

## Worlds Apart: Nam Le's *The Boat* and Ali Alizadeh's *Transactions*

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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).<sup>1</sup> 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 metafictional 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 metafictional story about a writer called Nam Le attempting to finish his final creative writing project.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> After the opening story's 'clever, if diaphanous, frame'<sup>4</sup> the book's remaining chapters deliver six of these global stories (without the vampires), set in places like coastal Australia, Columbia's Medellín

<sup>1</sup> Nam Le, *The Boat* (NY: Knopf, 2008), Ali Alizadeh, *Transactions* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2013), Maxine Beneba-Clarke, *Foreign Soil* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2014), Ceridwen Dovey *Only the Animals* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2014). There are other collections of short stories that traverse sections of globe and yet they wear their international border crossing more lightly. These include Jennifer Mills' *The Rest is Weight* (St Lucia: UQP, 2012) (moving from Central Australia to China and Mexico), Ryan O'Neill's *The Weight of a Human Heart* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012) (with its forays into Africa), Jess Huon's *The Dark Wet* (Atarmon: Giramondo, 2011) (which moves from Melbourne to Perth to Darwin to San Francisco to Varanasi), and Paddy O'Reilly's *The End of the World* (St Lucia: UQP, 2007) (flicking between Australia and Japan).

<sup>2</sup> Le, *The Boat* 6.

<sup>3</sup> Le, *The Boat* 10.

<sup>4</sup> Antoine Wilson, 'Across Seven Seas', *Los Angeles Times*, 6 July 2008, accessed 12 May 2010 <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul06/books/bk-namle6>

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.’<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> It portrays, in the author’s words, ‘an interconnected landscape of terror and exploitation ... with lots of sex and violence.’<sup>7</sup> Gay Lynch describes it as ‘part thriller, part realist drama, part satire, part diatribe against global capitalism and every other patriarchal ism.’<sup>8</sup> 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,’<sup>9</sup> Walter Mason observes its ‘brutish real world buffoonery,’<sup>10</sup> and Elizabeth Bryer notes that within *Transactions* humans become ‘expendable commodities.’<sup>11</sup> 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*).<sup>12</sup> 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).<sup>13</sup> 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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<sup>5</sup> Ken Gelder, ‘Proximate Reading’, *JASAL Special Issue: Common Readers and Cultural Critics* (2010) 9, accessed 1 March 2010 <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/1535/2082>

<sup>6</sup> Ali Alizadeh, *Transactions* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Ali Alizadeh and Maxine Beneba-Clarke, ‘Speaking Out’, Sydney Writers’ Festival Panel, 25 May 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Gay Lynch, ‘Book Reviews: *Transactions* by Ali Alizadeh’, *Transnational Literature* Vol. 6 no. 2, May 2014, accessed 25 May 2014 <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

<sup>9</sup> Jay Daniel Thompson, ‘[Review of] *Transactions* by Ali Alizadeh’, *Australian Book Review* July-August 2013, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Mason, ‘[Review of] Ali Alizadeh *Transactions*’, *Newtown Review of Books* 24 October 2013, 25 May 2014 <http://newtownreviewofbooks.com.au/2013/10/24/ali-alizadeh-transactions-reviewed-by-walter-mason/>

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Bryer, ‘Elizabeth Bryer reviews *Transactions* by Ali Alizadeh’, *Mascara Literary Review* no. 14 December 2013, accessed 6 February 2014 <http://mascarareview.com/elizabeth-bryer-reviews-transactions-by-ali-alizadeh/>

<sup>12</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 45, 13, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Ali Alizadeh, *The New Angel* (Yarraville: Transit Lounge, 2008).

allowed to have one.<sup>14</sup> Could this, at least from one perspective, have been the fate of *The New Angel* as an Iranian-Australian novel published during the year of *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 *The Boat*'s phenomenal success (I have outlined some of them elsewhere).<sup>15</sup> 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, *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).<sup>16</sup> 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 *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 *The New Angel* is replaced by Fereshteh the violent anti-capitalist avenging angel in *Transactions*. Furthermore, considering Alizadeh's *Transactions* as a rejoinder to Le's transnational high literary cosmopolitanism or a type of anti-*Boat*, makes this situation even more interesting. For it is clear that Alizadeh's work criticises the particular version of the globalised world that *The Boat* presents. The strident and consistently polemical tone of *Transactions* stands in binary opposition to the empathic realism of *The Boat*. To put it bluntly, *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.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Homer the Great', *The Simpsons*, season 6 episode 12, directed by Jim Reardon, written by John Swartzwelder, performed by Daniel Castellana (emphasis mine).

<sup>15</sup> Lachlan Brown, 'Globalised Fiction Becomes a Fact: Nam Le Launches *The Boat*' in *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, *The World Republic of Letters* translated by M. B. DeBevoise [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004]).

<sup>16</sup> Alizadeh, *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'<sup>17</sup> stories and events next to each with 'no explanation for their proximity.'<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> But for Alizadeh this is precisely the point.<sup>22</sup> 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

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Helm, 'A Boat Strong and True; A World of Stories from a Son of Vietnam', *The Edmonton Journal* 28 May 2008, accessed 12 May 2010

<http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.csu.edu.au/docview/253551781?accountid=10344>

<sup>18</sup> Gelder 11.

<sup>19</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'A World of Stories from a Son of Vietnam.' *New York Times*, 13 May 2008, accessed 24 April 2014 [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/books/13kaku.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/books/13kaku.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>20</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 148.

<sup>21</sup> John Scheckter, '[Review of] Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries*,' *Antipodes*, vol. 28 no. 1 (2014) 237-8.

<sup>22</sup> When asked about the book's structure in an interview with Sky Kirkham, Alizadeh speaks of *Transactions* existing in the line of Menippean satire, but also as a 'continuous fictional meditation' on the Tarot. Sky Kirkham, 'Ali Alizadeh Interview,' *4ZZZFM*, 21 July 2013, accessed 16 October 2014, <http://zedbookclub.com/?p=1016>

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.<sup>23</sup> The 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.<sup>24</sup>

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'.<sup>25</sup> 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').<sup>26</sup> Only the story's edges are haunted by tales of Asian poachers.<sup>27</sup> 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 Medellín slums.<sup>28</sup>

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'.<sup>29</sup> 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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<sup>23</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions*, 46ff, 132ff, 155-157.

<sup>24</sup> 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>

<sup>25</sup> Peter Craven, 'On Nam Le', *Heat* 17 (2008) 71-72.

<sup>26</sup> Le, *The Boat* 95.

<sup>27</sup> Le, *The Boat* 125.

<sup>28</sup> Le, *The Boat* 29-31, 37.

<sup>29</sup> Le, *The Boat* 178, 180.

Netherlands and broadcast into Iran via shortwave radio.<sup>30</sup> ‘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’,<sup>31</sup> 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’.<sup>32</sup> 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’.<sup>33</sup> 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.’<sup>34</sup> 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.’<sup>35</sup> 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).<sup>36</sup> 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’.<sup>37</sup> Almost all of the stories in *The Boat* abide by these kinds of injunctions, resulting in what Hari Kunzru labels ‘well wrought’ fiction.<sup>38</sup> 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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<sup>30</sup> Le, *The Boat* 191.

<sup>31</sup> Le, *The Boat* 186.

<sup>32</sup> Le, *The Boat* 222-223.

<sup>33</sup> Lachlan Brown, ‘“... An Asian Dummy with an Aussie Voice”: Ventriloquism and Authenticity in Nam Le’s *The Boat* and Tim Winton’s *The Turning*’, *JASAL*, vol. 14 no. 3 (2014) 4, accessed 10 November 2014, <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/3153/4092>

<sup>34</sup> Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume VI: Time Regained* translated by Andreas Mayor and Terence Kilmartin, (New York: Modern Library, 2003) 278.

<sup>35</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Letters To Children* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 64.

<sup>36</sup> F.R. Leavis, ‘Reality and Sincerity’, *A Selection from Scrutiny* (Cambridge University Press, 1968) 252, quoted in Alex Segal, ‘Wittgenstein, Ethics and Literature,’ paper delivered at Text13 conference, Charles Sturt University, 29 September 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Leavis (via Segal), 252.

<sup>38</sup> Hari Kunzru, ‘Outside Ethnicity’, *New York Times*, 8 June 2008, accessed 25 June 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/books/review/Kunzru-t.html>

lake, distant firecrackers) testifies to the way that Le's prose can be seen as suggestive and redolent within a particular aesthetic paradigm.<sup>39</sup>

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 the 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 *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'.<sup>40</sup> The task of literature, from this perspective, involves 'presenting the reader with otherness and thereby widening his or her narrow scope'.<sup>41</sup> 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'.<sup>42</sup> 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 ...?<sup>43</sup>

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 *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 *Transactions* is judgmentalism.<sup>44</sup> This is perhaps fitting in a book in which

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Jose, 'Aporetic Australia in *The White Tiger*, *The Boat* and *The Hamilton Case*,' *JASAL* vol. 12 no. 2 (2012) 5, accessed 25 June 2014 <http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/view/2303/3197>

<sup>40</sup> David Palumbo-Liu, *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012) 21.

<sup>41</sup> Palumbo-Liu 22.

<sup>42</sup> Palumbo-Liu 26.

<sup>43</sup> Nam Le and Sophie Cunningham, 'Interview: The Friction Zone, Sophie Cunningham talks to Nam Le,' *Meanjin*, vol. 68 no. 1 (2009) 137.

<sup>44</sup> 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 *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

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’.<sup>45</sup> Passengers ‘sigh with derision and impatience’, because they know their burgers will not bring them satisfaction.<sup>46</sup> Undocumented migrant cleaners carry ‘buckets brimming with a fusion of urine, liquefied faeces and industrial disinfectants from one toilet to the next’.<sup>47</sup> 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’.<sup>48</sup> Severe and extreme judgments pour out of characters every few pages (‘Alizadeh does not allow his cast of zealots to prevaricate’ Lynch notes<sup>49</sup>). The assassin writes to her mother about how the desires of ‘this world’s wretched occupiers’ have ‘turned the world into a grotesque wasteland’.<sup>50</sup> 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]’.<sup>51</sup> 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 asshole academic critic editor of a worthless journal? Oh proletarian poet. People’s poet. Why give a fuck?’<sup>52</sup> 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’.<sup>53</sup> 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’.<sup>54</sup> On two occasions characters note their own preachiness<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.

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bombing of a Palestinian police station, which he ‘processes’ through anal intercourse with a Ukrainian Jewish prostitute, 51-56)

<sup>45</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 2.

<sup>46</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 2.

<sup>47</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 2.

<sup>48</sup> Alizadeh, *Transaction*, 29, 175, 182, 184, 195.

<sup>49</sup> Lynch.

<sup>50</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 10.

<sup>51</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 27.

<sup>52</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 83.

<sup>53</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 97.

<sup>54</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 177.

<sup>55</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 10, 198.

<sup>56</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 25, 31-32, 109-110, 191, 200.

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'<sup>57</sup>), 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'.<sup>58</sup> 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'.<sup>59</sup> 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'.<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup> 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.'<sup>62</sup>

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'.<sup>63</sup> 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:

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<sup>57</sup> Le, *The Boat* 170.

<sup>58</sup> Ali Alizadeh, 'What I'm Reading – Ali Alizadeh,' *Meanjin*, 10 November 2014, accessed 14 November 2014, <http://meanjin.com.au/blog/post/what-i-m-readingali-alizadeh/>

<sup>59</sup> Fiona Wright, 'Listen,' *Sydney Review of Books*, 25 June 2014, accessed 1 July 2014 <http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/foreign-soil-maxine-beneba-clarke/>

<sup>60</sup> Wright.

<sup>61</sup> Dan Brown's prologue begins with these words: 'Renowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's grand gallery.' Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Anchor Books 2009) 3.

<sup>62</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 64, 116, 133, 153.

<sup>63</sup> Francesca Sasnaitis, 'Humiliations Accrue', *Sydney Review of Books*, 8 October 2013, accessed 24 June 2014 <http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/humiliations-accrue/>

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.<sup>64</sup>

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.<sup>65</sup> It would appear that the author, to use the words of the book's rich Emirati heiress, doesn't 'Give a Flyer's Fuck'<sup>66</sup> (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*.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup>

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.'<sup>69</sup> 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.'<sup>70</sup> Dr. Jamal Abulqaader judges the same work highly because it 'represents incontrovertible universal values such as family, respect, hard work and religion.'<sup>71</sup> Earlier in a gender inverted version of *Medea*, the male actor recites the following lines after he strips down to a sequined g-string and dances for his wife:

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<sup>64</sup> Margaret Simons, 'The Ties that Bind,' *Griffith Review* no. 8 (Winter 2005) 14.

<sup>65</sup> Alizadeh would no doubt be aware of such 'rules,' given that he teaches creative writing at Monash University.

<sup>66</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 45.

<sup>67</sup> Stinson, Emmett, 'In the Same Boat', *Sydney Review of Books*, 26 March 2013, accessed 5 May 2013 <http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/in-the-same-boat/>

<sup>68</sup> 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>

<sup>69</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 19.

<sup>70</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions* 207.

<sup>71</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions*, 210.

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?<sup>72</sup>

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.<sup>73</sup> 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'.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup>

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'.<sup>76</sup> As a result *Transactions* becomes a blunt example of Rancière's 'Dissensus': 'the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself.'<sup>77</sup> 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*.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Alizadeh, *Transactions*, 170.

<sup>73</sup> Gelder 10 and Jose 5.

<sup>74</sup> Dave Tacon, 'Finding a Home in Fiction', *The Age*, 31 October 2009, accessed 12 May 2010

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/books/finding-a-home-in-fiction/2009/10/30/1256835150139.html>

<sup>75</sup> Ali Alizadeh and Maxine Beneba-Clarke, 'Speaking Out' (emphasis mine).

<sup>76</sup> Jacques Rancière, trans. Stephen Corcoran, 'Ten Theses on Politics' in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010) 38.

<sup>77</sup> Rancière, 'Ten Thesis on Politics' 38.

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Rancière, trans. Todd May, *Chronique des temps consensuels* (Paris: Seuil, 2005) 8 in Todd May, '[Review of] Jacques Rancière *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*,' *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 1 July 2010, accessed 20 June 2014 <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24403-dissensus-on-politics-and-aesthetics/> (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.<sup>79</sup>

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.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Todd May, '[Review of] Jacques Rancière *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*,' *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 1 July 2010, accessed 20 June 2014 <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24403-dissensus-on-politics-and-aesthetics/>

<sup>80</sup> 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'.