the empiricist purposes of scientific research. Observing the daily migratory patterns of the dolphins, she is struck by the idea that this might be caused by an adaptation of the species’ behaviour to tidal ecology. Proving such a hypothesis would offer immense possibility for conservation and protection of the species, but Piya’s thoughts also wander to what it would imply for her career, and she imagines herself with a monumental project similar to Jane Goodall or Helene Marsh, ‘so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind’ (105). She is aware that it is these mythologies of discovery, whether Newton or Archimedes, that first drew her to science and that it is not just for the animals that she does what she does (106). However, this quest for professional distinction is not without its pitfalls. ‘I have no home, no money and no prospects … On top of that is the knowledge that what I am doing is more or less futile’ (249). This idea of the futility of human enterprise, especially of scientific projects, gathers momentum towards the end of the novel when the sea takes complete control of the tidal landscape and the need to study nature is replaced by a need to survive it.

As Ghosh pits Piya’s Western scientific training against Fokir’s fisherman’s instincts, it is suggested that she is lost in the habitat of the creature she studies, while Fokir has the advantage of being more integrated with his environment. Flashing cards with dolphin pictures has been Piya’s method of gathering information from local people across the world in order to do her research, all her scientific training falling short without the practical guidance of native informants. While this practice of flashing cards seems innocuous and utilitarian, Ghosh uses this to signal the fact, easily forgotten, that though the novel is in English, few people in the novel can speak it. It may be commented on here though, that Ghosh, in having Fokir simply and passively respond to picture and gestures, is in real danger of simply re-stereotyping the subaltern as being without language and enunciation. Indeed, the construction of the taciturn fisherman is dubious – this is exactly the subject-position which should have been pivotal.

Fokir believes that the dolphins are messengers of Bon Bibi, divine repositories of the secrets of the tides, and his family lore told him that if he learned to follow the dolphins, he would always be able to find fish (254). The difference in their perception and purpose is considerable, as Kanai caustically reminds Piya, ‘What you see as fauna he sees as food’ (222). While Piya continues to track the dolphins and make notes using advanced technology and equipment, Fokir
is busy with his own work of catching crabs, with nothing more than a nylon line weighed down with pieces of tile and fish bone. It is only through a mutual engagement with place that the American cetologist and the Indian fisherman who speak different languages are able to bond; the river that brings them to each other, the tides that carry them to the dolphins, the crocodiles they watch warily, the rainbow formed by the moon that they enjoy together, the mangrove forests they walk through and finally the tidal storm that threatens their existence.

In this context, it is pertinent to consider Ursula H. Heise’s suggestion that, in the face of increasing connections around the world, what is crucial for ecological awareness and environmental ethics is arguably not so much a sense of place as a sense of planet. For postcolonial studies, this would inevitably lead to questioning whose sense of planet is at stake. Heise addresses these concerns of erasure of political and cultural differences by pointing out that identities shaped by region ‘tended to be viewed as oppressive’ while those that are diasporic ‘are more politically progressive.’ In Piya and Fokir’s unspoken empathy, Ghosh is bringing closer these two modes of interacting with the environment, the indigenous wisdom of the subaltern and the scientific sensibilities of the global cosmopolitan, revealing them to be complementary rather than contradictory.

The mythology and oral tradition of Bon Bibi (the goddess of the forest), first explored through Nirmal’s experiences and diary entries, is another conciliatory component of the story. Piya and Kanai encounter it again in the singing of Fokir and during their visits to the shrine of the goddess. This traditional narrative, distinguished by combining elements of both Hindu and Muslim faith, and hence subordinating social differences to pay obeisance to the forces of nature, gives the figure of Bon Bibi dominion over the fate of those living in one half of the mangroves while the other half is reigned over by Dokkin Rai, a demon-king. The cautionary tale against indiscriminate exploitation of nature has been preserved through these archetypes of good and evil. ‘Thus order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance. All was well until human greed intruded to upset this order’ (86). The factor of human greed in the colonisation of nature is a key element of the myth; great suffering caused when people set out to barter their morality for wealth from the forest and redemption coming only from complete surrender to the powers of the goddess, reinstating ‘the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded’ (88). As a song-cycle, this narrative adds to the texture of the novel, almost a parallel to the verses from Rilke’s Duino Elegies that Nirmal continually evokes. Embedded deep into the gathering plotlines of the novel, these resonances of dependence and faith in stories, in poetics, prepares the reader for the elegiac resolution. Kanai translates Fokir’s songs of Bon bibi for Piya – this is a moment in the novel, ripe for novelistic self-reflection. Does Ghosh’s novelisation mirror Kanai’s translation, as a higher order translation of the problems of the Sunderbans for a global audience? However, it would seem that Ghosh declines to give space to this question. Later too, in the novel Kanai reconstructs Nirmal’s diary (a transcription of refugee-narratives) – this device, of indirect reconstructions,

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24 Heise 57.
should have been a moment of reflection on the novel-form, the paucity and elisions of memory and narrative that make any representation of the Sunderbans a fraught exercise. Yet Ghosh, despite evoking techniques that can bring these elisions to the surface, does not mine them to ask questions of the project as a whole – he seems content with a fairly cursory notion of social realism, where all viewpoints are simply presented for the reader on an equalising ontological plane.

The Bon Bibi folklore brings into focus a practice in Indian traditional societies of maintaining an ecological niche, a small wilderness area not tampered with by humans, as in the case of sacred groves. In precolonial India, a diversity of arrangements existed for communal management of forest which included leaving certain portions untouched, religious prescription, and communal sanction. In the Sunderbans, this effort to prevent human intervention in matters of land stems from a respect for the predatory forces. Dokkin Ray is believed to be the god of the tiger in these regions and the villagers in The Hungry Tide do not mention the name of the tiger for fear that doing so will beckon the creature. These mythic renditions of indigenous ecology acknowledge that human interests are protected through subordination to the interests of nature and construct a resistant discourse to colonial notions of ecological management.

**The Rising of the Sea**

Terri Tomsky writes that The Hungry Tide ‘engages the overwhelming question: how should we, as readers and writers, position ourselves in relation to today’s geographical inequalities in spaces that are both conceptually and geographically distant?’ As outsiders to the Sunderbans, Kanai and Piya are more conscious than the local characters of how many overlapping histories have constructed their understanding of this place, but at the same time, their present realities are being constantly moulded by the beauty and unpredictability of the tide country. They are deeply moved by it, and Alexa Weik considers this as a lesson in the novel that ‘affective attachment to place can be a choice: one that binds one both broadly and narrowly to others, and that does not necessarily require nativity or even permanence.’ The affect can nonetheless turn out to be short-lived and evanescent, as Kanai finds out when an altercation with Fokir leaves him alone on an island with the threat of man-eating tigers, leading to an emotional and physical meltdown.

For a man who makes a living from translating languages, Kanai is strangely stripped of all articulation when abandoned in the forest, with that which ‘could not be apprehended or understood’ without words (272). This ‘failure of representation continues to haunt the translator’ for the remainder of the novel. Even as regional cosmopolitan languages struggle with their limitations and becomes subservient to intuition and experience, Kanai finds himself looking into the face of a tiger. He flees from it towards a search party who disbelieve his tiger

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story for lack of supporting evidence. Had he imagined it all? Had his fears taken on a tiger form? Kanai decides to return to Delhi, confessing to Piya that what happened took him out of his element. Piya is soon to find that she is out of her element there too, but her choices are different. In the climax of the novel, when the cyclone charged tide rises from the sea to claim its supremacy over the landscape, human and non-human lives, all their personal histories and collective histories collapse and they find themselves at the mercy of nature that cannot be predicted.

Piya ventures out with Fokir in his small boat to explore one of the routes of the dolphins, unaware that a storm is moving towards them. For the first time since they have been out looking for the dolphins together, Fokir’s instincts seem to be faltering. The dolphins knew something he did not, and he had no access to the warnings put out by the weather office in New Delhi that a cyclone might be heading in their direction. The storm sequence in The Hungry Tide is remarkable, not just for the storytelling and the detailed account of what happens in the eye of the storm, but for projecting the power of nature over even the multiplicity of human narratives. Barely has the storm made its presence felt, when all of Piya’s expensive scientific equipment as well as her painstakingly filled data sheets are ripped off from Kanai’s boat ‘to become a small speck in the inky sky’ (307). A few miles away, Kanai is wading across a small stretch of river when the strong winds knock his uncle Nirmal’s diary out of his hands and it sinks out of sight. The diary represented an act of rebellion against the tyranny of history, the only way of transcribing the experiences of a large group of people who had no avenues to make their voices heard to policy makers. The suppressed history of oppression of the Bangladeshi refugees that Nirmal had wished to record for posterity, his words of idealism and plea for empathy, are all lost in the very tides that he had adored.

This peeling away of different kinds of human records and histories makes a fascinating parallel movement to that of the main action of the tide taking unquestioned control of the physical world. It is not only Nirmal’s notebook and Piya’s data that are destroyed, but also the shrine of Bon Bibi in which Fokir and his people placed so much trust to protect them from the dangers of the tide country. Piya and Fokir watch its bamboo structure go hurtling over their heads, along with clumps of mangroves, as they tie themselves to the branch of a tree. It isn’t long before the storm arrives in full fury. ‘It was as if a city block had suddenly begun to move: the river was like pavement lying at its feet, while its crest reared high above, dwarfing the tallest trees’ (315). Piya and Fokir emerge from this wave to see other life forms that have been moving with the eye of the storm, like the tired white bird that Piya picks up and the tiger that pulls itself out of the water a few hundred yards away. Human, bird, and animal, all are equally battered by the storm, equally desperate to survive. Suddenly all constructed hierarchies of life forms become redundant. Instead there is the connection of life. ‘Without blinking, the tiger watched them for several minutes; during this time it made no movement other than to twitch its tail. She could imagine that if she had been able to put a hand on its coat, she would have been able to feel the pounding of its heart’ (321). The storm erases differences between species. Tied to each other and to the branch of a tree, Piya and Fokir are now one entity, a highly diminished one in comparison to the power of the wind and water. ‘It was as if the storm had given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one’ (321). This symbolic sexual union reinforces the propensity of nature to act as a leveller, marginalising the differences in their upbringings, and encapsulating their different realms of expertise into a

hybridisation of knowledge. But the storm that fuses their lives also has the power to deny it to them. An uprooted stump hits Fokir as the storm returns from the opposite direction. There is nothing Piya can do except hold a bottle of water to his lips as he is dying and try to find the words to tell him how richly he was loved. The storm’s gift, in Mukherjee’s reading, ‘is Fokir’s death and the birth in Piya of a sense of place, the final abandoning of the “field”.’ The cyclone serves as a complex node of narrative closure. Unlike the tiger, here, the non-human truly cannot be tamed, and is destructive in a profound way – Piya’s notes are lost, Nirmal’s diary sinks in the water, Fokir dies. The healing of the wound provides the only sort of tentative closure that a novel like this can sustain – Piya strives to continue the project in Fokir’s name, and Kanai decides to re-create Nirmal’s diary from memory. The novelistic death of the subaltern in this instance is deeply unsatisfying – Ghosh seems to have preferred the neatness of mourning, for the ambivalence of the fisherman’s articulations, anger, resistance and politics.

The traditional, colonial, and ecological narratives about the Sunderbans that the tide had ripped through and threatened to completely obliterate are being resurrected and rewritten with a new wisdom. The close encounter with the destruction of nature has made an indelible impact on the characters, and they continue to engage with and aspire for a more embodied experience of place.

In *The Hungry Tide*, which consciously grapples with colonial impact and ecological consciousness, the environmental imagination becomes a causeway to ‘rethink oppositions between bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism, between transcendentalism and transnationalism, between an ethics of place and the experience of displacement.’ For Ghosh, the novel takes the form of the historical narrative, one which reflects developmental rationality as the predominant colonising force over nature, wherein ‘there is no place so remote as to escape the flood of history’ (65). The only available means to access, retell and decolonise nature is consequently through the fertile reciprocity of historical narratives and environmental imaginaries.

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30 Mukherjee, ‘Surfing’ 156.
31 Nixon 247.