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Spoiling suspense? Anticipatory structures as creative narrative devices in Tabish Khair’s diasporic fiction

Esterino Adami

‘The beginning is simple to mark.’

Abstract

Narrative texts often aim to generate suspense, or similar type of involvement, in order to enhance plot developments through the delay or withdrawal of explicit information, or the use of unreliable characters. There are also cases, however, in which the flow of narrative progression is deliberately broken and punctuated by anticipatory elements that introduce, hint at or suggest future events, situations, and characters. My aim in this paper is to examine how a wide range of proleptic, cataphoric and other elements can function as creative anticipatory structures for the construction of fictional discourse, and I will focus on a recent diasporic novel, How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position by Tabish Khair (2012), which extensively, almost obsessively, employs such devices.

Functioning as clues that intersect narratorial levels and call for attention paradoxically à rebours, anticipatory structures are often realised via the use of different items such as mental process verbs, deictic shifts and split selves. The textual effects they generate significantly contribute to the presentation of the narrator’s point of view, but also allow the author to address loaded questions, for example the ideological mixing of the ‘threat’ and the ‘token’ of otherness in our anxious postmodern age. From a methodological point of view, I will adopt and adapt a range of different tools from the fields of postcolonial studies, stylistics, narratology and pragmatics to investigate Khair’s novel.

Keywords: anticipatory narrative structures, prolepsis, Tabish Khair, diasporic fiction

1. Introduction

One of the main preoccupations of narrative texts is not only to catch the reader’s attention and generate involvement in the reading process in terms of plot development, characters constructions or other structural aspects, but also to maintain it constantly, as many scholars in literary discourse, stylistics and narratology have pointed out. There may also be cases in which the flow of narrative progression is deliberately manipulated and punctuated by elements that somehow introduce, hint at or suggest future events and situations impinging on the plot, and to a certain extent spoil the ‘surprise effect’ that normally fuels the construction of the story. Why should an author deliberately do this, considering that literary interest typically emerges from a


gradual accumulation of narrative ‘bits and pieces’ combined with informational blanks? My paper intends to examine how a wide range of proleptic, cataphoric and other resources can function as anticipatory narrative structures for building up creative fictional discourse both locally and globally in the text. As a case study, I will look at a recent diasporic novel, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position*, by Denmark-based South Asian author Tabish Khair, originally published in 2012.\(^3\)

In broad terms, anticipation can be seen as a benchmark element that plays a salient role in the reading process, as demonstrated by recent narratological, cognitive and neuropsychological studies.\(^4\) Operating as clues that intersect different textual levels and call for attention to narrative order, anticipatory structures are often realised via different strategies, encompassing the use of mental process verbs, deictic shifts and even ‘split selves’. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates stylistics, narratology and postcolonial discourse, I argue that these structures allow the author not only to modulate the narrator’s idiosyncratic perception, but also to provokingly handle controversial themes such as the threat from the ‘other’ and to challenge the reader in de/constructing specific stereotypes, for instance the notion of the ‘enemy’ as put forward by Umberto Eco, which I will use later in the article.\(^5\) In reality, in the novel the sense of anticipation is cunningly employed in balance with retrospection, so that it surfaces discreetly (though constantly) and may remain largely unnoticed. The text under discussion covers a variety of sensitive and dramatic topics, including the discussion of fundamentalism, the danger of terrorism and the debate on transnational identity in the globalised world, but, while other studies offer critical readings of the entire work,\(^6\) here I will mainly concentrate on the effects triggered by textual structures.

2. Constructing plot order: now and then

In his ground-breaking volume on narratology,\(^7\) Genette shows how it is possible for authors to modify the chronological development of the plot by shifting backward and forward the representation of the action with the aid of anachronies, defined as ‘the various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative’.\(^8\) The categories of flashback (or ‘retrospection’) and flash-forward, also termed foreshadowing (or ‘anticipation’), are typically used to illustrate such contrastive movements. Sometimes these are labelled respectively as analepsis and prolepsis, with the former referring to a shift from a narratorial ‘now-moment’ to a

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\(^3\) Tabish Khair, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (London: Corsair, 2012). Subsequent in-text citations from this text are included parenthetically with abbreviation HTFIT and page number.


\(^8\) Genette 36.

'then-moment', whereas the latter highlights the contrast between a 'future-moment' against the backdrop of a 'now-moment'. Genette also recognises in particular the centrality, and potential to this respect, of the narrating character, since

the ‘first-person’ narrative lends itself better than any other to anticipation, by the very fact of its avowedly retrospective character, which authorizes the narrator to allude to the future and in particular to his present situation, for these to extent form part of his role.9

Anticipation can occasionally operate via the use of prophetic modal operator ‘will’10 as in the classic example by W. Yeats’ lines ‘I know that I shall meet my fate / somewhere above the clouds above’, which spell out an act of foreseeing the future. Clearly, the order in which events are narrated is fundamental to the general atmosphere of a fictional work, and authors exploit it in toto to generate interest and implicitly anticipation in the readers, who as a result are led to continue reading whilst cognitively processing the text they are dealing with. It is also worth considering that the very idea of time in fiction is not monolithic or unidirectional, as Fludernik comments:

we are all tempted to see time as an objective, measurable and unambiguous category that can be pictured as a dotted line progressing from past to future. However, narrative temporality makes apparent the complex interrelationship of different types, or orders, of temporality.11

Anticipation, furthermore, often works in tandem with other narrative strategies such as delays and gaps,12 which may contribute to the orchestration of the storyline since they respectively postpone the distribution of information and/or deliberately leave some absence in the narrative discourse. These techniques also operate in the Khair novel and support the general atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of clarity, which in a certain measure is typical in much diasporic literature that deals with the interconnected themes of intolerance, rejection and otherness juxtaposed with the irruption of terrorism, for example with the instance of Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007).13

In the Western tradition, there seems to be a preference for a linear temporal order in which the story unfolds progressively, with some analeptic passages for the construction of suspense and surprise. In particular, this narrative typology is attested by those genres that fully exploit the readers’ expectations: detective fiction, for example, tends to rely on a progressive accretion of clues and elements that cumulatively lead to the resolution of the mystery, sometimes by offering a twist in the tale, as notably occurs in Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926) for example. When an author decides to break the traditional sequencing of a story, this operation affects the entire negotiation between text and reader, as it provocingly challenges natural expectations and consequential interpretations.14

9 Genette 67.  
12 Rimmon-Kenan 125-129; Wales 201.  
Tabish Khair cunningly manipulates the chronological piecing together of his novel in a subtle way through the ‘laddish’ and subjective voice of a first-person homodiegetic narrator. However, rather than openly formulating anticipation of the storyline, for example via prophetic affirmations (‘I know this will happen’, ‘Because of the action of X, this result will emerge’ and so forth), he intersperses clues that sideways collaborate to predict, at least partially, the climax of the story. The writer’s use of anticipation, in reality, functions in delicate balance with other levels of time and narration, so that the readers follow the narrator in his ‘now-time’ and enter a story-world, narrated in the standard past tense (a ‘past-time’), in which however certain episodes conjure up future events, or a ‘more recent past’, within a past context. As Katie Wales holds, ‘in our reading there is a double movement of prolepsis and analepsis: the constant anticipation of the movement when, looking back, everything falls into place’ and the final outcome is a complex network that organises and articulates the author’s narrative discourse of diaspora, migrancy and globalisation in its various chronological segments.

3. Introducing the novel

I will now briefly introduce How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position, a diasporic novel written by author and academic scholar Tabish Khair, which from the very title intertwines a range of sensitive topics and pragmatically functions as a kind of face-threatening act, because it provokingly alludes to religion, terrorism, sex and other complex issues and as such it explicitly aims to discuss a specific set of themes, motifs and atmospheres. Incorporating some biographical references, i.e. some traits of the narrator are actually shared by or at least similar to Khair’s personality, the novel pivots around three main characters from the Indian subcontinent who for various reasons end up sharing a flat in the Danish town of Aarhus: the unnamed narrator, a young Pakistani academic working in the humanities, Ravi, a flamboyant Hindu intellectual, and Karim, an Indian Muslim who works as a taxi driver.

Whilst the first two characters tend to have a rather secular, almost bourgeois vision, the latter strictly follows the precepts of Islam, while he also keeps receiving mysterious phone calls, which from the very beginning of the story arouse doubts in his flatmates and in the readers as well. These sensations of uneasiness and dubiousness underpin the threat of terrorism, emerging and developing within diasporic communities in the West. Indeed, Al-wazedi coins the label ‘homegrown terrorism’ to designate this kind of violence, which ‘morphs from the complex international plots to small-scale attacks carried out by individuals located within US, UK and Denmark’ and which amplifies fears, diffidence and shock among people, as the recent bombings in Europe have shown.

The puzzling figure of Karim is fictionally and physiognomically built with specific clues to alert both the other characters and the readers, although some of these signs are depicted in a nearly parodic manner. Let us consider for example the indexing element of the beard: ‘His beard fooled Ravi into thinking that Karim was from Pakistan, like me, or Afghanistan, like the Italians in our favourite Italian pizzeria, Milano, on Borgmester Erik Skous Allé’ (HTF 5). In the quotation, the very notion of cultural belonging and roots are ironically (and bitterly) elaborated, with the inner message that somatic features can be shared by various national

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15 Wales 378.
16 Black 74-76.
18 Al-wazedi 168.
groups rather than being unique stigmatising features, often marked by prejudice and stereotype. Other aspects, however, are designed to convey or suggest specific traditional connotations.

With regard to Karim’s eyes, the narrator comments that he ‘could never determine if the darkened edges were natural or due to the application of kohl that, though uncommon now, was once widely used by men in north India’ (HTFT 7). A mixture of various characteristics, based on both difference and similarity in social, geographical and religious terms, is attached to Karim and permits the discussion of many intercultural questions.

Placing the dynamics of the relationship among the three characters within a wider context in which fear, prejudice, and the echo of terrorist attacks are coterminous and often mixed, the unfolding of the narrative will progressively instil doubts about identity and increase suspiciousness. At the same time, according to Chun Fu,

the situation presented in the story through three differently placed immigrant characters can be universalized. It brings forth various combinations, permutations and possibilities out of human dilemma of keeping one’s identity intact yet simultaneously being in an acceptable relationship with the new society.¹⁹

The novel therefore aims to discuss a broader framework of cultural, social and political confrontations, including the personal dimensions of sentiments.²⁰

4. Anticipatory structures in Khair’s novel

Tabish Khair cleverly expands on the sense of anticipation by using a variety of devices that work in a double manner: on the one hand they target the reader to produce certain expectations and on the other they manipulate the levels of fabula and sjuzet, i.e. story and discourse. In other words, the force of prolepsis lies in the fact that it

serves as a foregrounding device, flagging it as an invitation to speculate. Not only does it positively invite predictive inferences by cueing a future state of the narrative, there is a strong pragmatic implicature that it is important to know this information now, not later.²¹

These anticipatory triggers may take a plurality of forms and functions, from chapter headings to phrases and sentences, from time adverbial expressions to modality and mental activity verbs. Probably the first indicator is the title of the opening chapter, ‘Prolegomenon to a Plot’, which speculates on the intertwined acts of narrating a story and arranging events chronologically, but which also seems to elicit predictions about future developments and to operate as a proleptic ‘amplificatory framework.’ In fact, the Greek-rooted lexeme indicates a type of prefatory observation, but in reality the etymology of the term covers a procedure of anticipation because it represents the neuter passive participle of prolegein, ‘to say beforehand’, from pro ‘before’ and legein, ‘to say’, and thus the linear and progressive order is disrupted and foregrounded to attract the readers’ attention.

This sophisticated item, which however somehow hides its ideological power, endorses the meaning of anticipation and expectation that will run throughout the whole novel, following the contention that ‘re-ordered chronology teases the reader, involving us more closely in the text’.²²

¹⁹ Chun 146.
²² Black 44.
In this chapter, the nameless narrating character recalls the advice about writing he had received from a former girlfriend, who suggested ‘always begin in medias res’ (HTF 1) and thus he continues:

Having set myself the task of providing a full account of the events that have exercised considerable media attention in Denmark in recent months and that involved me, though not mentioned by name, I now wish that I had paid more attention to her words. (HTF 1)

In spite of its apparent simplicity the final part of the quotation is rich in implied meanings and intentions. Through a volitive verb expressing deontic modality (wish), the subject in a specific narrating ‘now-time’ looks back to a narrated ‘past-time’ and from there he somehow foresees the future by suggesting that ‘something’ was bound to happen in a kind of ‘middle-time’, syntactically cued by the use of past perfect (‘had paid’). From a pragmatic perspective, this tense and aspect signal a sort of aftermath, namely ‘the time – however long it may be – during which the event or state seems to continue to have consequences’, hence the doubts and uneasy feeling that haunt the narrating character. Furthermore, two other elements contribute to the creation of this type of sensation: the intensifying, evaluative and attention-getting adjective ‘considerable’ and the place deictical ‘Denmark’, which very easily the reader will mentally associate with the recent cases of religion-related abusive cartoons and shootings in the Scandinavian area, along with a generalised feeling of xenophobia spreading in Europe and in the world. The Nordic reference thus triggers echoes of tension and instability (i.e. the case of the controversial 2005 Danish cartoons), but also might suggest and memories of attacks and fear (the bombings that took place in Norway in 2011).

The occurrence of time expressions such as ‘later’, ‘later on’, ‘in my memory’, ‘recollection’ and ‘in retrospection’ is statistically salient, and generally these function through paradox because even if they technically point back to some past context, often emphasised by anaphoric repetition, in reality from the past they orientate the prediction for the future within a past context. What operates here is an almost contradictory mechanism that linguistically shapes the mystery of the story since ‘on the one hand, it seems to be pushing toward a solution, while on the other it endeavours to maintain the enigma as long as possible in order to secure its own existence’. These structures anticipate at least a portion of the narrative, and in doing thus they ideologically try to persuade the reader to guide (or confound) their comprehension. This is a selection of examples of how such elements function in the text:

In later months, we would get used to such sudden disappearances by Karim Bhai. (HTF 22)

But the second kind of phone call was different and much rarer. So rare that we paid it sufficient attention only in retrospect, when suspicion left us with no choice. (HTF 32)

Later, when I mentioned these calls to the police, the interrogating officer looked visibly pleased. (HTF 33)

I mentioned this to the police officer later on. (HTF 35)

Karim, I realize in retrospect, was tense and nervous. (HTF 169)

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24 Rimmon-Kenan 126.
These devices activate a series of deictic temporal shifts so that they manoeuvre the accessibility of information for the reader and the development of self-awareness, or they may even attribute a type of ‘split self’ to the narrator, a kind of double perspective to a certain degree.

It is worth repeating that the triggers here considered generate this perspective along with other stylistic constructions, in particular those that refer to memory processes, which depend on the mental capacity of the speaking subject (and implicitly the reader) to reconstruct and rearrange the succession of episodes into a logical chain of events, and which to a certain extent may produce ambiguity and uncertainty. Consequently, as the narrator frequently offers metatextual reflections on his story, he also seems to disclaim responsibility for reliability and, in this fashion, his (sometimes partly) vague storytelling will anchor or orientate the reader’s viewpoint and schemata.

Structurally, the sense of anticipation may also be suggested by the use of either verbs or nominal phrases expressing mental cognition processes and states, indicating not only the workings of memory but also its possible fallacies and conscious or unconscious reconfigurations. I will now take into consideration some examples and will begin with the use of verbs describing psychological activity:

- Of course, I might have imagined this later on; at that moment, annotating my lecture on Gulliver’s Travels, I did not really pay them too much attention. (HTFIT 61)
- What else? What else do I recall from that period? The torrent of the past seeps the sieves of our memories and we clutch at the silt that sticks, trusting that it contains gold. Perhaps it does; perhaps not. (HTFIT 115)
- What you might not recall is that in November a small postscript – almost unreported by the media – had been added to this tragedy. (HTFIT 133)

Semantically the verbs here employed indicate specific cognitive activities that by crossing past and future imply different degrees of self-awareness of the speaking subject (then/now) and therefore impinge on linear storytelling by offering a kind of anti-climax. In other words, to construct a narrative, which is typically rendered in a past tense, the narrator cumulatively uses verb forms and other textual means that from the beginning allude paradoxically to the final resolution of the events and therefore depart from chronological order. In the third extract, for example, the verb ‘recall’ working with a negative modal item (‘might not’) foregrounds a specific detail introduced by the cataphoric element ‘what’ which will resonate in the readers’ mind as they continue navigating in the story-world.

The same type of effect may be generated by another grammatical category, i.e. nominal expressions (also in figurative terms) referring to time. Strategically these noun phrases are often embedded in rhetorical questions, which thanks to their ontological power further emphasise the obfuscation of borders between past and future, as shown by the following quotation:

- We still had a lot to discover, and not least about Karim Bhai. Why does this memory come back to me, almost entirely, exactly in this part of my attempt to recollect and understand what really happened to all of us? (HTFIT 80).

Of course the exact meaning of ‘this memory’ can be inferred only by the support provided by context and co-text, but the recourse to such a lexically compact and semantically echoing expression displays a kind of ‘iconising’ function, since it draws the readers’ attention to an apparently plain point. In this fashion it questions the distance between the two narratorial levels
(narrated time and narrating time) and signals the incursion of the future into the textual unfolding of the past, because it brings to light the semi-transparent micro-elements that proleptically have to be taken into account for the general comprehension of the story. As a matter of fact, it is through these stratagems that the entire novel builds up a sense of ambiguity, suspicion, and obsession concerning the idea of transnational identity, its perceptions and its possible forms of otherness against the backdrop of Western society, while provocingly it also projects the schema of the ‘orientalised’ migrant who ‘has to be’ an enemy and a terrorist, in Eco’s definition, because of their physical/cultural/symbolic alterity.

The examples discussed above show how anticipation is textually constructed, but it might be argued that it also resides in the narrator’s ‘split self’, namely the situation in which the speaking agent seems to experience a twofold perspective: self 1 presenting the story and self 2 as an earlier version of the subject immersed in the narrated story-world. In general, this binary positioning is frequent in first-person narrative texts because the narrator in some ways is inclined to manifest a certain change from his original position and thus advocates the presence of two, at least partially separate, selves. As Catherine Emmott notices, the instantiation of split self characteristically ‘occurs at times of personal crisis’, and this modality ‘reflects the sense of fragmentation of identity in postmodern society’. The nameless protagonist, indeed, has to face a personal and professional crisis (which may mirror aspects of Khair’s real experience) and approaches writing also as a therapeutic tool to elaborate on and come to terms with the many facets of his life, including the mysterious matter with Karim, and his love affair with a woman nicknamed Ms Marx, but he also questions how the sense of identity filters through our perception of time, with the result of a dual point of view:

It was not the first time I wondered at the difference between what we seem to be and what we are to ourselves. Or is this too something that I think of now, penning down this account with all the advantages of hindsight? (HTFIT 79)

It strikes me that I am probably letting my current state of knowledge influence my narrative of those weeks to some extent. (HTFIT 100)

Both citations reveal how the complex and dialogic interplay of narratorial levels and selves constitutes the backbone of the entire novel inasmuch as the narrating voice induces readers to take up certain interpretive clues as anticipation-building elements. With the excuse of writing a biographical account of certain events, the nameless narrator brings to the fore the issue of how experience may affect or revise our understanding of reality. Of course the narrator’s split self 2 (in the narrated story) does not know the entire story but, because his speech is juxtaposed with or influenced by the narrator’s split self 1 (the narrating character), he naturally tends to insert some forms of narrative anticipation.

This articulated system of referencing is organised via deictic shifts that signal different degrees of consciousness for the narrator, so that in the first quotation the initial speaking ‘I’ using a past tense (‘was not/wondered’) is contrasted with a different version of the same individual who contemplates his current reality through the use of present tense with a time adverb (‘I think of now’). Likewise, the second quotation illustrates the splitting of the self, with

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26 Emmott 153.
a confessional statement in which the narrator acknowledges his amplification of the story with the aid of opposing parallel structures (‘my current’ / ‘those weeks’) that engender anticipation. In both cases, the final outcome is a dialogic connection between the two selves and as Emmott points out ‘both the perceiving self and the perceived self need to be included in a dynamic representation’. In this framework, anticipation is a meaningful cognitive concept as long as something that is going to happen is assessed, therefore focusing on two time levels, a crystallised ‘now’ and the ‘future’ possible world, or two different selves with their corresponding views.

5. Concluding remarks: spoiling suspense and strengthening stereotypes?

Bearing in mind all the textual examples of anticipation mentioned above, it is important to return to the question of why an author might want to spoil suspense, or, in other words, why readers would decide to read a book that, from the very opening, seems to tone down the components of narrative tension such as twists in the tale and dénouement by sketching at the beginning what will be revealed at the end. In pragmatic terms, the narrative anticipatory technique can represent a form of face-threatening act that might even annoy readers, as it disrupts a linear narrative style and thus requires a greater level of attention and elaboration. However, here I argue that Khair adopts this strategy as a provocative means of representation for the anxieties and contradictions of contemporary societies in the age of multicultural globalisation. In particular, in order to handle the thorny issues of cultural and transnational otherness (in terms of ethnicity, religion and difference), for the author the use of anticipation allows him to introduce, interrogate and deconstruct stereotypes and their ideologies.

As I have argued in this article, the anticipatory structures at work in the novel depict the image of the orientalised ‘other’ and suggest that because of his ‘difference’ he has to embody a certain role, i.e. adhere to the cliché of the Eastern terrorist, which is culturally and socially ‘invented’ by the establishment as the ‘enemy’ because, as Umberto Eco affirms, it is fundamental for strong powers to create an adversary, an opponent onto which you can project fears, anxieties, obsessions and many other negative sentiments:

Having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So when there is no enemy, we have to invent one.

In this manner, the establishment not only legitimises its own decisions and actions, but also manipulates people and imposes ideologies of order, control and cultural superiority.

In processing the text, readers will normally invoke and rely on their schemas about binary otherness that is usually constructed and associated with fundamentalists through a set of linguistic, semiotic or other types of oppositions (e.g. white/Arab, western clothes/traditional Arab clothes, etc.), sometimes even in non-standard types of opposition, as demonstrated by Leslie Jeffries. But here, because the narrative scenario is more articulated than what appears superficially, actually the task of the stereotype is not merely to confirm ideology and prejudice (eventually the pernicious role of secretive Karim in the ‘Islamist Axe Plot’ is reassessed), but

27 Emmott 177.
29 Umberto Eco 2.
30 Leslie Jeffries, Opposition in Discourse (London: Continuum, 2010).
rather to invite the readers to discuss and probably revise their schemata within a broader cultural context, e.g. by considering significant human concepts such as religion and culture not as monolithic entities but as individual constructs shaped by personal experiences. Ravi, Karim and the unnamed narrator for example interpret and construct their cultural baggage, including attitudes towards religion, society and politics, differently and as a consequence they cannot be distractedly pigeonholed together. In this light, Miall’s view that ‘the anticipatory function of literature provides degrees of freedom in our thinking and feeling that are perhaps only rarely available elsewhere’

31 can be fittingly extended to this novel, since it unfolds a discussion of current values, sentiments and movements that constitute the dominating paradigms of the globalised world. While the force of anticipation might result in defamiliarisation and confusion, this has to be interpreted within the author’s intentions and attempts to grasp a complex, changing and challenging reality, since, for Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Om Prakash Dwivedi, ‘in his novels, Khair ponders the uncertainty of life and how such quandaries compel individuals to fight for survival and to subvert the current given order which does not completely satisfy human needs, if at all.’

32 According to Umberto Eco, ‘a text is a lazy machine that expects a lot of collaboration from the reader’

33 and as a result it is open to interpretive pathways which perhaps undermine previous ideological positions, and thus lead to a process of schema refreshment. In this sense, anticipatory structures work as creative narrative devices as they require readers to cognitively elaborate the narrative material to extract meaning, and they are reminiscent of the sense of prophecy that blends together ‘the real, the fiction, or something indistinguishable between them’.

34 Hence stems the warning against the deceiving force of intolerant ideology that Tabish Khair translates into his writing.

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31 Miall 296.
32 Gámez-Fernández and Dwivedi xviii.
33 Umberto Eco, Six Walks 28.


Spoiling suspense? Anticipatory structures as creative narrative devices in Tabish Khair’s diasporic fiction.
Esterino Adami.
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Nettie Palmer’s South to South: Australia, Chile and Writing the Nation

Jane Hanley

Abstract

This article explores Australian writer and critic Nettie Palmer’s presentation of the figure of Gabriela Mistral and vision of Latin American literature more generally. It compares changing experiences of women writers in the early twentieth century in Australia and in South America and connects these changes to their role in defining and developing concepts of national literature. Salter’s proposal for finding both national and international literatures via the echoes and resemblances between texts and authors is used as a starting point for identifying fruitful points of comparison in the specific case of Palmer and Mistral as well as the limits of the Australia-Chile association. The complex role of gender and race in the construction of postcolonial aesthetics is linked to differences and similarities in the colonial histories of the two nations and the instability of women’s identification with the evolving national discourse of the time.

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This article examines Australian critic, poet and diarist Nettie Palmer’s vision of Latin American literature and specifically of Chilean Nobel Prize-winning poet Gabriela Mistral. This moment of transnational engagement offers a point of departure for exploring the changing experiences of women writers in the early twentieth century and their agency in defining the nation. Nettie Palmer, a powerfully influential figure in Australian literary circles in her day, was a driving participant in shaping an aesthetic of Australian literature. She did so in dialogue with developments in international literature and emerging concepts of national cultures beyond Australia, an activity supported by her talents as a linguist. Her awareness of international culture was paired with active political solidarity at both a national and international level. Palmer’s use of Latin America as a comparison case is an interesting example of the role of the transnational in creating the national, both for its ongoing relevance today and as a way into understanding the diverse connections between creative cultures and colonial history. Mistral, in addition to becoming a poet of global renown within her own lifetime, was a diplomat and a teacher who also wrote essays and letters on topics connected to Chilean and Latin American identity and the importance and nature of education. Palmer’s take on Mistral is relevant for understanding the connection between literature and the idea of the nation because of Mistral’s close, complicated association with Chile’s national culture in many areas of her life and work. Mistral is also useful to consider because of her poetic themes, including her ‘passionate engagement with ecology and geography’ in evoking Chile.1 These provide grounds for comparison with the use of the land in Australian poetics. It is instructive to consider the close association of Mistral’s author-discourse with narratives around Chilean national identity, alongside her somewhat uneasy fit with emerging ideals of Latin American citizenship.

Artistic expression is increasingly understood as a mobile and multi-sited activity, reflecting alternative cultural geographies. Jacklin writes ‘critical connections between Australian and Latin American literature are few and far between’. This relationship is nevertheless an interesting one, with further attention coming not only from literary scholars but in many other areas. The comparison suggests valuable alternative perspectives on postcolonial cultures, referring not to the originating colonial power but to the processes of forming a relationship to place and to the repressed violence imbued in landscapes in the context of race and indigeneity. Reddaway suggests that, for New Zealand, Latin America provides a vocabulary to understand some of the surprising processes of postcolonial adaptation and reinvention of aesthetic traditions that were perceived to be exhausted in Europe itself. While Latin American and Australian/New Zealand comparisons have increased, they are not quite new, and decentring Europe in considering artistic transnationalism is far from unique.

Beyond those already mentioned, there are additional projects underway to trace historic and contemporary connections between the two regions, from early maritime routes through to economic partnerships, while others explore comparative politics, the history of international networks, and migrant experiences. Modes of considering history and culture across the Pacific rather than Atlantic and from South rather than North have begun to take root in a range of fields, even leaving aside the migrant artists and poets who have moved or continue to live between sites. Australia’s role in the global South is disputable, given its privilege and embeddedness in the cultural networks of the North. In looking at the first half of the twentieth century, Australia and South America are also in different stages in their relationship to colonialism, as well as being the products of divergent colonial processes. Australia was still deeply embedded in the British Empire, whereas Chile and its neighbours had already been through more than a hundred years of decolonisation, which included powerful threads of anti-Spanish sentiment within public discourse. However, colonial race relations and the position of Indigenous peoples in the process of nation formation, as well as the role of women in a masculinist modernisation still offer fruitful points of comparison, as Strodthoff has argued.

The ease of using the nation as a category for understanding culture entrenches the assumption that there is something called Australian literature. The national is convenient, however Salter proposed that instead of assuming commonality, literature be considered through a ‘network of similarities’. Salter uses Wittgenstein to argue that what makes Australian literature Australian are the “fibres” like themes, concepts and characterizations of individual works, that are then woven first as literary works and then as author-discourses. The “rope” then produced is Australian literature.

Extending this framework further gives us a relational approach to literature that goes beyond the nation. The foundation of international literature also emerges from echoes and resemblances in author-discourses, whence connections between the national and other literatures ‘will then reveal themselves’. Salter further writes that ‘the textual field of Australian culture is itself horizontal and does not simply end at Australia. The web of “family resemblances” that exists between the literary texts of any social group function in ways

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4 Irene Strodthoff, Chile and Australia: Contemporary Transpacific Partnerships from the South (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
6 Salter 20.
similar to those that constitute Australian literature. Resemblances occur in texts, author-discourses, and frameworks of interpretation, supporting a transnational approach to understanding literature, especially when considering the relationship between texts, authors and the effects of changes that were global, even if uneven. Using this framework, international literature, just as national literature, becomes an outcome rather than assumption. Where the place of international literature might have been a no-place, a false universalism, examining it as the totality of a network erases the requirement for national literature to somehow both measure up to and distinguish itself from an abstract imagined standard.

The historical evolution of national identity in Australia and Chile is partly informed by gender and women’s participation in the early twentieth century. Women writers of the 1920s and 1930s still worked with a patchy genealogy of precursors. Part of their project had to be defining and justifying their position in the artistic culture and authorising their voices. Doll Castillo suggests that in Chile earlier women laid some foundations for women to participate in culture as writers of authority, but that generation brought about a previously unknown professionalization of writing for women.

Doll Castillo observes that strictly chronological interpretations of literary relations are limited, proposing instead more discursive analyses that consider sociohistorical context and also gender difference. Echoing the productive possibilities of Salter’s challenge to the national, her challenge to chronological literary criticism suggests that heterodox interpretation finds new relationships as well as new conflicts. The chronological connection made here, between 1920s and 1930s Chile and Australia, is not linked to the specific national setting. This expansion of focus allows the exploration of processes of change and similarities in the formation of postcolonial national stories in relation to global modernity. This, like Doll Castillo’s multigenerational approach, allows the consideration of not just context or individual experience, but writers as cultural actors and professionals who shaped their public selves according to the possibilities available to them. As cultural actors, furthermore, writers engaged with multiple cultural networks. Their lives and creations are locally situated, but that situation/location does not equal the nation. They can be at once profoundly more local and more transcendent than a national category would imply.

Cooke’s monograph on the Chilean-Australian comparison in the context of Indigenous poetry outlines a multi-site poetics. He accepts that texts are inextricable from the attachment to place, but argues that the relationship can be understood in more nuanced ways, rather than the place of production or place described defining a text and vice versa. He identifies nomad poetics as useful for comparing Mapuche and Indigenous Australian writers. Race is an essential component of national identity formation and is significant in the way both Palmer and Mistral create their poetics of place. However, the most relevant aspect of Cooke’s work for the present study is his adaptation of Ashcroft’s ‘transnation’ as that which escapes and exceeds the boundaries of the nation state, not easily limited within established categories.

7 Salter 21-22.
8 Darcie Doll Castillo, ‘Escritoras chilenas de la primera mitad del siglo XX: trayectoria en el campo literario y cultural como criterios para una periodización de su producción,’ Taller de letras 54 (2014) 24.
9 Doll Castillo 25.
11 Cooke 21.
In applying this horizontal excess to literature, Cooke evokes Ramazani’s transnational poetics of ‘intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect, and converge.’ These concepts do not suppose displacement into a non-place, lacking specific roots. Indeed, Salter suggests that ‘post-colonial subjectivity’ is formed explicitly in relationship to place, and that art has a role in performing and reshaping the way that attachment is imagined, while refusing to fix it into permanency. An excess of ontological security in belonging, Salter believes, draws on mimicry of an imperial gaze. Cooke makes a similar critique of settler connections in Judith Wright’s landscape poetry, finding a profound sense of absence. Wright’s particular manifestation of post-colonial subjectivity is ‘the articulation of a progressive politics within conservative traditional structures’. It has been common in Australian poetry to speak about rather than from Australia. This connects to the repression of indigeneity in public discourse, and the racial aspects of articulating national difference are central to Chileanness and Australianness. Understanding the limitations of certain modes of post-colonial subjectivity can link to gender via the degree of radicalism or conservatism supposed in different writers’ positions within the national project and their roles in artistic culture.

As context for the analysis of gender, it bears repeating that as Mistral began her literary career in Chile, there had been a number of exceptional women antecedents and then a collective of women writers visible as a group and not only as individuals. Doll Castillo terms Mistral’s generation the modern group because they specialised as writers and engaged in a mature Chilean cultural field. This generation coincided with high levels of literary production, including by some middle class women, and a less limited cultural circle. In Australia this was a similarly active period in which, at least in novels, women were the most notable and productive writers working at the time, although many did so while residing abroad. The changing spectrum of publication possibilities coincided with the professionalisation of writing as a public office, with writers participating in a wide range of cultural activities. Nettie Palmer is not on the level of Mistral in Chile as a figure in the Australian literary landscape. She was a literary critic and minor poet largely recalled for fostering Australian literature as an editor, biographer, correspondent and critic who promoted Australian literary culture. That role, however, connects her trajectory to social change in Chile. Doll Castillo cites the increasing significance of the role of writers at that time as agents of wider culture, strengthening ‘the development of culture and mediating between cultural or artistic phenomena and the public or wider community’. Palmer was an active cultural curator, and her work in both literary and more general public debate combined a focus on the role of the writer, writers’ lives, and the ethical and social implications of cultural production. This aligns with the cultural activity reshaping Chilean society at the time. Palmer’s efforts to define Australian literature and personally encourage and publicly promote Australian writers contrast with Mistral’s use of

13 Salter 16.
14 Cooke 38.
15 Cooke 70.
16 Doll Castillo 26. All translations my own.
17 Doll Castillo 33.
18 Drusilla Modjeska, Exiles at home: Australian women writers 1925-1945 (Pymble: A&R Classics, 2001 [1981]) 4–5. This, of course, was roughly the generation of Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Christina Stead, and Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, among others.
19 Doll Castillo 29.
20 Deborah Jordan, Nettie Palmer: Search for an Aesthetic (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1999) 120.

literature and self-fashioning of her image within the national culture. Palmer worked to invigorate Australian literary culture via a cultural network, which naturally influenced her evolving author-discourse and legacy but was not closely linked to her aesthetic project. Mistral shaped her own image and creative work in relation to Chile’s national discourse in ways that ended up altering the themes and preoccupations of Chilean literature as a national literature as a result.

Dixon notes that the idea of place ‘has been used in Australian literary criticism either to connect particular writers and their work with the idea of a national project and national canon, or to exclude them from it.’ Palmer, and some like-minded contemporaries, sought to promote a concept of Australian national literature that contrasted with other more Bohemian, cosmopolitan or expatriate-minded writers of the time. She wrote that Australia’s meaning ‘lay in the hands of her writers, above all, to discover.’ This emphasis on taking Australia as a creative focus seems to reinforce the division between a given national category and an international universal that Salter was critiquing. However, Dixon notes the nuance in Palmer’s position, describing it as a ‘strategic provincialism’ in vital contact with literatures from elsewhere.

Her focus on Australianness in Australian literature was connected to the urgent need she identified for a strong and systematic support system – critical, genealogical, editorial, and so forth – for Australian literature, so that authors need not repeat work already done nor labour in isolation. By putting so much energy into this secondary infrastructure for the dissemination and reception of Australian literature, her critical range created ‘an impression that the national literature exists in the same time and space as international writing, and that it can and should be judged from that broad perspective.’ This vision is itself quite cosmopolitan, with an explicit local rootedness remaining the point of difference. Australian literature, while reflecting its location, should be considered as naturally in dialogue with the world. The value of idiom was to swiftly evoke Australian culture, but Palmer would readily compare such idiom to the nuances of reading Proust in France. Dixon argues that Palmer ‘locates herself as both a cosmopolitan and a provincial reader: she reads both Furphy and Proust from a local perspective, but also in dialogue.’ Beyond critical egalitarianism, the secondary apparatus of a cultural industry also brought together the local and the global, positioning Australian literature in the same space as literature from elsewhere.

It is interesting to compare the complexity of this local-global artistic affiliation in South American relationships with Europe and especially France as sources of culture. France offered a more established genealogy of female participation in literary culture, and the international orientation of some women writers was partly a product of obligation rather than inclination, given the complexity of their reception at home and the limited domestic market. This reflects the general ambiguity of women’s place in the nation, since their exclusion from national brotherhood meant that many ‘Spanish American women became heavily internationalist, and often antinationalist.’ The place of Europe in South American and Australian literature echoes trajectories of racialised national self-definition, given the differences and the similarities in

22 In Dixon 13.
23 Dixon 13.
25 Dixon 14.
26 Pratt 31. Italics in original.
racial issues between Australia and Chile. For Chileans the mobilisation of race in national narrative was more complicated than for the generally Anglo-Celtic writers of Australia, who had more access to repression and denial – what Brantlinger terms the Great Silence in prevailing usages of indigeneity in Australian literary discourse.\textsuperscript{27} The racial tension in the Australia-Chile comparison is one major source of difference and of productive critique of white Australian writers’ engagement with colonial violence and with the land as the root of belonging.

Cooke’s postcolonial Australian-Chilean poetics challenges the engagement with the Indigenous past and present in the work of some of the most beloved and revered writers of both countries. However, the degree to which non-Indigenous writers of these decades engaged with the land as a space marked by displacement, violence, and alternative experiences and meanings did set out such questions as central to post-colonial culture, even if rarely doing justice to the contemporary living culture of their Indigenous contemporaries. Such writers contributed to the case for tackling the specificities of place in the construction of the nation.

The primacy of the land in national narratives is inextricable from ideas of masculine and feminine spheres of action. Jordan describes the way 1930s women engaged with national feminine ideals, either via reinforcing the pioneer image, or reappropriating it as ‘pioneering new fields’ of work and activity.\textsuperscript{28} Jordan identifies three modes of female nationalism: first, spiritual; second, resisting male nationalist essentialism; third, inevitably, as mothers. In their complex individual relationships to these available subject positions, Jordan suggests ‘white women were both colonised and colonisers – they took up a variety of positions in relation to the imperial centre and their own sense of spiritual and national identity.’\textsuperscript{29} Palmer downplayed strong imperialist sentiments when making editorial selections and amendments to others’ work, putting more emphasis on female citizenship in the public sphere, not only through mothering and family.

This considered reduction of overt imperialism and focus on areas of women’s public action facilitated a situated, historicised view of culture, in which by ‘validating women’s active participation in their own culture and place, white women were developing the tools to come to terms with their colonial past’; Palmer’s particular inscription of this was through ‘environmental awareness, situated knowledge, validation of older women’s agency and a critical engagement with the evolving national culture’.\textsuperscript{30} Overall, this is not a strong action in favour of Aboriginal people but is gestures towards new ways of recognising the Indigenous past and present. Extending on these seeds of an alternative Australia, Jordan has also begun to reconsider Palmer’s own nature writing in the context of eco-criticism, one framework for linking the more positive aspects of Australia’s early and mid-twentieth-century landscape writing to the challenge that critiques of colonial violence make to the use of land in Australian national discourse. This approach suggests the limits of modernity as a totalising narrative; it is unable to absorb or negate all the subtleties of engagement with place. Modernity, Cooke suggests, fails to explain how to leave a place as well as how to be in it.\textsuperscript{31}

The description of landscape and rural experience had similar importance in Chilean national discourse. Mistral’s contemporaries like Marta Brunet, Doll Castillo argues, had begun to pair

\textsuperscript{27} Patrick Brantlinger, ‘Eating tongues: Australian colonial literature and “the Great Silence,”’ \textit{The Yearbook of English Studies} 41.2 (2011).


\textsuperscript{29} Jordan, Palmer’s present 108.

\textsuperscript{30} Jordan, Palmer’s present 109.

\textsuperscript{31} Cooke 27.
emphasis on nature with examination of the contradictions of colonial agrarian society. The treatment of land in the national imaginary – not always reinscribing an unalloyed colonialist geography – is an aesthetic common to Chile and Australia. Another similarity is the distinctiveness but not parochialism of local idiom, already mentioned among Palmer’s critical interests. Falabella finds in Chile too that analyses of the national in literature reinforced a distinctive idiom compared to the Castilian of Spain. Nineteenth-century Latin American thinkers had been preoccupied with how to understand their linguistic and cultural relationship to Europe without compromising their independence. One influential interpretation proposed contiguous language, not erasing Castilian from America but reconfiguring its limits and forms in order to make the language their own. Antipathy to Spain is stronger in 1930s South America than any ambivalence about Britain present in still-Anglophile Australia, but the drive to define Australia’s difference was accelerating. Palmer is a particularly useful example for both the role of the land and linguistic distinctiveness. Her commitment to a kind of nature writing running somewhat counter to imperialist territorial projections complemented her interest in foreign languages as tools to explore literature and society in other cultures. Both infuse her engagement with emerging post-colonial cultures like Chile’s. Palmer’s suggestion that Latin America could provide a model for Australia serves as a starting point for the exploration of how resonances in texts, themes and author-discourses in post-colonial cultures work. Palmer, Jordan suggests, believed ‘the relationship between international and national literature could be seen in a third course, “to find out mankind for ourselves”.’ A sense of the national arises from independent, non-subordinate perspectives that nevertheless feel themselves part of a global cultural network. Palmer is not alone in exploring such possibilities, and recent scholarship on 1930s Australia has revealed many transnational lives and cosmopolitan attitudes that inscribe interesting genealogies for Australia’s global connectedness. She suggested Latin American literature offered a ‘prototype – a large-sized symbol of our own in Australia’. Palmer’s comparison presages Salter’s suggestion for international literature; acknowledging that some resemblances are superficial, she explains that by going into more detail ‘we come upon other resemblances, not so near the surface. But when once discovered all the more important for us. We too have had our problems of coming to terms with our environment.’ She finds in Latin American culture similar struggles to distinguish an independent literature in the modern era, throwing over the inheritance of established poetic diction and forms. The Latin American poet ‘had no wish to produce more pseudo-heroic poems about the past; that would be like purveying imitation antiques to adorn the bourgeois drawing-rooms of newly rich patrons, who didn’t know how to spend their money.’ How, Palmer asks, ‘was he to write in freshness and freedom?’ Though for the purposes of the present example it is more useful to say she.

Latin American culture had to move beyond Paris as inescapable cultural reference point. ‘What was the meaning of modernism if it had to depend on the passing phases of an alien culture?’

32 Doll Castillo 35.
33 María Soledad Falabella Luco, ‘Modernidad literaria y la entrada de las mujeres a la esfera pública en los discursos de Bello, de Hostos y Mistral,’ Revista chilena de literatura 82 (2012) 119.
34 Falabella 121.
35 Jordan, Nettie Palmer 135.
37 Palmer, Growth of Literature 116.
Palmer inquired. Excessive mimicry of European fashions supposed deliberate ignorance of the ground on which one stood. Palmer explicitly discusses the problems in evoking a mythic Indigenous past rather than the present, without, obviously, leaping out of her time and place to alight on Cooke’s more radical critique, and she still reproduced the racist trope of vanishing Indigenous cultures. She suggests, rather than mythic imagery, a land-based or ecological approach to understanding place. She lightly gestured towards the complexity of rural life without approaching the difficult interrelationship of the urban/rural dichotomy and racial politics in Latin America. The land, according to Palmer, allowed artists an escape from the mimicry inevitable in metropolitan poetics, though insights thus gleaned must then be brought to bear on the complexity of cities too. This process ‘would result in a general enrichment of national understanding’. As already suggested, there is scope for further work analysing the poetics of place in Mistral’s and Palmer’s poetry, along with that of their contemporaries, since the land is such a powerful signifier in the literary cultures of both countries. Mistral put forth a literary mestizaje in her poetic blending of pre-Colombian and Judaeo-Christian references, while melding both with the landscapes and living things of her continent. Further developing the ideas from Jordan’s initial essay into eco-critical interpretations of Palmer’s writing, both poetry and prose, we do find elements of the construction of the situated and specifically Australian self through reflection on the natural environment. The explicit engagement with the consequences of European presence in relation to Indigenous cultures is absent.

How do women writers work as subjects articulating the relationship between people and place and the meaning of this relationship in the national imaginary? Falabella describes the emergence alongside discourses of American difference of a new female subject, an educated woman with the authority to participate in the public sphere, and Mistral’s use of this subject position to promote her authority. A clear difference from Palmer was the importance for Mistral of establishing her credentials as self-taught and mestiza to fit the parameters of a modern Latin American subject. However, the image of Mistral in Chilean culture leads us into Palmer’s own take on Mistral. Palmer repeated the version of the poet as a symbol of Latin American culture, and interestingly she too phrased it as Mistral having ‘established herself’ as such, emphasising Mistral’s participation in public life, her consular postings, and ‘intellectual cooperation as a basis for international life’. Rather than exploring the thematic content of Mistral’s poetry, Palmer signals the possibilities inherent in Mistral’s dual positioning as a ‘devoted patriot’ who ‘was intensely aware of the world beyond the borders of Chile.’ This reproduces Palmer’s own combined focus on both home and away. Palmer, while mentioning a few qualities of the poetry – ‘personal and romantic’ with ‘tenderness of touch’ – mainly engages with the scope of Mistral’s life and the scale of her influence in Latin American culture. To understand Mistral’s role as a symbol of Latin America and as a travelling representative of Chilean culture, it is vital to consider the way she used national discourse in her self-presentation. She activated a series of racial identities deliberately and, some argue, strategically. Both racial and feminine markers she mobilised in her work and her image were an uneasy fit

38 Palmer, Growth of Literature 117.
39 Palmer, Growth of Literature 119.
40 Mestizaje is a culturally and historically specific term that refers both to the mingling of races in America and to the use of the idea of this new race in imagining Latin American identity. It carries with it the weight of the racial hierarchies established in the post-independence states, but as a critical concept also implies their instability and mutability.
41 Falabella 131


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with Chilean national discourse, however, and the mother and teacher components of her author-discourse were adopted while other aspects of her life and work were ignored, but the use of racial identifiers at all is significant. Chilean literature’s more explicit if not always more successful engagement with colonialism’s foundational violence contrasts with whiteness and race as the repressed trauma of Australia. The idea of nature and the relationship to the land are central to national literatures in both countries; however, the extent to which this supposes an explicit appropriation or erasure of Indigenous histories is quite different. Cooke identifies in Chile simultaneous absorption and relegation, with acceptable indigeneity integrated into the whiteness of the Chilean nation while disruptive Otherness remains outside. Despite this variegation, the state itself is totalising, and Indigenous peoples are not permitted to retain their own boundaries and belongings, true also in Australia. Indigenous people’s cultures were employed where useful as signs of postcolonial difference, but denied their particularities. Race intersects with gender in defining national identities. Fiol-Matta’s *A queer mother for the nation* outlines elements that disrupted the conflation of Mistral with her public position, strategic though it may have been, as a symbol of Chile and representative of Latin American culture. Gender and queerness is one reason why the public and private lives of Mistral have often been treated separately. Mistral contributed to the parameters for belonging to Chile, but had an unstable belonging herself, and truly entered the Chilean cultural pantheon only after moving away to live abroad, reflecting once again women’s problematic and partial citizenship. Pratt writes of Mistral and her peers that they were ‘widely acclaimed, but never accepted’, and women more generally ‘were neither imagined as nor invited to imagine themselves as part of the horizontal brotherhood’ of the nation. Fiol-Matta argues Mistral’s queerness facilitated her assumption of a non-specific and encompassing maternity of the nation as a whole, and was in fact attractive as an additional entrée to primarily masculine spheres of activity. This maternal pose had a subsuming, totalising aspect, however, utilising indigenist discourse but tailoring racial identifications ‘to the state’s desire’, to promote *mestizaje* a la Vasconcelos, in service of unity and the maintenance of white power. Mistral’s identification with *mestizaje* and indigeneity is a form of queer pose, evoking the complexity of the citizen’s engagement with the state in Latin America.

Fiol-Matta’s critique echoes Cooke’s disruptive analysis of Indigenous themes in the poetry of Judith Wright, in that it constitutes a reinterpretation of an iconic figure in the national literary canon in terms of their racial politics and positioning, although Fiol-Matta is reinterpreting Mistral’s self-fashioning, rather than any modernist, totalising optic. Sepúlveda proposes a less radical critique of racial politics in her analysis of Mistral’s *Poema de Chile*, the nation-encompassing opus written largely from abroad. Sepúlveda, like Fiol-Matta, suggests that Mistral includes herself in an Indigenous or *mestizo* we (*nosotros*), but argues that she does signal the invisibility of the Indigenous past and present. Sepúlveda explores the problematic of this invisibility in Mistralian poetics as a kind of unexpressed interior, something inside oneself.

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43 Cooke 3.
46 Pratt 36; 30.
47 Fiol-Matta, Race Woman 493.
48 Fiol-Matta, Race Woman 495.
which is observing our failure to acknowledge it.\textsuperscript{50} Along a similar line, Pratt describes the way that a seeming infantilisation nevertheless incorporates an Indigenous character in a ‘dialogic, conflicted, continuously challenged’ relation with the poetic narrator.\textsuperscript{51} The unexpressed, the partial and the absent are essential elements of the construction of the national in literature. In analysing Mistral’s self-fashioning, Sepúlveda discusses her choice of the name Mistral, a cold European wind. Her poetry employs a wide variety of natural imagery, Sepúlveda writes, but to be a daughter of the wind is a particularly complex choice, it runs counter to unity and integrity.\textsuperscript{52} It moves and changes. Zaldívar finds a similar resistance to unity and feminine instability and duality in Mistral’s \textit{Locas mujeres} poems.\textsuperscript{53} Images she chose herself bring us closer to the multiplicity of Mistral. It is not possible to fix one image or story of her in place, in part because she has so been absorbed into the Chilean national imaginary – or inserted herself there. Like all symbols of national identity she is half-remembered and half-invented. While the choice to assume different roles and try on different metaphors is a cultural privilege, the mobility of the images on which Mistral alights, however momentarily, suggests the unresolved character of Chilean belonging.

In both her texts and her life choices Mistral engaged with the high-level construction of Chilean culture, both in its evocation in metaphor and in her direct negotiation with the powers of her day and education advocacy. She fused her artistic project with her civic one. In Chile, conditions that facilitated Mistral’s success and prominence were based on the convergence of artistic authority for women and modernising energies in a range of cultural industries. As Doll Castillo describes, new professional and political opportunities and educational reform meant that middle class women could make their voices heard in new spaces.\textsuperscript{54} Their authority had still to be negotiated, and the unevenness of modernity means this social change is not a total transformation.

Despite her advocacy, Mistral did not directly discuss the problem of uneven modernity for other women, though like Nettie Palmer she maintained correspondence with some number of her contemporaries. For Palmer, however, energetic participation in the women’s movement and promotion of women in both political and cultural contexts were central to her activity as an agent of the emerging national culture, and she wrote a lot in the women’s press and collaborated with feminists.\textsuperscript{55} Henry Handel Richardson even criticised Palmer’s political engagement for impeding her creative practice.\textsuperscript{56} Palmer saw with clear eyes that women’s increasing freedom would certainly be held up as the cause for a range of perceived social ills that emerged concurrently.

This difference in public feminism between Palmer and Mistral can be partly explained by the multiple elements feeding the national myths of Australia and Chile at the time. In engaging with problems of uneven modernity, Palmer had the luxury of taking women as a special category, whereas in Chile any critique around modernity and social participation immediately evoked issues of race in ways that remained more submerged in Australian discourse. The pioneering ideal allowed for white women to be partly encompassed in an emerging emphasis on resourcefulness defining the Australian character. Palmer identified adventurousness and coping

\textsuperscript{50} Sepúlveda 28.
\textsuperscript{51} Pratt 43.
\textsuperscript{52} Sepúlveda 29.
\textsuperscript{53} María Inés Zaldívar, ‘Gabriela Mistral y sus “locas mujeres” del siglo veinte,’ \textit{Taller de letras} 38. (2006).
\textsuperscript{54} Doll Castillo 34
\textsuperscript{55} Jordan, Nettie Palmer 128
\textsuperscript{56} Jordan, Nettie Palmer 124
with hardship as parallel threads in Australian womanhood, finding the second was ‘woven into the textures of our life today.’ As can be inferred from the powerful influence of Arielism in South America, the self-definition under way there at the time incorporated a stronger emphasis of sensitivity and woundedness, alluding to the effects of domination. That allusion carries a forceful undertone of racial difference. National definitions in Latin America also incorporated to varying degrees radical liberatory political projects that informed concepts of the subject as citizen and continental inhabitant.

This is not at all to minimise Mistral’s significance as a woman who declared herself an important writer and demanded her work be taken seriously. Mistral did use her position to legitimise not only her own work but also literary possibilities for successors. She explicitly identified the need to contribute to a coherent genealogy of women writers and to promote women’s literacy and literature. In Chile, however, this legitimisation necessarily drew on the rural and the mestizo as central elements of Chileanness, and in Mistral’s case of her Chilean maternity as a mother of national knowledge and national language. To tie this strategic self-presentation back to the challenge for women writers of authorising their voices in the public sphere, Cabello Hutt claims that Mistral inserted herself into the cultural centre as a letrado (man of letters), declining to occupy what had been women’s spaces: she was among the first women of letters. The simple teacher who occupied herself with educating her nation was a role she created, but in fact, Cabello Hutt argues, she was highly ambitious and engaged with public discourse from adolescence, using the spheres of public debate that were available to her to bring her name to prominence.

In Chile, Doll Castillo suggests, women of Mistral’s generation tended to join established cultural fields rather than remain outside or in conflict with the existing regimes because they could not afford to be on the margins. The increasing professionalisation available to women writers as cultural actors also meant, however, that they started to participate in supplementary activities such as diplomacy and conferences outside Chile, giving them more economic options. In Mistral specifically Cabello Hutt argues that this gives rise to a reformist rather than revolutionary social commentary. Mistral’s engagement with uneven modernity was focused on humanising its effects, rather than a more radical resistance, suggesting that industry should not exploit, oppress, nor leave behind the poorest citizens, and that children must be protected and culture fostered. In Cabello Hutt’s accounting of Mistral’s position, however, she promoted this ethical modernity at least in part by establishing herself as a model of ethics, integrity and hard work, in the accepted Latin American mode for the writer as public figure.

Palmer, in contrast, was neither a mother to nor model for the nation and did not aim to be, evaluating her personal literary powers more humbly, though her influence as a critic and letter writer is undeniable. She can be seen, however, as a precursor and advocate for the next generation of Australian writers. Palmer worked to establish a framework for Australian literature and culture more broadly, as a cultural agent and writer, as a critic of conservative government, as a feminist, and via active promotion of social justice. She was limited by a lack

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57 Jordan, Nettie Palmer 130
58 Falabella 135.
59 Falabella 137.
61 Cabello Hutt 54.
62 Doll Castillo 36
63 Cabello Hutt 59.
64 Cabello Hutt 64.

of personal wealth and the demands of supporting her family alongside husband Vance, whereas Mistral’s fairly swift acceptance as a writer and cultural actor, at least once she was safely expatriated, meant she could ultimately cast aside the financial concerns of her early years. Given Palmer’s smaller audience and lesser literary authority it was both more vital and more viable for her to organise politically and to try to shape the direction of the nation by promoting the voices of others. Palmer was engaged on the left, and did some work with Aboriginal Rights activists as well as for labour rights and the like, though obviously without employing the kind of racialised discourse of national identity-forming in Chile and other Latin American nations around mestizaje. Palmer worked and corresponded with those she felt could give voice to a national project she would support, whereas Mistral was already in her lifetime emblematic of the Chilean national project. The two women took different paths, with their different talents, but at parallel moments in terms of the emergence of women’s voices in the national imaginaries of their respective nations. As Modjeska outlines, analysing women writers from this era gives us insight into the ways people ‘were acting out their lives in a class and patriarchal society, [the] values and ideas by which they made sense of their lives, but which at the same time tied them to dominant social structure and values.’

This applies to race just as to gender. Their words give us a space to understand women’s voices in processes of postcolonial identity formation. The discourses surrounding particular authors allow us to interrogate sites of critique and change, and to find resonances beyond the national. Both Palmer and Mistral questioned the primacy of a masculine national image, and made substantial sallies in the struggle for interpretive power for women, though Mistral did so more directly in her own name. As Pratt describes in her analysis of Mistral, ‘patrician writings by women ... cannot easily be read back into the domestic sphere, for they take as their very subject matter the impersonal entity of the nation-state; their authorial voice is that of the citizen.’

Palmer and Mistral, and others like them, used transnational change to support their right to imagine their nation.

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65 Modjeska 20.
66 Pratt 42.

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Transnational Narrativity and Pastoralism in
*The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* by Washington Irving

Jessica Allen Hanssen

Abstract

Washington Irving’s collection, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819-20), was one of the earliest and most influential texts to have achieved acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Its most famous stories, which include ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’, are considered to be classics in their own right and are still popular. At the heart of the collection, however, is its narrator Geoffrey Crayon, a New Yorker travelling to England, and especially London, for the first time in order to experience its grand museums and libraries, its stunning architecture, and the sedate yet rarefied country house lifestyle of the landed gentry: in short, all of the things he could not have experienced in contemporary America. Once in England, however, Crayon is struck by his increasing feelings of exile and loneliness, and retreats into his artistic intentions as solace. Notably, the collection’s most enduring stories in the collection are set in America: even as Crayon distances himself physically from his homeland he is drawn to it as an artistic subject, as though he cannot really see America until he leaves it.

This feeling of artistic exile, as presented in *The Sketch Book*, is strikingly modern in tone for a text which is over 170 years old, and not only precedes later literary expatriations but anticipates developments in narrative studies, with respect to short-story theory and the composite novel.

Irving negotiates the preferences, assumptions, and historical experience of each audience by steeping his social and cultural criticism in the universal realms of storytelling and mythology. In an age of emergent cultural nationalism, Irving seeks to establish both himself and his narrator as transatlantic writers. His desire to craft a truly transatlantic work, however, becomes a blatantly pastoral act, which turns the very presence of narrative into an anachronism. In our own time of emergent cultural nationalism, recent critical revival of Irving has explored his position as a postcolonial writer, but without the fullest realisation of the narrative theories that bring to the fore precisely how Irving’s work manages the diverse needs of its transatlantic audiences, or without much consideration of its fictive author. A reading of specifically transnational sketches from *The Sketch Book* from the perspective of contemporary narrative theory, but informed by their place in time, identifies and foregrounds the significance of the sociopolitical narrativity and literary pastoralism that emerges from Irving’s – and Crayon’s – transatlanticism.

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As Richard V. McLemore notes, Irving was in a sense ‘one of the first postcolonial writers,’ and the ideas of patriotism and cultural legitimacy permeate his works in a cosmopolitan and centred way. Much of what is truly remembered about The Sketch Book celebrates America’s vast wild spaces and emerging archetypes, but the pastoral, traditional, non-threatening England Irving writes about in contrast is just as foreign to his contemporary English audience, who found itself in between a political and an industrial revolution, and in a time of rapidly changing social mores, as the wild and untameable Catskills would have been to a lifetime City dweller. Irving negotiates the preferences, assumptions, and historical experience of each audience by steeping his social and cultural criticism in the universal realms of storytelling and mythology. In an age of emergent cultural nationalism, Irving seeks to establish both himself and his narrator as transatlantic writers. His desire to craft a truly transatlantic work, however, becomes a blatantly pastoral act, which turns the very presence of narrative into an anachronism. Jeffrey Insko calls attention to the need for revaluation of Irving’s place in literary history, claiming that Irving has become a ‘casualty of a particular way of thinking about history: the notion that history progresses through chronological, linear time’. This new emphasis on asynchronous temporality in history applies equally, if not more, to approaches to the text itself: freed from its linear publication history, The Sketch Book contains clues to how it should be read, as a profoundly complex statement on the transactional nature of narrative. In our own time of emergent cultural nationalism, recent critical revival of Irving has explored his position as a postcolonial writer, but without the fullest realisation of the narrative theories that bring to the fore precisely how Irving’s work manages the diverse needs of its transatlantic audiences, or without much consideration of its fictive author, Geoffrey Crayon. A reading of specifically transnational sketches from The Sketch-Book from the perspective of contemporary narrative theory, but informed by their place in time, identifies and foregrounds the significance of the sociopolitical narrativity and literary pastoralism that emerges from Irving’s – and Crayon’s – transatlanticism.

Although the land and its people always had stories, as a purely literary topos, the United States of America was still not fixed in Irving’s day: ‘the new United States had fewer legends to

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draw upon (than did Europe), being constituted by people from a range of different national origins who were not inclined to celebrate its truly indigenous, that is Native American, traditions.

Aside from what seemed to the settlers to be largely (and regrettably) irrelevant, there was yet to be a distinctly American mythology. The Sketch Book, perhaps inevitably, found a large readership in America, as Americans were hungry for a literature of their own, and Irving was eager to supply it. Irving himself wrote, in connection to both his literary and social ambitions, that `whenever I could not get a dinner to suit my taste, I would endeavour to get a taste to suit my dinner,’ but it’s clear from the wistful and tempered excellence of the sketches that The Sketch Book was more than a cynical cash grab. Irving felt a keen sense of what Laura J. Murray calls `dispossession from his English heritage,’ and he also felt sympathy for the Native Americans’ real-time loss of their land. Irving watched his own country simultaneously expand and implode from an outsider’s perspective, and this unique vantage became Irving’s creative catalyst for The Sketch Book.

Irving himself, in a famous 1824 letter to his friend and mentor Henry Brevoort, gives what is undoubtedly the best description of his narrative mode, but does not make a clear distinction between the sketch and the short story:

> For my part I consider the story merely as a frame on which to stretch my materials. It is the play of thought, and sentiment and language; the weaving in of characters, lightly yet expressively delineated; the familiar and faithful exhibition of scenes in common life; and the half concealed vein of humour that is often playing throughout the whole ... I have preferred adopting a mode of sketches and short tales rather than long work, because ... there is a constant activity of thought and a nicety of execution required in writings of the kind, more than the world appears to imagine.

While Irving does not go as far as to say so, to him, his work, while firmly rooted in the sketch genre, also represents more than the sum of its parts: the `play of thought, and sentiment and language’ is the very essence of story, and the combination of the sketch and the short tale is the very essence of the modern short story. Furthermore, his interest in the imagination of the reader as it pertains to the craft is of particular interest as we make the distinction between sketch and short-story.

Brander Matthews famously defined the sketch in 1901 by way of comparison: `while a Sketch may be still-life, in a Short-story something always happens. A Sketch may be an outline of a character, or even a picture of a mood or mind, but in a Short-story there must be something done, there must be an action’. While The Sketch Book is obviously a collection of disparate sketches that were originally published separately, certain thematic patterns emerge now that

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they are collected, and these patterns are best appreciated by using the tools and strategies of short-story theory, particularly the strategies of reading a short-story cycle in which there is a dominant narrative persona. In this mode, one examines, according to Robert Luscher, how ‘the artist may set forth even less of the whole picture and rely on the reader’s pattern-making faculties to formulate the variable connections and build textual consistency’. Luscher, interestingly, cites The Sketch Book as a precursor to the genre: ‘Even Irving’s Sketch Book, with its fictitious narrator Geoffrey Crayon, illustrates the early impulse to produce something beyond a miscellaneous collection of independent tales’. Treating The Sketch Book as more than the sum of its parts, rather than just an unrealised impulse, generates fascinating results because we can interpret Crayon’s drive to establish his narratorial presence as action, even in a ‘still-life’ sketch, breathing new life into the genre. Michelle Sizemore maintains that it is the stasis of the sketch, as compared to the action essential to the story form, which allows Irving to take liberties with chronology and to reconstruct narrative time in The Sketch Book as something more than linear, and while the sketches themselves remain static, Crayon’s development as a distinct narrative presence becomes a dynamic story all on its own, and heightens the text’s contrasting of time and desire. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris place emphasis on the way that a composite novel may ‘...eschew linear narration (at least in part) and achieve whole-text coherence through the principle of juxtaposition’. Since the individual sketches were later compiled into one unified collection, it is rewarding to use knowledge of how a composite novel functions to extract significance from Crayon’s development as a narrator. Short-story theory with regard to the novelistic aspects of a composite informs this reading of The Sketch Book, as it enables our perception of Geoffrey Crayon as being a homodiegetic narrator with his own arc as opposed to merely a stand-in or pseudonym for Irving, whereupon the very act of having a fictional persona freed Irving from potentially negative criticism of his ideas. Irving’s choice to present his narrative via a fictive author allows what Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky called the ‘filtering persona’ of Geoffrey Crayon to serve ‘as a screen between himself and his audience, shielding him from the hostile response he dreaded’, whereupon even the screen itself further signifies liminality. Irving’s deployment of Crayon as an idealised form of the ‘American abroad’ stereotype therefore becomes a kind of romantic wish-fulfilment, a transatlantic hokey-pokey, with one foot in and one foot out of both place and time.

Geoffrey Crayon begins ‘The Author’s Account of Himself’ with a mission statement for his quest: to visit new scenes and observe strange characters, to see something of Europe’s ‘charms of storied and poetical association’, and, above all, ‘to see the great men of the earth’ (AAH 3-4). With these goals in mind, Geoffrey Crayon makes the passage to England, but his search for greatness is promptly consumed by his growing concern about the fate of literature and his place in its annals. ‘As it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand, and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches, I am disposed to get up a few for the entertainment of my

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10 Luscher 150.
friends,’ writes Geoffrey Crayon (AAH 5). This, he claims, is his intention, but his language betrays him; ‘I am disposed to get up a few …’ implies the very-present tense, as though the remainder of his sketches do not immediately follow this one, they have indeed already been written, even as he is only now ‘disposed’ to do so. While a casual tourist’s sketches may be spontaneous and drawn on-location, Crayon’s sketches, then, are much more carefully conceived, and may even be composites of several visits to the same location, or even imaginary! Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky writes that The Sketch Book ‘traded on these common and current associations (of the sketchbook conceit), although there was nothing careless about the writing, construction, or publication of The Sketch Book’, this observation was specifically made about Irving, but it works even better as a statement about Geoffrey Crayon and his status as a fictive author. Crayon makes no claim to be travelling ‘pencil in hand’; even though he tangentially places himself in the category of a casual tourist by claiming to be working ‘as it is the fashion for modern tourists,’ his employment of ‘as’ here reads more like a challenge than a conciliation, ‘as’ genteelly standing in for ‘while’ or ‘although’. Through Crayon’s posturing and manipulation, his gnawing need to be popular and well-liked becomes clear, and echoes to a certain extent Irving’s own, minus, of course, the nagging pressure of Irving’s economic woes—a pastoralised look at the life of the author right from the start.

While ‘The Author’s Account of Himself’ establishes the premise of the collection, which is that Crayon will be our tour guide on a meandering journey across England, the sketch ‘The Voyage’ builds anticipation for the quest by using the location of the ship across the Atlantic as a reference point for being not quite here nor there. The setting of the sketch, a boat as it crosses the Atlantic from America to England, increases the effect of alienation that Crayon attempts to achieve here and throughout the collection. While Irving, on his 17-year expatriation from the United States, ‘may have drifted away from America physically, he never left it psychically’; chronologically, Geoffrey Crayon is left to bear the weight of at least four of these years, even on what is purportedly his first voyage. From the very beginning of the book, Crayon’s self-imposed exile spurs his expeditions and keeps him isolated from the people around him. His bend towards intellectualism stunts Crayon’s perception of his surroundings, and he can only identify with his surroundings or position by redefining it in the context of literature. For example, Crayon compares the act of travel itself, a physical, exterior function, to the intellectual, interior act of reading: ‘it seemed as if I had closed one volume of the world and its concerns, and had time for meditation before opening another’ (AAH 7). Continuing in this vein, he likens the sea itself to text: ‘The vast space of waters, that separates the hemispheres is like a blank page in existence,’ writes Crayon, and thus seized upon it to fill this blank page. Crayon defers to his inexperience by directly giving voice to his ship’s captain, who stands in for Crayon and delivers a tragic tale of shipwreck and loss that would otherwise have been beyond Crayon’s ken. Geoffrey Crayon sees only what he wants to see, his telescope shuts out everything else:

As we sailed up the Mersey I reconnoitered the shores with a telescope. My eye dwelt with delight on neat cottages with their trim shrubberies and green grass plots. I saw the mouldering ruin of an abbey over run with ivy, and the taper spire of a village church rising from the brow of a neighbouring hill – all were characteristic of England. (AAH 10)

And all this – the very images upon which he dwells throughout the collection whenever London or the rest of England is concerned – he knows even before disembarking. Crayon’s England, like Irving’s, comes from books, and not even seeing it with his own eyes will alter his impression, which was formed in the libraries of his youth. By offering up the captain’s tale, Crayon’s experience remains as seen through his rose-coloured telescope. He dwells on his solitude, barely disguising his desperate need for approval: ‘I had no friend to meet, no cheering to receive’ (AAH 11). One asks whom could Crayon have possibly hoped to be waiting on the other side?

Irving had ‘known from his earliest infancy the names of the city streets and scenes’ of London – but he had of course, like Crayon, learned them all from books. Travel literature was naturally among the most popular reading in Irving’s time, and The Sketch Book itself is also a sort of travelogue, although Geoffrey Crayon frequently spends just as much time describing what he doesn’t find in London as what he does. This would have been a subversive enough approach for a travel writer to take, but Irving also deploys his Geoffrey Crayon persona in a rather more risky way, which is to set a clear position for America as having its own distinct identity, as he does in ‘English Writers on America’. The desire to please a transnational audience meant that Irving had to be very careful when he describes the way America had been portrayed so far in English travel literature. It was his uncanny ability to negotiate this exchange that produced ‘English Writers on America,’ which received, in its own time, great praise and recognition, and remains an important example of Irving’s political dexterity and literary diplomacy.

‘English Writers on America’ attempts to define and correct what Crayon refers to as the ‘literary animosity daily growing up between England and America’ (EWA 42). He feels that the English press, rather than disseminating facts about America, goes out of its way to print the ‘gross misrepresentations of coarse and obscene writers’ rather than the truth. He condemns the ‘censors’ of the English press for wasting their ‘opportunities of enquiry and observation and their capacities for judging correctly’ the true nature of the United States (EWA 44). Crayon recognises that the press serves as both a filter and as the prime medium by which people’s opinions are indelibly formed. The ready dissemination of the written word has made the world smaller; there is ‘nothing published in England’ that escapes the American reader, ‘not a calumny dropt from an English pen, nor an unworthy sarcasm uttered by an English statesman, that does not do to blight goodwill and add to the mass of latent resentment’ (EWA 46). Since, after all, ‘everyone knows the all pervading influence of literature at the present day, and how much the opinions and passions of mankind are under its control’ (EWA 45), it is therefore up to the press to sort out the truth from fiction and present to its audience an unbiased account of news and relevant information.

In order to frame and contextualise the debate, Crayon must establish for us what he means by ‘England’ and ‘America,’ which he does by way of describing – in a purely informative way, of course – the prevailing traits of both places. Crayon’s America, as represented in this piece, is made of ‘sound and wholesome ingredients’, a beacon of universally educated but simple people who graciously offer ‘asylum for strangers from every portion of the globe’ (EWA 44, 46-48). Crayon’s England, on the other hand, is a country of ‘smug conveniences and petty comforts which belong to an old, highly finished, and over populous state of society,’ containing people whose ‘absurd expectations produc[e] petulance in disappointment’ (EWA 43-4). His mode of

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correction, while attempting to ground his narrative in a specific American regionality, thus gives way to the same sort of slander that he abhors in the English press.

For example, it must be noted that, while narrating a corrective piece against those of the London press who ‘diffuse error rather than knowledge’, he is doing so unashambly as an American, his allegiance to the New World made plain by his tedious incorporation of the plurality of the editorial ‘we,’ as opposed to his customary ‘I’. Crayon here takes it upon himself to represent, or even personify, ‘The American’, as opposed to ‘An American’, a title he can more rightfully claim (and does in ‘The Voyage’). Although he references the plural American early in the piece when he notes that ‘it has also been the peculiar lot of our country to be visited by the worst kind of English travellers’, and proceeds to refer to the English people who have previously written about America, quite pejoratively, as ‘they’ – as in ‘they are capable of judging only of the surface of things; of those matters which come in contact with their private interests and personal gratifications’ – it is not until much later, in the sentence ‘we attach too much consequence to these attacks’, that Crayon makes the all-important switch to ‘we’ from his original first person point of view (EWA 43-5). Crayon makes this change to what Jahn terms ‘collective focalization’ as a defence mechanism;17 once America is on the defensive, Crayon needs the reinforcement of the we-narrative masses. From this point until the end of the narrative, ‘I’ scarcely graces the page. His technique of first establishing a sense of individual authority, then systematically opposing a given opponent and his ideas, then closing with an inclusive ‘we’ in the right-meaning place of ‘I’, thus simultaneously encapsulates both enemy and ally in a deft change of pronoun.

Yet Crayon’s use of ‘we’ is more than a rhetorical device, it is a political choice, and it is also a subtle and perhaps insidious proof of his vulnerability as a narrator. For without the ‘we’, Crayon would be a mere ‘traveller, who publishes an account of some distant, and comparatively unimportant, country’ for the entertainment of ‘his immediate neighbours’: the very sort of bloke whose presence in letters so rallies his frustrations (EWA 43-4). It is only by asserting his place as a part of a whole that his words have any sort of resonance; his appropriation of the ‘we’ voice gives him the authority he needs to counter the vicious slanders put forth by English writers on America, yet without personally shouldering the burden of opinion. And yet, he does not want to risk alienating his English audience, which is perhaps why Crayon closes ‘English Writers on America’ by asking Americans to ‘place England before us as a perpetual volume of reference ... we may draw from thence golden maxims of practical wisdom, wherewith to strengthen and embellish our national character’ (EWA 49).

One of the key oppositions The Sketch Book presents is that of New York against London, representing the other, less immediate conflicts that come to define The Sketch Book, such as new versus old, or the established versus the frontier. For a ‘literary’ New Yorker (certainly a juxtaposition of terms in Irving’s day) London itself was the frontier: it was all well and good for a native New Yorker to write the satirical History of New York for a British audience, as Irving did in 1809, but to presume to write on such beloved landmarks such as the Tower of London, the reading room of the British Museum, Westminster Abbey, and even the national caricature of John Bull, for a sophisticated London audience with its own fully-formed notions of these places and ideas, would have been a bold step for an American to take, especially when the very idea of an American writer was so new. Jane Eberwein wrote that The Sketch Book represents a

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‘working out of Irving’s worries about his prospects and those of his country’;\textsuperscript{18} Irving not only worried about his personal reputation as a writer, but about his abilities to represent America as one of its first writers. He was also extremely worried about his financial status, and while, being as he was already well known at home, he wanted to write on themes that ‘would be popular and striking in America’,\textsuperscript{19} Irving was also on a sort of quest to make his entrée into London society, hoping to restore his family and personal pride in the process. To this end, he had to be very careful to present versions of home and away that would please both audiences.

The main way, however, in which Irving’s \textit{Sketch Book} managed to win over a cross-Atlantic audience, however, is that it presents versions of both countries that play to their strengths, rather than their weaknesses. In order to do this, he focuses Crayon’s narratorial gaze less on London’s grittier aspects, and more on its quaint charms and curiosities, which would have pleased both groups of readers, and the majestic New York he presents in stories like ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and ‘The Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ is a rural fantasy almost tailor made for an overworked and jaded city reader, whether he or she dwell in the City or in Gotham (a nickname, incidentally, which Irving himself coined and made famous in 1807). Both the stories about the city or those about the country, however, are presented from a pastoral perspective, as though they are written about places long changed or times long past, but Irving wrote the present of \textit{The Sketch Book} as though it was not just the past, but the idealised past that may or not have been the actual, historical past of the places he sketches. This is how the book came to appeal to such a large and divided readership: we all like to have our picture taken in a flattering light, in custom-made clothes that fit well, and by a patient photographer who is not afraid to subtly use Photoshop to smooth out our wrinkles and whiten our teeth; Irving merely gave the people what they wanted, and he was amply rewarded for it.

The pastoral genre itself has evolved over thousands of years, and the definition of ‘pastoral’ has broadened greatly as a result. Once a very rigid form, pastoral has come to broadly represent a fictionalised imitation, or even idealisation, of rural life. This is not to say that tension does not exist within the pastoral; Raymond Williams notes that although pastoral literature celebrates ideal feelings and images, ‘there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience: summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present.’\textsuperscript{20} As time passed, simple agricultural economies gave way to more complex feudal systems, often leaving individual farmers and shepherds working for an estate rather than for themselves. Pastoral literature inevitably reflected these changes; the peasant labourer no longer had a narrative voice (one could argue that he never actually did), and although the pastoral’s intensity of attention to natural beauty remained strong, this intensity became ‘the nature of observation, of the scientist or tourist, rather than of the working countryman’.\textsuperscript{21}

Yet when the ‘real’ shepherd could no longer speak of the simplicity of nature and rural life, artificial shepherds supplanted them; the shepherd-farmer figure became a mask, and the natural environs of this figure a backdrop for disguised courtly and political intrigue. These ‘shepherds’ spoke in courtly language and appeared in costumes less appropriate for the pasture than for the parlour. Before long, the pastoral itself became a metonymical reference point by which the

\textsuperscript{19} Irving, Letters 546.
\textsuperscript{21} Williams 20.
mere intimation of the pastoral is enough to serve the writer’s ulterior purpose, whether that be to criticise the court or the church, or to mock courtship rituals, or to more simply reassure the audience that they were on the ‘city’ side of the stage. Dr Johnson condensed the definition of pastoral to include literature in which ‘any action or passion is represented by its effects on a country life’; it is from this definition that later writers working within the pastoral tradition took their cue.22

That the rural workingman had been replaced by the scientist or the tourist, and that the pastoral mode itself became a literary reference point are the two points of departure for Crayon’s comparison of the city and the country in England. Crayon’s use of the pastoral takes the political undertones of earlier pastorals to the next level; while Alexander Pope, for example, may have moved the intrigues of the London court to the broad countryside, Crayon’s playing field is much larger, spreading across the Atlantic rather than across the counties. Crayon’s pastoral is not so much about the relationship of the city and the country as it is about the relationship of the England and the United States, respectively, which is still tenuous, still beginning. The city and the country, as it were, become metaphoric reference points, convenient substitutions for his real subject matter.

Yet, as we observe in ‘The Voyage’, Crayon writes not about what he sees, but what is already in his mind; he writes the image of the two places, not the places themselves. Crayon writes what he believes that his intended audience wants to believe, in order to derive a certain amount of power from his creation of both narrative and audience; he, like his ‘father’ Irving, seeks praise, belonging, and identity. To achieve this end, Crayon deliberately uses and subverts the conventions of the pastoral tradition to manipulate the expectations of both of his intended audiences. Crayon’s outsider status means that he can ‘report’ on present conditions in England without the appearance of bias, but he simultaneously invokes his self-serving concern to shape things in a flattering fashion, thus creating (or perhaps re-creating) the present at the same time that he narrates it. It is an old tradition, whereas a narrative turns into an anachronism, thus handily finding itself outside of the laws of time.

As always, Crayon sits on two sides of the fence, the fence being this time the moat of the Atlantic. By focusing on a pastoral, rural setting, one in which even suffering is sweet, and no one seems to work for a living, he panders simultaneously to his American audience and his English audience: to the Americans for what could be, and to the English for what once was; to both he presents a reminder of noble heritage. Let us not forget that the two countries were one, and then at war, just 40 years before the publication of The Sketch Book. The stories presented in the collection are presumed to be concerned with and having taken place within more or less the same time frame, and the sketches were meant to reflect current events. But with the then-recent development of the United States of America as an entity separate from England, the meaning of ‘America’, that is, what it is to be an American, was, at the time of Crayon’s narrative, still up for grabs. To a newly-minted American, Crayon’s emphasis on England’s rural, bucolic roots seems strangely comforting, especially when one considers that America was, at the time of the publication of The Sketch Book, fresh from the War of 1812, which was considered a success for the Americans not at least because it sealed America’s independence as a military presence. This success, however, called into question the continued American dependence on English culture and literature. Crayon’s pastoral emphasis is therefore politically subversive: Crayon writes

about England as seen through a soft-focus lens, and in the past tense; Crayon’s presentation of an old subject in the new political climate is an act of defiance. To the contemporary English reader, however, the exact same material loses all of its rebelliousness, and the soft glow of its nostalgic and deferential view of England seems strangely flattering. Crayon’s encomium seems contrived somehow to serve as an example to those English tourist-writers he so harshly criticised in ‘English Writers on America’. As it happens, ‘Rural Life in England’, the piece which most overtly panders to his English audience, is placed right after ‘English Writers in America’, in the collection, doubtless to show them how it’s done.

Crayon’s outsider status (American, independent means, etc.) allows him to emphasise consumption and ritual without labour; he concentrates on the touring man’s England, at least when it is advantageous to him to do so. Crayon, although doubtless informed of changes in rural society (e.g. development of industry, or of increased communication and transportation), barely mentions them. In fact, in ‘Rural Funerals’, he even goes so far as to admire the ‘fixed and unchanging features of the country’ (RF 122), which might indeed exist in his eye, since he is merely a tourist and wouldn’t recognise the changes as they occurred. Nowhere in Crayon’s rural England do we find tenant farmers or displaced peasants, which were among several of the harsh realities of England during the time Crayon writes about. In Crayon’s bucolic paradise, the farmers are all noble and proud, the peasants’ clean and cosy cottages (and they all seem to have them) ‘bespeak the influence of taste, flowing down from high sources, and pervading the lowest corners of the public mind’ (RLE 53). Yes, it seems that some larger estates have somehow ‘almost annihilated the sturdy race of small farmers’: Crayon apologises for this in ‘Rural Life in England’, but these, he believes, ‘are but casual breaks in the general system’ (RLE 53).

Likewise, Crayon’s London (the only city in question) is one in which the gigantic monster is charmed into repose. ... The shops are shut. The fires of forges and manufactories are extinguished; and the sun, no longer obscured by murky clouds of smoke, pours down a sober yellow radiance into the quiet streets. (‘A Sunday in London’, 94)

Obviously, people work for a living in London – ‘the gigantic monster’ simultaneously being the City itself and its spewing industrial machines – but Crayon’s observation of London just happens to be on a Sunday, where people trade the factories for the churches and parks. Clearly, Crayon seeks to present both city and country at their sparkling best, denying or whitewashing reality in order to do so.

But rather than directly address the latent animosity between America and England, as he did in ‘English Writers on America’, Irving, through Crayon, allows the simple opposition of ‘city’ and ‘country’ to do the work for him. Sketches like ‘A Sunday in London’ coexist with sketches like ‘The Country Church,’ which, set in a village outside of London, simultaneously satirises the pretentious manners and false religion of the village’s most prominent residents, yet portrays the rest of the country parishioners as hardworking, modest, and decent citizens: the very image of how an American would like to have been portrayed. It is easy to see how this subtle mode of comparison stands in for a larger national pride; to the typical Englishman of Irving’s day, Americans were the country cousins, and so in portraying London in a flattering light, but the countryside in a still more flattering light, Irving carefully retains the image of reverence while subtly promoting his own national values.

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Furthermore, when New York is represented in *The Sketch Book*, it is done so from the point of view of its still-wild horizon. Nowhere are we presented with New York City’s political importance, its overcrowded and dirty streets, or its nearly constant business trading: Irving’s New York is the Catskill mountains and the Hudson River valley, headless horsemen and dwarves at nine-pins. Famously, he took ‘Old World’ adventure stories and transplanted them onto an American landscape using American vernacular, and readers on both sides of the Atlantic absolutely relished Irving’s imagination and wicked humour, and were positively entranced by his descriptions of American abundance and good cheer. By taking the old and making it new, he achieved the impossible: New York stories ‘Rip Van Winkle’ and ‘Sleepy Hollow’ are so well known as mythology that we tend to forget that they have an author at all.

It is perhaps worth mentioning, by way of conclusion, that *The Sketch Book* was widely applauded by both its English and its American readers; its English readers found ‘their world reflected in a mind so accomplished and winning’, and the book ‘an honour to American letters’, while its American readers found *The Sketch Book* to be a ‘model of prose’ and a ‘matter of national congratulation’. In fact, *The Sketch Book* was used as a school primer in the United States for nearly 100 years after a publication, replacing Addison’s *Spectator* as a prose model; no less a Londoner than Lord Byron claimed to have known *The Sketch Book* by heart. Clearly, even though Irving risked alienation by presenting a direct criticism of English writers and the London lifestyle, he wrote with such delicacy that his words rang true. On Irving’s side, however, are his famous conversational and social skills: Irving was an enormous social success in England, and, as a confirmed bachelor, a sought-after dinner guest and house party participant. After achieving financial success with *The Sketch Book*, but never having married after the loss of his fiancée, Irving was also considered to be a ‘good catch’, and even *Frankenstein* writer Mary Shelley hoped for more than just casual friendship with him. As a result of the immediate and enduring popularity of *The Sketch Book*, he was able to maintain a comfortable and stylish lifestyle, surrounding himself with London’s finest painters, actors, and writers. Having learned to negotiate the cross-Atlantic exchange, is it any wonder that this dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker then pursued politics, and became an aide-de-camp to the American legation in London beginning in 1829? He also received an honorary doctorate of civil law from Oxford in 1831. After making such a success of himself in London, beginning with his little sketch book, Irving, in true pastoral tradition and at peace with himself and his reputation, found his way home, dying in his beloved New York in 1859. His quiet influence, however, lives on.

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23 Brooks 159.
24 Brooks 165.

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My Memoir Betrayed Me: A Neo-Expressivist Study of The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by Farah Ahmedi

Neelam Jabeen

Abstract

This paper is a neo-expressivist study of The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by a young adult Afghan refugee Farah Ahmedi. As opposed to expressivism, neo-expressivism rests on the idea that expression in writing is not of a single, authentic self but something more than this. While expressing, one is expressing something else, and is also being expressed. This paper rhetorically analyses the metaphors that the text under study uses to see what else is being expressed through the writer. The detailed analysis of the metaphors used in the text reveals the author’s ‘internalised oppression,’ and ‘double consciousness’ that create a narrative – the ‘white saviour narrative’ – other than the apparent survival story of the writer in the memoir. The study converges neo-expressivism with the postcolonial perspective of ‘internalised oppression’, and ‘double consciousness’ to complicate the use of memoir in an expressivist pedagogy classroom where personal writing is considered a window to imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development of the student writers.

Key Words: Memoir; expressivism; neo-expressivism, internalised oppression; double consciousness; white saviour narrative.

Expressivist composition pedagogy affords students the opportunity to ‘take the responsibility of writing’ while writing ‘in their own language.’ This may encourage teachers to introduce memoir as a genre in the classroom as it fits into the definition and function of expressivism that Burnham and Powell describe in their ‘Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice:’

Expressivism places the writer at the center of its theory and pedagogy, assigning highest value to the writer’s imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior. Expressivist pedagogy employs freewriting, journal keeping, reflective writing and small group dialogic collaborative response to foster a writer’s aesthetic, cognitive, and moral development.

So, expressivist pedagogy allows the writers to express themselves in a way that their voice becomes a window to their ‘imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual development.’ Memoir, in this way, is one of the suitable options for the expressivist pedagogues since it allows...

2 Burnham 115.
3 Burnham 115
instructors to gauge the maturity of their pupils through their personal writing. Composition theorist Jeannette Harris’s definition of expressivist writing as ‘loosely structured, subjective writing with a strong personal voice’ also supports the use of memoir in a composition classroom. (There are also counterarguments against the use of memoir in the classroom denouncing the genre as ‘easy’ and ‘uncritical, but that discussion will be out of the scope of this paper).

Where expressivists emphasise the personal and subjective in writing, neo-expressivists complicate this idea further by dismantling the binary of personal and public. Joshua Hilst in his ‘Deleuze: (Neo) Expressivism in Composition’ presents the notion of ‘expression’ as something more than mere reflection of a unified self: ‘expression is not of a subjective mind but of a whole social, textual and material field’. For Hilst, expressing the self is ‘one aspect of expression;’ other aspects include being expressed and expressing ‘something else altogether.’ Drawing on Deleuzian expressivism, Hilst explicates that ‘existence’ or ‘being’ is a ‘substance’ that ‘expresses itself in different attributes [e.g. mind and body] … these attributes then express themselves in various modes (such as this thought or that thought, this body or that body).’ To simplify it further, when I express, I am being expressed, and something else is being expressed through me unconsciously.

For this essay, I assert the usefulness of applying this neo-expressivist notion of being expressed, expressing, and something else being expressed to The Other Side of the Sky: A Memoir by Farah Ahmedi. I argue that Ahmedi in her memoir is not only recounting her past through her personal memory and voice, but ‘something else’, a counter narrative – the white saviour narrative – is also being expressed through her. Locating metaphors in the text and using Hilst’s term ‘palpate,’ while addressing ‘internalized oppression/colonialism’ and ‘double consciousness’ of the author, reveal the white saviour narrative. This argument in turn helps complicate the notion of using the genre of memoir in a composition classroom or as a literary genre in a literature classroom.

Ahmedi wrote her memoir as a young adult Afghan refugee in the United States (originally Ahmedi wrote her story for ABC’s ‘Good Morning America’ contest). Her memoir is a tale of her experiences as a young Afghan girl who stepped on a land mine on her way to school in Kabul. The Other Side of the Sky is the story of her survival (1). Ahmedi saw Afghanistan in crises since the day of her birth. It fell in the hands of one oppressive power (external as well as internal) after the other. She briefly refers to the different groups who ruled Afghanistan before and after her birth: there are references to the king being overthrown by a military dictator followed by Communist party rule, Soviet invasion in 1979 followed by Jihadist groups engaged in civil war, and the eventual uprise of the Taliban. There are no references to American invasion of Afghanistan, although she did refer to 9/11 as it postponed her flight to America for

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7 Hilst.
8 Hilst.
9 Farah Ahmedi with Tamim Ansari, The Other Side of the Sky (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2005). Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text. 2

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six months. Stepping on a landmine was something that later determined everything that happened in Ahmedi’s life. She was selected by a team of German doctors to be taken to Germany for her treatment because her medical situation was very grave and the doctors in Afghanistan could not help her. She spent two years there without her family and eventually returned with a prosthetic leg. On return, the circumstances were no better than before, and one day she even lost her father and sisters when a rocket landed on her house. Her two brothers escaped to Pakistan, supposedly, for fear of being recruited in the Taliban force, but she and her mother never heard about them ever again. Later, along with her mother, she too fled to Pakistan, crossing the border illegally. After spending some time there, she applied for the World Relief program that was taking refugees to the US. And on arriving the US, her life changed altogether.

Ahmedi arrived in the US in 2002 as a 14-year-old and wrote her memoir when she was 18. The time that she spent in Afghanistan, Germany, and Pakistan and later in the US developed a sense of double consciousness in her as a young adult refugee. W.E.B. Du Bois defines double consciousness as ‘a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.’\(^{10}\) Closely related to the double consciousness is the idea of internalized oppression/colonialism. E. J. R. David and Derthick in their Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups sum up the concept by alluding to different postcolonial scholars thus stating:

Postcolonial scholars (e.g., Fanon, 1965; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965) argue that internalized oppression, or specifically internalized colonialism is the major psychological effect of colonialism. Fanon argues that the sustained denigration and injustice that the colonized are subjected to often lead to self-doubt, identity confusion, and feeling of inferiority among the colonized. Memmi added that the colonized may eventually believe the inferiority of one’s indigenous identity. Freire further contended that because of the inferiority attached to their indigenous identities, the colonized might develop a desire to rid oneself of such identities and to emulate the colonizer because their ways are seen as superior. Further the colonized may eventually feel a sense of gratitude and indebtedness toward the colonizer for civilizing and enlightening the colonized (Rimonte, 1997).\(^{11}\)

Both these concepts of double consciousness and internalised colonialism are palpate-able in Ahmedi’s memoir. She is engaged, as expressivists would believe, in expressing a truthful account of her survival in an authentic, individual, subjective voice. Nancy Mack, however, thinks that while writing a memoir, there is no single subject position from which the writer writes:

The naive self who was present at the time of the experience.
The subjective self who interprets the experience as the culture would suggest.
The future self who imagines the person that the author wishes to become.


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The author self who negotiates among the other selves and constructs meaning. (58)

These multiple subject positions that Mack suggests also resonate with the aspects of expression that Hilst discusses. Mack’s ‘subjective self’ becomes a vehicle for something else to be expressed – cultural expectations in this context. It also reflects internalised cultural constructs. Ahmedi does negotiate among all these ‘selves’ and, as a result, her memoir is not merely an account of her survival (‘the naïve self’) but of an individual who has internalised oppression and who looks at herself from others’ eyes (‘the subjective self’) and who wants to assimilate into the foreign culture (‘the future self’).

Daniel F. Collins in his ‘From the Personal to the Social’ also brings forth the notion of the relationship between the personal and the social in composition. In the article, Collins refers to the composition pedagogies of several prominent expressivists who believe that the personal and the social are intertwined in writing. While commenting on Mary Rose O’Reilly’s composition pedagogy, Collins observes that she ‘escorts students from the idiosyncrasies of the personal to the checks and balances of the social.’ Similarly he quotes Robert Yagelski who believes: ‘When we write, we enact a sense of ourselves as beings in the world. In this regard, writing both shapes and reflects our sense of who we are in relation to each other and the world around us. Therein lies the transformative power of writing.’ Peter Elbow, according to Collins, ‘considers expressivism as a form of discourse that addresses the ways in which interested parties engage other interested parties, all the while identifying (and checking and modifying) our individual and collective stakes in the matters at hand.’ Ahmedi’s act of writing in a way that pleases the American audience can clearly be seen in this light. In Afghanistan, the role of America is that of an oppressor who has invaded the land after 9/11 to teach a lesson to the so-called terrorists. Ahmedi, while living in the US as a refugee, is at the mercy of the American government who has protected her from the Taliban in her own country and from a wretched existence as a refugee in Pakistan. Having accepted the US as her saviour, Ahmedi’s narrative pays tribute to the American government and the people who have so wholeheartedly accepted her. In Collins’ terms, Ahmedi’s writing is personal made public where she acknowledges the world she inhabits so that when she writes it is ‘in a way that heals [her relationship with the US], and not a way that wounds’.

This expressivist idea of the connection between the personal and the social is complicated when the matter at hand is a memoir written by a refugee or an immigrant. There is nothing novel about the idea of considering one’s audience when writing, but it is a considerably different situation when the writer belongs to a marginalised or oppressed group and the audience belongs to the centre. ‘Writing back’ is also not an unfamiliar phenomenon, as postcolonial discourse brims with resistance literature; however, writing is more problematic when it conforms to the expectations of the centre. Ahmedi’s memoir, just as it fits Mack’s multiple ‘selves’ in a memoir, also fits Collins’ understanding of an expressivist writing. But the text also problematises the act of memoir writing and enters the realm of new-expressivism.

While conforming to the expectations of the society that Ahmedi inhabits, the memory that

13 Collins 123-4.
14 Collins 125.
15 Collins 126.
16 Collins 123.
she recalls does not necessarily represent her personal authentic voice that would represent her true identity as an Afghan. Her voice has been shaped by the double consciousness that is result of the internalised oppression. So, when she expresses, she is being expressed and something else is being expressed through her. Victor Villanueva in his “Memoria” is a Friend of Ours’ argues that there is

the need to reclaim a memory, memory of an identity in formation and constant reformation … memory of an identity as formed through the generations … the need to reclaim and retain the memory of the imperial lords, those who have forcibly changed the identities of the people of color through colonization.17

Villanueva here acknowledges that assimilation occurs but one should try to reclaim the past while realising that one has been forced to assimilate into the dominant culture. In Ahmedi’s narrative, however, this realisation seems to be absent because of internalised oppression.

I have tried to locate this absent realisation through heaven/hell metaphors that Ahmedi uses in the text. Michael Osborn claims, ‘archetypal metaphors are grounded in prominent features of experience.’18 If Ahmedi’s metaphors are grounded in her experience, it is fairly safe to hypothesise and easy to ‘palpate’ that Ahmedi exhibits double consciousness that is the result of internalised oppression constructing a white saviour narrative. The title of Ahmedi’s memoir The Other Side of the Sky is significant and symbolic. It constructs the dichotomy of heaven and hell and heaven and earth – metaphors that permeate the entire narrative. She recounts that as a child she always wanted to know ‘what lay on the other side of [her] city. [She] never dreamed that [she] would see [her] home reduced to rubble and would end up living on the other side of the world, in the suburbs of the city called Chicago’ (1-2). Her life in Afghanistan is the life of ‘losses,’ but her life in America is that of ‘tremendous gifts’ (2). So from the very beginning we see the heaven versus hell metaphors at work. Heaven stands for all the good that she receives, first in Germany in the form of her prosthesis and later in America in form of a safe life. Hell stands for her life in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and all the miseries associated with that life.

The first scene in the memoir that takes her back to her past is her carnival visit with her dear friend Alyce and her husband John. While sitting on Gondola ride, ‘the machinery sent off some kind of spark … I dropped from a trapdoor to some other reality. Suddenly I wasn’t in America on a carnival ride. I was on the ground’ (5). The parallel positioning of ‘America’ and ‘ground’ and the word ‘dropped’ between these holds significance as in the first few pages of the memoir, the reader is prepared to understand the metaphors and expect them to recur throughout the narrative. America is ‘high’ like heaven as dropping down from that high position brings her to the ‘low’ position: the ‘ground’ that is her past life in Afghanistan. In the same scene, when she is on the ‘ground,’ she is helpless but when she realises she is actually in America she is relieved that ‘Alyce was there to save [her] life’ (6). Concluding this episode, she explains: ‘My mother and I are safe now. We have good food and decent shelter and I have a dear friend’ (7). So attached to the overarching metaphors of heaven and hell are series of related binaries where everything positive is heaven – America (or Germany in some instances) and everything negative is hell – Afghanistan or Pakistan. So if we try to make a list, it would be somewhat like


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this: Heaven/hell, America/Afghanistan, high/low, sky/ground, West/East, hope/hopelessness, benevolence/malevolence, safety/danger, modernity/tradition, freedom/entrapment, and emancipation/oppression.

As already mentioned, Ahmedi relates the series of crises Afghanistan has been through. She was born in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, so the process of internalising the oppression and colonialism and internalising the white saviour myth was initiated even before she was born. As a child in Afghanistan, she was told the tales of early invasion of Afghanistan by Russian troops and, not surprisingly, those tales are told as if those were good days that Afghanistan saw.

Afghanistan was going through great changes at the time. Kabul was becoming a modern city. My mother used to tell me how it was in the capital when she first moved there, and later too when the Russian occupied the city. In those days, she said, city women went to work outside the home. They wore stockings instead of the traditional baggy pantaloons. They didn’t wear veils or even head scarves. They appeared on TV, where they read the news, sang songs and even performed dance. (21)

Modernity relates to Western ways of life, and it clashes with the traditional Afghan way of life. The mujahideen who were fighting against the Russian rule were seen with hatred and contempt because their rebellion caused the Russians to attack the villages. Russian soldiers were thought to be friendly, and Afghans were ‘not particularly afraid of the Russians’ (23). Ahmedi was growing up in Afghanistan in a family that was already struggling with the dualism of modernity and tradition where modernity stood for Western ways of life, that Russian occupation inculcated in part and tradition stood for indigenous identity that was looked down upon.

In those days my father made a Western-style outfit for my mother. He told her, ‘Don’t wear a headscarf anymore. Cut your hair, be modern.’ But my mother was a traditional woman, and on this point she refused to go along with her husband’s wishes. ‘I won’t do it,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be a modern woman’ … It was all part of the conflict between an old way of life and a new way of life. My father leaned toward modern ways. He wanted to be part of a new, socially modern Afghanistan. (21, 25)

In a memoir, the writer is looking back at the past but he/she cannot escape the current ‘self’ that the person is. So the past is looked at from the eyes of the present self. Ahmedi’s six or seven year old ‘naïve self’ is not as visible as her ‘subjective self’ who is aware of the circumstances in which she is writing the memoir, who has internalised the oppression from a young age and who cannot escape the double consciousness that the text exhibits in the form of the central metaphors of hell/heaven.

Looking at the colonial/imperial ‘centre’ as advanced, modern, and ‘better’ is habitual for those who have internalised the oppression, so, as a result, the oppressed have a ‘stake in their subordinated identity.’19 Ahmedi’s life changed when she stepped on a land mine when she was seven-year-old. After getting severely injured, she was chosen to be taken to Germany for treatment. She considers herself to be ‘fortunate that [her] situation was so grave’ (51) because at the Afghan hospital they told her that the ‘Germans were [her] one and only hope’ (50). So the German doctors are seen as ‘saviors’ who are ‘good,’ ‘wonderful’ (51), ‘smart, those German

19 Pyke 557.

doctors,’ ‘loving’ and ‘gracious’ (56). After comparing the Afghan hospital with the German hospital, Ahmedi reflects: ‘Going from the hospital in Afghanistan to this one felt like going from hell to heaven’ (57). In the hospital, she came across a woman called Christina whom she considers an ‘angel’ and she brought her ‘toys and flowers and cards and candy’ (63). This entire episode of getting injured, being selected and going to Germany is presented as an ‘opportunity’ to get out of ‘hell’ and land in ‘heaven’. Later, when refugees in Pakistan were being selected to be taken to America, Ahmedi also found herself to be fortunate to be ‘disabled’ and ‘orphaned’ and her mother a ‘widow’ because these were pre-requisites to be ‘protected’ (133-62). Ahmedi took the falling of a star from the sky as a sign of God’s power: ‘he had showed me that he could take the mightiest life and plunge it into hell and he could take the most wretched of beings and lift her to heaven’ (165). So the heaven versus hell metaphors are again being used when she finally gets a chance to go to America.

It is ‘fear of freedom’ that makes Ahmedi take decision of going to America. Her life in Afghanistan or Pakistan is challenging, but she seeks refuge from those challenges:

A single girl can’t live by herself in the cities of Pakistan or Afghanistan! Are you waiting for someone to marry me? Do you think that’s how I will be saved, Mama? Forget it! No one is going to marry me! Here in Pakistan, if a girl has so much as a mole to mar her beauty, she gets no suitors! … and I’m missing a leg Mama, who will take me? In America it is different. There if I am alone, I can survive, I can live. No one will look down on me for being single. No one will attack me – the law won’t allow it. There I can go to school, learn something, build a future for myself. (137)

Remember that these are the words of a 12 or 13-year-old Ahmedi when she is trying to convince her mother to go to America. She has never been to America before, but she can say all this because she generalises and assumes this on the basis of her two-year stay in Germany when she was between seven and nine-year-old: ‘Mama America is like Germany. I have been to Germany’ (136). According to Friere ‘the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom.’ Consequently, instead of living in her own country and fighting for freedom, Ahmedi escapes her country and finds refuge and security with the oppressor.

This ‘fear of freedom’ also goes hand in hand with the idea of dependence on the oppressor. There is a consciousness that without the help of the oppressor, the oppressed cannot survive. So in the beginning, the German doctors came as ‘saviours’ and later the American organisation that sponsored escape to America was the ‘saviour,’ (keeping in mind America being the current oppressive force in Afghanistan) Ahmedi also constructs her image of a person who is always at the receiving end. This further strengthens the myth of the white saviour. In Germany, Christina the ‘angel’ is always bringing goods for her that gives Ahmedi joy. Later, it is Alyce who is another ‘angel’ (198) in the heaven called America: ‘as soon as she saw how much we needed, she took it upon herself to save our lives, and I do not use the word ‘save’ lightly’ (203). The moment Ahmedi arrived in the US, she was expecting every type of material good from the people around her. There is a long list of things that she received step by step: ‘public aid,’ ‘food stamps,’ ‘payment for being disabled,’ ‘a telephone,’ ‘some fun,’ ‘pots and pans, dishes, and

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21 Friere 47.
cooking utensils,’ ‘clothes that matched the style of this country,’ ‘television,’ ‘a Mercedes-Benz’ (185-235).

Internalised oppression and sense of inferiority also leads toward assimilation. Looking at one’s self from the eyes of the oppressor creates the desire to be like the oppressor and creates difference within the members of the oppressed groups. Schwalbe et al. refer to this phenomenon as ‘defensive othering.’

Having internalised the Western discursive practices, the oppressed take part in perpetuation of the discourse that portrays the oppressed as ‘racially and culturally subhuman, deficient and vile.’ In Ahmedi’s memoir, the desire to assimilate into the culture of the West and ‘defensive othering’ is manifest through metaphors. Head scarf and ‘chadari’ are referred to as symbols of conservatism and oppression done by Taliban. There are long details of troubles that she faced when she had to wear chadari. Western clothes on the other hand stand for liberalism and emancipation. After going to Germany, she soon felt the desire ‘to be the part of their wonderful world’ and the means to that was ‘wearing the same kind of clothes as the people around [her]’ (64). Later, when preparing to go for America, they were shown orientation videos and Ahmedi devotes some space to tell the reader that they were ‘warned’ not to wear ‘long head scarves and chadoris’ as they could ‘strangle’ them in escalators (158). So head scarf and chadari, the very obvious symbols of otherness, are considered troublesome. The first step for Ahmedi then was to get rid of her traditional dress code. ‘We had our head scarves, our veils of modesty, wrapped tightly around our heads and chins and shoulders. In Pakistan, wrapping ourselves this way gave us some anonymity, some protection from stares. Here, dressed in this manner, we stood out like ants in a sugar bowl. No one else looked the way we did’ (169). And later after discarding her traditional dress code she exclaimed: ‘American clothes made us feel so much safer in public’ (198).

There are numerous places when Ahmedi distances herself from her mother, indulging in ‘defensive othering.’ A very significant scene in the memoir is when her mother refused to eat turkey on Thanksgiving considering it non-halal (202). Ahmedi never uses the plural pronoun ‘we’ in this episode. So there is clear distancing between herself and her mother, although eating only halal meat (when animal is slaughtered according to Islamic rules) is essential for every Muslim. Similarly, when she returned from Germany as a nine-year-old, she felt separated from the entire family and saw them as primitive as they ate while sitting on the floor with their hands. The very colours of the house annoyed her; in short ‘[her] home embarrassed [her]’ and '[her] family’s way of life now seemed primitive’ (74-6). All these instances are to reinforce to the audience of her memoir that she is not like her other family members. She is more like her American audience now.

Toward the end of her memoir, Ahmedi still seems to be struggling to assimilate fully in the American culture, and she uses her memoir as a platform to demand this incorporation.

Maybe we embarrass them [Americans] … we are also ashamed of our situation – of being so dependent, impoverished and out of place … we are ashamed that we don’t know English very well … we don’t want to take the first step because we assume we’ll be rejected … why should an American kid who has everything want to waste time with a poor refugee? … but here is something I want to say in this book: it’s hard for us to reach out to you; we, with our

clumsy English. I want to say don’t be afraid of us – you have to understand: We are afraid of you. We want to make friends but you have to take the first step … invite us in. (226-7)

As stated previously, Ahmedi wrote this memoir as a tale of survival, and she declares in the prologue that ‘it is the story of many people … so many people have stepped on land mines, so many have gotten hurt by war, have lost their families, fled their homes’ (2). This analysis shows that this is not all that she has expressed in this memoir. The other things that were ‘expressed through her,’ recalling Hilst’s claim, are part of her narrative. The detailed study of the heaven and hell metaphors that Ahmedi has used shows that memoir, as a genre, is not necessarily a true expression of one’s voice. There are other voices that escape through the writer. As young as Ahmedi is at the time of writing, she is probably not aware of these other voices. The realisation that Villanueva suggests is somehow missing. While reclaiming the memory of her transformation, she is not aware, or at least does not show that awareness through her memoir, that she is perpetuating her oppression by letting the white saviour narrative escape through her.

Going back to Collins’ idea of ‘healing the wounds,’ Ahmedi’s memoir does the job. She clearly has the American audience in mind and the underlying white saviour narrative of her memoir strengthens the sense of superiority of the dominant West. Having experienced reading The Other Side of the Sky in a youth adult literature classroom and seeing the response of the American YA readers, I was not surprised to find that the group was unable to, or not willing to, understand my interpretation of the text, and they saw it as a perfect non-fiction young adult survival text. They also had their justification to support their viewpoint but that is just one side of the picture – one aspect of expression. They could see the ‘naïve self’ who suffered and survived, but they could not see the ‘subjective self’ who has internalised the oppression so much so that her survival story became a contributor in perpetuating the dominant discourse, hence conforming to the expectations of the society.

This case study also asks the affordances of the use of memoir writing in an expressivist pedagogy classroom. Jean Bessette in her ‘Past Writing: Negotiating the Complexity of Experience and Memory’ recognises that recalling a past event from memory does not stand for telling the truth because memory is ‘dynamic’ and it keeps changing because of the experiences of the present and ‘such understandings of memory upset calls to represent experience as individual, authentic, chronological, and linear.’24 However, Bessette still considers it a useful activity in the composition classroom because ‘memory writing offers a unique opportunity for critical analysis of students’ social and political locations’ (80). Bessette’s argument thus far is understandable – that memory writing or a memoir would still be a window to ‘students’ social and political locations’ (80), but the complication that the current study brings forth is: what good does such a memory writing do to the student who has ‘internalised oppression’ and exhibits ‘double consciousness’? Bessette also acknowledges, while quoting Maurice Halbwachs, that ‘the mind reconstructs under the pressure of society’ (qtd in Bessette).25 So what does a refugee, like Farah Ahmedi, produce when writing from the memory under the pressure of the society? I contend that, in such a case, personal writing or writing from the memory is problematic for both the student writer in a composition classroom and the student reader in a literature classroom. Bessette stresses the importance of using the experience

25 Bessette 81.
‘critically’ so that one is aware of the ‘ideological system’ in which one experiences and later recalls the experience. This resonates with Villanueva’s point earlier referenced. A critical understanding of the situation in which one is writing and a realisation that one is writing under the pressure of the society is crucial for memoir writing, and when both of these ingredients are missing, the memoir serves to perpetuate the oppression, instead of giving an expression to the identity of the writer.

This case study has complicated the notion of using memoir in an expressivist classroom. However, the study has only laid bare the challenges and complications one may come across in a teaching and reading situation or in a writing and reading situation. The ways to cope with the situation can be taken up in another study.

The study has also brought into light, as Karen D. Pyke asserts, a neglected aspect of the postcolonial discourse in composition and literature: internalised oppression. Pyke lays bare the challenge of writing about internalised oppression. She discusses in detail the reasons for the lack of the study of internalised oppression and traces the roots of misconstrued understanding of internalised oppression as ‘blaming the victim.’ She presents a counterargument that it is actually the ‘theoretical fixation’ with the concept of ‘resistance’ that ‘mystifies and normalizes domination.’ Discussing internalised oppression does not reinforce the inferiority of the oppressed because it is not the result of ‘cultural or biological characteristic of the subjugated. Nor is it the consequence of any weakness, ignorance, inferiority, psychological defect, gullibility, or other shortcomings of the oppressed.’ So while studying the metaphors to dig out the internalised oppression of the author that creates and perpetuates the white saviour narrative, the purpose is not to highlight that the oppressed are inferior. On the contrary, the study reinforces the importance of the discussion of internalised oppression in the mainstream postcolonial discourse so that it can be seen as another hazard of domination. The study also implies that while using such texts in the literature classroom, the teacher should be aware of the ideological baggage that such texts may carry.

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26 Bessette 81.
27 Pyke 560.
28 Pyke 560-61.
29 Pyke 553.


The Geography of Jean Rhys: The Impact of National Identity upon the Exiled Female Author

Alexandra Philp

Abstract

Critical considerations of Jean Rhys’ texts are often intent on geopolitically ‘placing’ the female author. Feeling exiled from her birth country of Dominica and her resident country of England, Rhys felt as if she ‘had no country really now’. National identity seems to have impact upon both public and private practices of Rhys’ authorship. A lack of national identity implies that Rhys is placeless; a concept which is further problematised when considered under Virginia Woolf’s arguments in A Room of One’s Own (1929). If Rhys does not have country, how can she have a private space from which to write? For an exiled female author, private space is an issue pertinent to studies of her authorship. Through the frameworks of A Room of One’s Own and Hélène Cixous’ concept of ‘country in language’, this article demonstrates that Jean Rhys may use her writing practice as an imagined place in which to search for home. For the exiled female author, the textualisation of place and her identity as ‘author’ is an alternative dwelling space.

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‘So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.’

Throughout her life Jean Rhys struggled with feelings of exile and isolation. As a ‘White’ Creole and critic of colonialism, she felt detached from her ‘motherland’ of England and excluded from belonging among the ‘Black’ Creole population in her birth country of Dominica. At sixteen she immigrated to England where she found herself dismissed for being a colonial and a female, thus beginning a lifetime of functioning perpetually as ‘other’. Bridget T. Chalk and Helen Carr suggest that she felt lacking in nationality, a notion that is confirmed by Rhys herself. In a 1959 letter to Francis Wyndham (later to become Rhys’ literary executor after her death in 1979), Rhys wrote that she felt she had ‘no country really now’. Rhys’ lack of national identity forces her to inhabit the space between countries; to find another space to belong.

The impact of (a lack of) national identity on the female author is a question that proves important to studies of Jean Rhys. The question appears central to much Rhysian criticism (see

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Chalk; Carr; Erica Laura Johnson5), and is perhaps why a significant interest in the elusive figure of Rhys herself retains a strong hold over critical considerations of her texts. Critics are constantly attempting to ‘place’ Rhys, and I wonder how belonging in no place influences Rhys’ authorial identity and practice. For a female author, this notion of dislocation is complicated further by her gender. Concepts of home and private space are inherently linked to the female sex, and a sense of national dislocation may render such spaces difficult to inhabit.

In A Room of One’s Own (1929) Virginia Woolf argues that a female author must have a private space if she is to write. For Woolf, an obviously ‘English’ author, considerations of private and domestic space for the female practitioner is a question of pertinence to her practice. However, how can a female author with a challenged sense of nationality find a room in which to dwell if she does not even have country? For Rhys, then, what effect does an incoherent national identity have on her practice? As Johnson suggests, writing from terra infirma, a lack of physical country and land, insists that the female author must create terre in a different way.6 One such way might be to search for a place in language itself.

For Hélène Cixous, the author may find ‘country in language’.7 This concept allows us to speculate that a lack of national and domestic belonging prompted Jean Rhys to find a textual, rather than geographic, home. Through the act of writing and the textualisation of place an exiled female author can search for a room of her own in writing itself. Though Rhys may dwell in her writing, this means she can only really ‘inhabit’ an imagined space. When Rhys leaves her practice, she is again homeless. Rhys did not find belonging in her personal life as she never felt truly accepted in a nationality or geographic place. Her authorial practice, however, functions as a space in which she could search for an alternative belonging. Both the act of writing and the identity of ‘author’ provide Rhys with a site in which she can create a place for herself. In this article, and through the frameworks of A Room of One’s Own and Cixous’ concept of ‘country in language’, I will explore how an exiled female author with a lack of national and domestic belonging may turn towards her writing in search for ‘home’. It is important to note that the term ‘exile’ in this article is used to articulate Rhys’ feelings of rejection from place, rather than in a literal or political sense.

Rhys was born in 1890 in the former English colony of Roseau, Dominica. Her upbringing in Dominica was as a colonial, ensuring that she was unable to convincingly dwell among the majority of the Dominican population. In her unfinished autobiography Smile Please, published after her death with a foreword by her editor Diana Athill, Rhys makes clear her childhood of longing to belong to Dominica. She was enchanted by the Patois songs of her nurse, though her desire, perhaps, is most clearly articulated by her memory of being given two dolls, one of dark skin and one of white. Rhys remembers that; ‘As soon as I saw the dark doll I wanted her as I had never wanted anything in my life before’8, and she smashes the face of the white doll. For Rhys, her ‘White’ Dominican face was the reason for national and cultural exclusion. In wanting a ‘Black’ Dominican face, Rhys wanted to belong.

In her chapter ‘Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual’, Carr explains that Rhys existed in a state of constant contrary tension. Though she longed to be Indigenous, she also grew up reading

6 Johnson 14.


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English books, and her view of England was therefore ‘glamorous, magnificent’. When she arrived in England at 16 with dreams of becoming an actress, she was rendered ‘other’ by her gender and further rejected for her colonial status. She worked as a chorus girl, and likely a prostitute, firstly in England and then throughout Europe. She married the first of her three husbands, and spend some time in rented rooms in Paris. After being dismissed in both Dominica and her ‘motherland’, it is possible that Paris offered Rhys a third, hopeful site where she might find belonging. Rhys was, of course, still ‘other’ in Paris, and she settled in rural England for the rest of her life. She only returned to Dominica once in 1936. Rhys straddled two cultures without finding concrete identity in either. Perhaps illuminated by Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands, which Aida Hurtado and Karina Cervantez describe as a third space between ‘two countries, two social systems, two languages,’ Rhys resided within the unfixed space between Dominica and England. She felt exiled; as if she belonged to no nation.

She wrote for much of her life, and throughout her career published a collection of short stories (1927), followed by five novels and a further two collections of short stories. Her texts received little critical acclaim until, after a 27-year hiatus, she published Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966. In 1967, she received the W. H. Smith Award, and in 1978, she ‘was awarded the rank of Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to literature’. Both awards celebrate ‘English’ authors. When asked how she felt of her belated success, Rhys replied that ‘it has come too late’. It is unclear whether it was her ascent to success or England’s ‘claiming’ to which Rhys was referring.

Scholars of Rhys argue that she is often read quasi-autobiographically (see Sue Thomas, Barbara Fister, and her protagonists may be viewed as ‘avatars’ of herself. Her protagonists function as the exiled female West Indian, and their struggle with national identity and the resulting feelings of isolation could be seen as derived from Rhys’ lived experience. The character Anna Morgan in Voyage Though the Dark (1934), for example, feels that ‘England was the real thing and out there [West Indies] was the dream, but I could never fit them

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9 Carr 105.  
10 Chalk 122.  
11 Chalk 121.  
12 Johnson 22.  
15 Carr 93; Chalk 119.  
17 Johnson 268.  
21 Carr 98.

together’.  

Sasha Jensen in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) and Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also resonate with feeling a lack of belonging to place, with Sasha unable to permanently inhabit spaces in Europe and Antoinette’s fragmented sense of identity at each location of the text: Coulibri, Granbois, and England. Whether in the Caribbean or in the metropole, Rhys’ protagonists do not inhabit place nor nationality comfortably. For her exiled protagonists, citizenship (or residence) does not equal belonging.

It is difficult to argue that Rhys’ dislocated sense of identity had no impact on how and what she wrote. Exile from place, nationality, and home is seen as a ‘trademark’ of her authorship, with Chalk suggesting that her texts ‘cannot be separated from these questions’. Rather than drawing direct causation, however, I explain the links between Rhys’ search for nationality and her narratives here merely to problematise the concept of Rhys’ authorship. The way Rhys functions as ‘author’ is filled with complexities, though her challenged national identity does seem to have a significant influence on the concept of her authorship.

Madan Sarup suggests that nationality signifies to readers, critics, and authors themselves the language, culture, and ‘norms’ in which their texts operate and are contextualised. This notion is clearly seen operating in the reception of Rhys’ early texts. In the preface to her first published book, the short story collection *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), Ford Madox Ford articulates Rhys as an exotic identity and despite praising her ‘singular instinct for form’, positions her as an ‘underdog’ with exotic perspective. Ford positions Rhys as ‘other’, which Chalk claims somewhat diminished her potential to gain social and authorial legitimacy in the metropole. Before the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, few of her critics in the West Indies saw her as being truly ‘Caribbean’, which likewise diminished her potential to gain social and authorial legitimacy in her home country. Rhys’ authorship was refused footing and belonging in either nationality, and the notion that identities are not fluid but ‘limited by borders and boundaries’ operates strongly here. The author and text are not judged or identified by the writer but, as Johnson suggests, by ‘pre-existing national or socio-linguistic categories’. The way in which Rhys is positioned and accepted as author is inherently political: her colonial status dictates how she is read and received. When viewed in this way, Oliver Quimby Melton’s insistence that nationality is an ‘unavoidable, requisite donne of modern life’ makes clear the importance of national belonging in forming individual, and in Rhys’ case authorial, identity. How her texts were viewed were of importance to Rhys, as demonstrated by her comment when receiving the rank of Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Wanting to belong to a national literary community and receive acceptance (and celebration) for her work is a

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23 Chalk 122.
26 Chalk 130.
27 Carr 94.
28 Sarup 93.
29 Johnson 269.
component of Rhys’ authorial practice. It could be seen that a lack of belonging in her personal life translated to a desire to belong in an alternative identity: author.

The result of (a lack of) national belonging on writing practice and authorship is a concept deepened when the issue of gender is considered. Writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous illuminates these concepts in her essay ‘Coming to Writing’. With ‘no grounds from which to write. No legitimate place, no land, no fatherland, no history of my own’31, Cixous questioned ‘in whose name would I write?’32 Cixous felt that her incoherent national identity had an impact on her writing and the way she viewed herself as an author. She felt uneasiness about writing in her adopted tongue, French, though it was the language where she believed she could ‘thrive’.33 She explains ‘Write French? With what right? Show us your credentials! What’s the password?’ 34 This anxiety, different for female exile writers, is understood when considering issues of authority. Issues of finding voice and feeling a right to write is problematic for females in ways that for males, who have long occupied positions of authority, it is not. For Cixous, ‘No permanent residence’35 dictated borders in which she as the exiled female author struggled to find identity on either side of the line. This tension is clearly seen in Rhys’ authorship. Like Cixous, who straddled Algerian and French nationalities, the ways in which Rhys wrote are fermenting in the link between nationality and the female sex.

Another concept pertinent for the exiled female author is, naturally, the idea of ‘home’. National belonging indicates inhabiting a ‘home’. Rhys’ lack of nationality, therefore, renders her occupation of a home space difficult if not (geopolitically) impossible. This is an important concept for a writer of the female gender: without being able to occupy a ‘home’ it is possible she does not fulfil the function of her traditional gender role to be the ‘keeper of home’ and becomes a ‘stranger to her own language, sex and identity’.36 In this way, Rhys is alienated from her sex by being unable to inhabit a ‘home’. Her exiled position is furthered.

‘Home’ space is crucial to Rhys’ authorship when viewed under Virginia Woolf’s concept of A Room of One’s Own. In her essays, Woolf focuses on the private space and financial income that a woman needs in order to write. For Woolf, stability in a private space is crucial for a female author’s practice. The female author needs a room, a place to be grounded, where she can write without the traditional constraints of her gender, as well as an income that facilitates this. Woolf easily belonged within England. Her clear sense of national identity and her financial security arguably allowed her the option of private space. Woolf’s claims are complicated, however, when turning to Rhys: what happens when national identity (an external marker of authorship) is indecipherable for the author? It is possible that for Rhys, her inability to inhabit place in a national context and her lack of financial security prohibited her ability to find a room of her own. Her writing practice, if viewed in the light of Woolf’s concepts, is not grounded. Rhys’ personal displacement and reliance on various men for her income37 is consistently

32 Cixous, Coming to Writing 16.
33 Cixous, Coming to Writing 15.
34 Cixous, Coming to Writing 13.
35 Cixous, Coming to Writing 36
37 McDowell 1.

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echoed in her narratives. Her exile protagonists are nomads, stopping temporarily in hotel rooms and cafés, ‘places that sell the trappings of security and domesticity’,38 without being able to permanently inhabit the spaces. Tone Selboe notes that her protagonists ‘do not have money, home or any sort of security except the temporary protection provided by various men’.39 These notions are especially evident in Sasha Jensen’s wanderings in Good Morning, Midnight and Anna Morgan’s movement through England in Voyage in the Dark. Sasha moves between rooms in London and Paris, where she is either disliked or disregarded by those she meets. Anna, similarly, inhabits rented rooms for only short periods of time – ‘Anywhere will do, so long as it’s somewhere that nobody knows’40 – and depends on Walter, a man with whom she once shared a relationship, for her limited income. The metropole proves to be harsh and difficult to navigate. Like Rhys, Sasha and Anna are unable to completely belong in either domestic space or country, and resonates with Chalk’s suggestion that Rhys’ text depicts a Europe ‘marked by the logic of the passport’.41 As suggested, it is not only their national identity but the financial situation of Rhys’ protagonists that limit their belonging to place. Carr explains that ‘just as in the West Indies, Rhys suggests, it was hard to be truly “white” without money, in England it is difficult to remain a “lady” without an income.’42 Income evidently has influence on perceptions of social belonging and nationality. Furthermore, income influences the simple practicalities of inhabiting space: money determines how long one can pay to stay in a room. Financial status clearly impacts upon the practical and social aspects of dwelling, and belonging, to place. Rhys’ resulting lack of national identity impacts upon external markers of her authorship, while the resulting lack of ‘home’ and private space impacts upon her internal authorship and how and what she writes. If Rhys has neither national nor private space, she writes from a lack of physical place. When viewed under Woolf’s claims, how can Rhys write without place?

Pavlina Radia suggests that critics and scholars of migrant and immigrant writing often emphasise the female author’s need to find stability in their dwelling.43 This certainly resonates with Woolf’s insistence for a room of one’s own. These critics and scholars (see Caren Kaplan; Rosi Braidotti) argue that the female author can defy patriarchy by defining herself as belonging in a borderless and fluid site.44 Mobility and in-betweenness themselves become spaces in which the female author finds location, and as Iain Chambers suggests in Migrancy, Culture, Identity, a way of being ‘rooted in the unrooted’.45 This concept is obviously problematic when considering Rhys’ authorship. This scholarship focuses on migrant and immigrant authors, rather than on ‘exile’ authors. Terms such as migrant and immigrant suggest, at some point, a sense of belonging to national and physical place. For Rhys, clearly an exile without even initial acceptance, belonging in the space between countries is not a desire nor a choice.

38 Chalk 132.
40 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 86.
41 Chalk 120.
42 Carr 103.
44 Radia 14.

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For writers of exiled nationality, Trihn H. Minh-ha suggests that ‘the true home is to be found, not in houses, but in writing’.46 A concept of ‘home’ in writing and textualisation is not exclusive to Minh-ha. In her essay ‘From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History’, Cixous explains that for the author with incoherent belonging, ‘country in language’47 might be discovered. Both Mihn-ha and Cixous articulate that for the exile, writing becomes a place to construct ‘home’ and a place from which to ground their practice. These frameworks resonate with Johnson’s claims of Rhys’ ‘life-long artistic struggle to claim a place from which to write’ and how ‘she works to create just such a place in her writing’.48 Like Mihn-ha and Cixous, Rhys might search for a place to dwell in language and writing itself. Not belonging geographically, she textualises the places from which she writes. Through writing, as Johnson suggests, Rhys conceptualises places from which she writes and finds a linguistic ‘home’ from her experience of displacement.49 Often, the author’s textual places are the places where Rhys is exiled from; a notion that Rhys has made explicit. In a second 1959 letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys wrote ‘[w]hen I say I write for love I mean that there are two places for me. Paris (or what is was to me) and Dominica … Both these places or the thought of them make me want to write.’50

Rhys’ textual places coincide with her melancholy connection to both Paris, where she wandered nomadically, and her birth country of Dominica. For Rhys, after leaving Dominica and being exiled in England, Paris became a third place where she thought she might find belonging. The stories in The Left Bank and Other Stories are set in Paris. Similarly, the narratives of Quartet (1928), After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1931) and Good Morning, Midnight take place in Paris. When considering Rhys’ textual Paris, and the way her protagonists are unable to inhabit the spaces, the ‘real’ Paris is understood as just another place of exile for Rhys. The promise of Paris was lost, and Rhys returned to her lifetime struggle to belong in both her birth country and her ‘motherland’.

In contrast to these texts, Rhys’ protagonists remember Dominica from afar; from inside the English metropole. While England is always cold, distant, and filled with towns that ‘always looked so exactly alike’,51 Dominica functions as an almost-feverish dream which the displaced protagonists remember as the place of an intense connection though a lack of belonging. In her letter to Wyndham, Rhys continued that ‘the West Indies started knocking at [her] heart. So – “Voyage in the Dark”. That (the knocking) has never stopped.’52 It is true that until Wide Sargasso Sea, Voyage in the Dark contains the most references to the Caribbean. The protagonist, Anna Morgan, is a West Indian exile and the narrative is haunted by memories of her birth country. The novel opens with Anna’s memories of the island, where she thinks of ‘the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup’.53 Anna thinks ‘it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream’.54 It is perhaps the ‘constant knocking’ of the West Indies beyond the completion

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47 Hélène Cixous, ‘From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History’ 5.
48 Johnson 24.
49 Johnson 14.
50 Rhys, Letters 171.
51 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 8.
52 Rhys, Letters 171.
53 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 7.
54 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 7-8.

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of *Voyage in the Dark* that prompted Rhys to write *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel is Rhys’ only text that takes place (mostly) in the Caribbean. The novel is derived from a very ‘English’ text: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). By rewriting and giving voice to Bertha Mason, the ‘White’ Creole ‘madwoman in the attic’, Rhys creates place through the textualisation of the meeting place between an ‘English’ text and a ‘White’ Creole voice. Even the title constructs an idea of the space between the two nations, as the Sargasso Sea refers to the body of water between the Caribbean and England. Rhys also combines French, Patois, and English to create the language of her text. Using untranslated words and phrases – ‘glacis’\(^55\), ‘sans culottes’\(^56\) – exposes and transcends linguistic borders. Writing in the languages of her birth country and ‘motherland’ is a way that Rhys combines nationality in order to create a place where she is able to exist without friction.

Considering the background provided in *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, the way Rhys turned to *Jane Eyre* in which to find a place to write and search for ‘home’ is not surprising. She describes how her older siblings left her and how she felt a lack of interest in making friends with those around her. Rhys felt that ‘[she] was alone except for books’.\(^57\) Language, it seems, is the place where Rhys has always been able to find some sense of belonging. From between two nations Rhys creates textual homes, whether it be in the rented rooms of England or the garden of Coulibri. For the exiled female author, the act of writing and the textualisation of place creates a site where she can search for a space to dwell.

In this article I have explored how an incoherent national identity influences a female’s authorial practice. For Jean Rhys, a lack of national identity and belonging certainly has an impact on both public (critical reception; how she is viewed and written about by others) and private aspects of how she functions as author. Finding no ‘home’ space in her personal life, Rhys instead turns to writing to search for Cixous’ insistence of ‘country in language’. Rhys seeks ‘a room of one’s own’ in the actual practice of writing, and through the textualisation of place she allows herself to search for ‘home’. I use the verb ‘search’ rather than ‘find’ as although Rhys creates a dwelling space in her writing, her personal life was still plagued by a lifelong sadness. Even at the end of her life, when she had received acclaim and recognition for her texts, Rhys was discontented. In an interview, she claimed that if she could choose between happiness and writing, she would choose to be happy.\(^58\) It seems that Rhys never found personal happiness. She did, however, find a place and another identity in which to search for such belonging. Though Rhys’ search for a stable national identity is, and will always be, unresolved, it could be said that she found some comfort in writing and in her authorial practice as a place that she could call her own. For the exiled female author, her writing is her *terre*.

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56 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 45.
57 Rhys, *Smile Please* 19.

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Australian Gothic fiction. Her other research interests include female authorship, rural landscape, and female response to place.

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Formed by Place: 
Spatiality, Irony, and Empire in Conrad’s ‘An Outpost of Progress’

Thais Rutledge and Robert T. Tally Jr.

Abstract

In its ironic narrative and distinctive geography, Joseph Conrad’s 1897 short story ‘An Outpost of Progress’ is well suited for geocritical analysis, insofar as Conrad demonstrates the degree to which space and place affect both the characters in the story and style of the text. Focusing on the unique setting – the ‘outpost’ – in which the events take place, we argue that Conrad’s tale employs an ironic narrator in order to highlight the tale’s distinctive spatiality, particularly with respect to a geopolitical system that too neatly divides the spaces of the globe into civilised and barbaric regions. The spatiality of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ can be seen in the geographical aspects of the narrative, with the specific site or heterotopia of the ‘outpost’ situated at the edge of a territory coded as ‘barbaric’ or ‘uncivilised,’ thus connecting the colonised domain in central Africa to the metropolitan society of northwestern Europe, largely unseen, but implicitly present throughout the story. But this spatiality may also be observed in its formal or stylistic elements, especially in the point of view and voice of the narrator, as the perspective shifts from omniscient overseer to ironic commentator and then to a free indirect style in which the distance between narrator and subject is dramatically reduced. In this way, Conrad produces an ironic, spatial narrative that highlights, in both content and form, the absurdity of the imperialist ‘civilising mission’ in Africa.

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Early in Joseph Conrad’s 1897 short story ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ the director of the ‘Great Trading Company’ marvels at the incompetence of Kayerts and Carlier, who had been appointed to manage a remote trading station. ‘Look at those two imbeciles,’ he remarks to his servant aboard the steamer as they are departing. ‘They must be mad at home to send me such specimens. … I always thought the station on this river useless, and they fit the station!’ With ‘a quiet smile,’ the servant responds, ‘They will form themselves there.’1 This cryptic remark resonates throughout the story, as the reader watches the inept station manager and his assistant become ever more dull, lazy, irritable, immoral, and ultimately murderous. Although the narrator’s depiction of them, along with the director’s initial assessment, leave little doubt as to the men’s thoroughly low character even upon arriving at the station, one might agree with the old servant that they ‘form themselves’ in this particular place. Indeed, the ‘outpost’ determines the shape of these characters during the six or more months of their residency there, and the irony of its ‘progress’ is strongly connected to the station’s spatiotemporal position, its location in both geography and history, as Conrad’s ironic narrator almost revels in observing. In both its

form and its content, the spatial narrative of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ offers a compelling case for the ways in which place or space determines character.

In its ironic narrative and distinctive geography, ‘An Outpost of Progress’ is ripe for a sort of geocritical analysis, insofar as Conrad demonstrates the degree to which space and place affect both the characters in the story and style of the text. Focusing on the unique setting – the ‘outpost’ – in which the events take place, we argue that Conrad’s tale employs an ironic narrator in order to highlight the distinctive spatiality of the narrative, particularly with respect to a geopolitical system that too neatly divides the spaces of the globe into civilised and barbaric regions. The spatiality of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ can be seen in the geographical aspects of the narrative. The specific site or heterotopia of the ‘outpost’ situated at the edge of a territory coded as ‘barbaric’ or ‘uncivilised,’ thus connecting the colonised domain in central Africa to the metropolitan society of northwestern Europe, largely unseen, but implicitly present throughout the story. But the tale’s spatiality may also be observed in its formal or stylistic elements, especially in the point of view and voice of the narrator, as the perspective shifts from omniscient overseer to ironic commentator, then employing a free indirect style in which the distance between narrator and subject is dramatically cut short. In this way, Conrad produces an ironic, spatial narrative that highlights, in both content and form, the absurdity of the imperialist ‘civilising mission’ in Africa.

In its use of foregrounding, interior dialogue, and narrative commentary, Conrad’s style itself indicates the complex spatial organisation of ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ Drawing on the insights of recent work in spatial literary studies, we read Conrad’s story as a spatial narrative that combines a literary cartography of a representative location in Africa with an ironic perspective on the colonial system at large, while also exploring the psychological spaces of its characters, especially Kayerts and Carlier. Conrad’s critique of the ‘civilising’ rationale of imperialist conquest and exploitation is thus tied to the interior and exterior spaces of the system in which it flourishes. The distinctive narrative voice in ‘An Outpost of Progress’ functions as perhaps an even more significant presence than the characters, as it persistently engages its targets in satirical critique. As Lawrence Graver notes, the tale is ‘a work of ruthless belligerence,’ and he adds that

its interest rests less in the people than in the quality of the narrator’s attack. The targets themselves are worth aiming at (greed masquerading as philanthropy and colonizers shielded from their natural impulses by the dead hand of custom), and the assault is carried off with verve and decisiveness.

This engaged narrative voice is also evidence of the tale’s spatiality, for it expands or contracts the distances between the reader and various characters in revealing the nature of this distinctive place and its effects on those who occupy it. Just as Kayerts and Carlier ‘form themselves’ in that place, Conrad’s ironic narrative shows how a colonial system informs modern consciousness of spatial and social organisation.

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2 See Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). In this essay, we do not follow Westphal’s ‘geo-centered’ methodology, but refer to a geocritical practice understood in a broader sense that would include various spatially oriented approaches to literature.

Conrad and the Spatial Turn

As a number of critics and theorists have acknowledged, the humanities and social sciences have witnessed a ‘spatial turn’ in recent decades, as more scholars have begun to pay attention to matters of space, place, and mapping in relation to social and cultural studies. This turn has not only meant a heightened awareness of space or geography, but has involved, in the words of Barney Warf and Santa Arias, ‘a reworking of the very notion and significance of spatiality to offer a perspective in which space is every bit as important as time in the unfolding of human affairs.’

Space matters, ‘not for the trivial and self-evident reason that everything occurs in space, but because where events unfold is integral to how they take shape.’

The impetus for the reassertion of spatiality in critical theory and practice can be traced to several developments, including postcolonial criticism’s revisionary rewriting of imperial master narratives, the poststructuralist critique of historicism, theories and practices of postmodernism, the displacements and mobility of populations in the twentieth century, advances in telecommunications and other technology, and the development of a more pertinaciously global economic and political system, to name a few. As Robert T. Tally Jr. has pointed out, ‘The spatial turn in literary and cultural studies is both a reasonable response to the perplexities of this condition and a tentative exploration of new spaces and representations.’

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Conrad’s writings have maintained a privileged place in spatial literary studies. In Conrad’s nonfiction, as in his 1921 essay ‘Geography and Some Explorers,’ mapmaking and exploration are considered crucial elements of modern social formations, and Conrad dramatises this sense effectively in Heart of Darkness, as when Marlow discusses his youthful enthusiasm for map-gazing, along with his excitement over the map of Africa he had seen in the Company’s offices in Brussels. Moreover, Conrad is probably the most significant artist for Edward W. Said in his ‘geographical inquiry into historical experience’, Culture and Imperialism, in which a nuanced projection and interpretation of ‘Two Visions in Heart of Darkness’ becomes the exemplary model for Said’s ‘contrapuntal’ method of reading.

Christopher GoGwilt’s meticulous postcolonial readings of Conrad’s works have paid close attention to the relations between space, place, empire, and narrative. In The Invention of the West, for example, GoGwilt explicitly connects the use of cartographic language or mapping metaphors with the crisis of representation that corresponds to the age of imperialism and the imaginary geography of ‘All Europe’, not to mention the far-flung territories under European control. Con Coroneos, in Space, Conrad, and Modernity, investigates in detail the author’s cautious navigation between ‘the space of things and the space of words’ in his diverse body of work. More recently, in ‘Joseph Conrad and the Epistemology of Space’, John G. Peters argues convincingly for the pervasive spatiality of Conrad’s entire canon – Peters had previously analysed the distinctive space of Russia in Under Western Eyes – as he demonstrates the manner in which subjective space in Conrad leads to questions of knowledge in general, which in turn

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5 Warf and Arias 10.
Generally speaking, then, Conrad’s writings remain important sites for exploration by geocritics and other spatially oriented scholars.

‘An Outpost of Progress,’ however, seems to be lightly regarded by such critics. For instance, Coroneos mentions the story only once, in passing, and even then he is merely quoting another’s citation. Graver views it as ‘static and derivative’, a Kipling-esque story by a ‘writer handling materials that he has not yet made his own’. Indeed, as Louis-Anthony Martinez has observed, the story is ‘often considered of secondary importance’, particularly since its main themes are generally believed to be revisited, but more elegantly or more powerfully, in *Heart of Darkness*, published just two years later. Although it too explores the experiences of colonialism, civilization, and alienation, ‘An Outpost of Progress’ is hardly an early draft of the subsequent novella. Conrad places two white, ostensibly ‘civilised’ men, Kayerts and Carlier, in an unfamiliar territory deep in the interior of what would seem to them to be a savage land. Their presence is itself supposed to be a sign of the civilising ‘progress’ sardonically alluded to in the title. The narrator takes pains to demonstrate the irony of the situation, as, for example, when the narrator facetiously refers to ‘the Great Civilizing Company,’ which was earlier called the Great Trading Company, and then adds, parenthetically, ‘since we know civilization follows trade’ (99). Here there is no fictional intermediary, a character like Marlow, who can interpret what he has seen for the audience, and the foolish civil servants Kayerts and Carlier do not in any way resemble the magnificent and terrible Mr Kurtz. Additionally, in ‘An Outpost of Progress’, Conrad narrows the geographical scope of the tale to a discrete space, that of the outpost itself, and examines its effects upon these characters. By extension, Conrad’s ironic narrative indicates the degree to which a place shapes one’s character, which is as true in the ‘civilised’ parts of Europe as it is in the colonial outposts of Africa. A geocritical reading of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ discloses the significance of both the exterior, geographical place and the interior or mental space in connection to the broader geopolitical system Conrad explores.

In ‘An Outpost of Progress’, Conrad engages in a literary cartography of the ‘outpost,’ even if the exact location – presumably a station along the Congo River, but in any case, a place ‘deep’ in central Africa – remains unnamed directly. One could assert that storytelling is itself a form of mapmaking, and hence that literary cartography is an integral part of the function of narrative. Not only does literature provide the landscapes and contours of a fictional world, but in viewing the writer as a figurative mapmaker, one sees and understands a work’s distinctive spatial aspects. True, this cartography is mostly metaphorical. It is not merely a matter of describing spaces or places; it also characterises the style in which the narrative unfolds, as the form of the narrative determines the ‘space’ disclosed in it. The events in the world, whether historical or cultural, are driving forces which may themselves transform modern rhetoric. Much in the same way that the cartographer creates maps which can then be used to prevent individuals from being

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12 Coroneos 101.
13 Graver 14.
lost, the writer functions as a mapmaker, and one of the principal tasks is to prevent his readers from getting lost in their imagined world. The crisis of representation associated with modernity (and postmodernity) is tied to the radical spatiotemporal and social transformations of the modern era, which Conrad registers in his own turn-of-the-century fiction. Like cartographers, writers have to choose what to include in their stories, and what to leave out. Of course, ‘real’ mapmakers do not have any say about the relative truth of the actual geospace figured on their maps; if, for example, they choose not to depict a mountain or lake on their map, that does not mean the mountain or lake doesn’t exist in the ‘real world’. However, the map – like the literary text – might work well without these details, depending on its functions and uses. (Road maps, for instance, frequently omit topographical details unrelated to the needs of motorists.) A writer arguably has even more freedom, since the willing suspension of disbelief might allow readers to forgive a patently ‘unrealistic’ literary map. They create new places and spaces; they decide how a story must function; they determine what should be part of their stories and how it will affect their readers. In so doing, they construct an image of the world of the narrative, effective plotting the spaces inhabited by the characters and in which the events take place. In most cases, understandably, there is a clear sense of referentiality by which the places depicted in the narrative are more or less correlated to the ‘real-and-imagined’ places of the world.

Needless to say, a proficiency in literary cartography does not necessarily require extensive knowledge of or training in the geographical sciences. As Zdzisław Najder observed with some surprise, Conrad himself failed his ‘Day’s Work’ exam, a test of navigation and geography in which one must determine a ship’s position, speed, and so forth based on log entries over a 24-hour period. Navigation is not quite the same as geography, and Najder suggests that a weakness in mathematics and perhaps language may have been factors, but it is also true that the cartographic impulse is felt most keenly by one who is lost, and the well-designed map does not always provide solutions. Conrad is a gifted literary cartographer, but that does not mean that evidence of a spatial or cartographic anxiety does not persist in his writings. As Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle notes in their Cartographies of the Absolute, ‘among the first products of a genuine striving for orientation is disorientation, as proximal coordinates come to be troubled by wider, and at times overwhelming vistas.’ Arguably, Conrad’s style, as well as the content of his narratives, respond to the challenges of this sense of disorientation in a modern, increasingly interconnected world system.

Like other writers of his era, Conrad was attuned to the spatial disruptions and desire for clarifying maps, but in his attention to the distant places outside of his readers’ common experience, Conrad’s writings are especially well suited to depicting the diverse spaces of the planet. ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ which recounts only a brief episode in the history of geographic empire, nevertheless offers a perfect example of Conrad’s literary cartography.

The Heterotopia of the Outpost

‘An Outpost of Progress’ might be considered a spatial narrative for several reasons, but most obviously it is a story in which Conrad introduces his readers to a distinctive and exotic place:

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the outpost. This new space represents a distant and remote station within a colonised territory at a particular moment, presumably, King Leopold’s Congo in the 1890s. According to Norman Sherry, the story was originally to have been titled ‘A Victim of Progress’.19 Hence, in changing the name, Conrad highlights the way that the place itself, rather than one or more of the protagonists, features as the main theme of the story. The story is less about Kayerts, Carlier, or even Henry Price, and more about the location in which their fates are decided. At the beginning of the tale, the reader is introduced to the men who are to manage this outpost, Kayerts and Carlier, who represent ‘civilised’ Europeans, although they are also introduced as utterly incompetent and ill-suited to the task. Sherry notes that Conrad himself had travelled with a commercial agent named Alphonse Keyaerts to Stanley Falls in 1890, and the captain of that steamer was named Carlier.20 Whether these characters were modelled on them directly or Conrad merely borrowed the names, the Kayerts and Carlier of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ are depicted in an almost wholly negative light. Each is deeply flawed, with questionable motives and goals. As noted above, the managing director of the Trading Company, their nominal supervisor, is fairly disgusted by their stupidity and incompetence, characteristics that Conrad’s narrator foregrounds right at the beginning of the narrative. It is clear that their character is both suited to the place – a ‘useless’ outpost, as the director calls it – and likely to be made worse by dwelling there.

At first, the men appear to have high hopes about their new job and both glow with pride at being part of the civilising mission in this savage territory. Moreover, they do not see much value in the various people around them, including the friendly native Gobila and their officious assistant Henry Price, also known as Makola. They care only about trade, or rather, about their own professional success in running this trading station, and they take for granted their superiority over anyone else at the outpost. In ‘Conrad’s Irony: “An Outpost of Progress” and The Secret Agent’, Gail Fraser observes that ‘Conrad can view his protagonists with aloof detachment because they represent a society determined to sacrifice ethical values for material profit.’21 However, after a few months of being so far away from civilisation, Kayerts and Carlier’s characteristics and behaviour change.

Kayerts and Carlier, who are revealed to be the products of an advanced European civilisation, with the ironic sense that such a designation inevitably entails, are placed in charge of the trading station, an outpost that is an important asset of the colonial power. As they become acquainted with one another, Kayerts and Carlier exchange personal stories. Because of their boastful personalities and arrogance towards each other and those around them, it does not take readers much to foresee the demise of both men. While at the outpost, Kayerts and Carlier believe themselves superior to all others. With such mentality, they do not take the ‘respectful position’ seriously. Rather, they lounge on the porch, smoke tobacco, and watch as the strikingly named Henry Price performs the daily labor involved in maintaining the trading station. What is more, both men wait for members of a nearby tribe to supply them with food, mediated by the amiable Gobila. In a crucial turn of events, they unwittingly allow Henry Price to broker a sale of human slaves – that is, a number of Gobila’s tribesmen – in exchange for ivory, and Kayerts and Carlier’s greed and desire for professional advancement overcome their scruples with respect to human bondage. At first, they are outraged by Price’s actions, but they are mollified.

20 Sherry 21, 43.
by the thought of how pleased their superiors would be when they discover the profits. This event challenges their sense of their own moral superiority, but each character attempts to put the sinful act out of his mind. After many months of isolation, life at the outpost becomes monotonous. Kayerts and Carlier irritate one another; they become fickle, and like children, they begin to fight over minor possessions. During a row over whether to use or to preserve their remaining sugar, both men lose control of their emotions. Overcome with fear and desperation Kayerts takes his pistol and shoots Carlier in what seemed to be self-defence, only to discover that Carlier did not have a weapon. In his great agitation and anxiety, a moment in which ‘death and life had in a moment become equally difficult and terrible’ (96), Kayerts realises that he had killed an unarmed man. ‘Contemplating his future within a shadow of unrelieved darkness,’ as Said puts it in *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, ‘Kayerts takes his own life.’

This is where the managing director of the Great Trading Company, returning after six months, finds him, hanging from a leather strap from the cross atop the former station director’s grave.

A similar theme is sounded in *Heart of Darkness*, published shortly after ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ There Conrad, once again, plays with the motif of imperialism as he places Marlow in a remote and largely unknown region. Recounting his tale years later, Marlow inexorably steams up the Congo River in search of Mr Kurtz, a man whose geographical incursion into unfamiliar regions ostensibly entails a historic mission, to bring civilisation into the dark areas of the globe. The infamous *mission civilisatrice*, which Marlow himself alludes to in his famous soliloquy on ‘the conquest of the earth’, was part of the ideological justification for the colonisation of the Congo (among other places) from the start. When King Leopold acquired the Congo, he scheduled a meeting in Brussels to announce his reasons for invading the unknown territory: ‘to open to civilization the only part of our globe where Christianity has not yet penetrated and to pierce the darkness which envelops the entire population.’ Like Kayerts and Carlier before him, but with a much greater and more terrifying efficaciousness, Kurtz reveals a significant change in behaviour after months of isolation. With incisive irony, Conrad discloses the hypocrisy of those who consider themselves ‘pioneers of progress’ even as they engage in horrific atrocities.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s irony is leavened with pathos, as well as a broader sense of the human condition, but the author’s critique of the civilising mission of imperialism is clearly on display in ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ Using a variety of narrative techniques, including realistic description, editorial commentary, irony, and free indirect style, Conrad attempts to expose the violence, brutality, rapacity, and selfish greed that lay behind the rhetoric of the civilising mission. In so doing, he demonstrates that nearly all involved with the imperial project, from exalted leaders to hired functionaries, are corrupted by the enterprise.

In ‘An Outpost of Progress’, the particular site in which this all takes place is notable. The outpost is a distinctive type of place, a *heterotopia* in the sense that Michel Foucault uses the term, inasmuch as the outpost represents a ‘counter-site’ or a place ‘outside of all places.’ Heterotopias ‘are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about.’

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23 In a moment of foreshadowing earlier in the story, Carlier had fixed the shabby cross that stood over the grave of his predecessor. He even takes pride in its sturdiness, noting that he could hang by his arms from the cross-piece with no trouble.

Formed by Place: Spatiality, Irony, and Empire in Conrad’s ‘An Outpost of Progress’. Thais Rutledge and Robert T. Tally Jr.
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outpost is literally ‘outside’ of the dominant social space; it is, by definition, distant from it, and yet the outpost is supposed to represent aspects of the dominant culture. In ‘An Outpost of Progress’, for example, the trading station functions as a node in a circuit of trade, but it also represents an outpost of European civilisation within the heart of Africa. As Foucault notes, ‘the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible.27 In Conrad’s story, this juxtaposition is revealed primarily in the ironic contrast or conflation of civilisation and savagery, but it also appears in the outlandish behaviour of the main characters. As the nameless servant on the steamer had predicted, Kayerts and Carlier ‘form themselves’ in this unique place.

The representation of the outpost, and what it does to both Kayerts and Carlier, can only be understood through Conrad’s distinctive narrative voice and presentation. The author never discloses the specific geographical location of the trading station, although one can infer that it is one of those remote sites along the river, such as Marlow visited while travelling up the Congo River in Heart of Darkness. The reader gets a sense of its ominous atmosphere through indirect discourse:

They had been in a vast and dark country only a very short time and as yet always in the midst of other white men, under the eye and guidance of their superiors. And now dull as they were to the subtle influences of surroundings, they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness, a wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained. (79)

The meticulous description evokes the mysteriousness of the unfamiliar territory and discloses the hitherto undetectable anxiety both men feel. While at the outpost, Kayerts and Carlier feel uncomfortable and, in a way, lost because of their unfamiliarity with the new environment. Conrad’s narrative strategy, however, provides readers with the men’s unspoken opinion of the place and its impact upon the protagonists: ‘dull as they were to the subtle influences of surroundings,’ ‘they felt themselves very much alone.’ As the narrative progresses, the ‘outpost’ is mapped, not only spatially but with respect to the effects of the environment on the attitudes of the characters. In ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ Kayerts and Carlier are removed from the ‘civilised’ spaces in which they had been previously formed, and they are now placed in an unfamiliar territory which will exert its own subtle influence upon them. Unable to adapt or modify their character to fit this heterotopic space, the two men quickly disintegrate.

The suggestively named Henry Price is the only one who appears to adapt well to his environment. ‘He spoke English and French,’ according to the narrator, ‘wrote a beautiful hand, understood bookkeeping,’ and generally comports himself as the most competent person at the outpost (77). Price’s commercial savvy, his ability to speak other languages, and most of all, his general survival skills, are the driving forces in making this trading station a successful operation, to the extent that it is successful. (His willingness to evade the rules, for example, is likely the reason he and the station can thrive in this place.) While Kayerts and Carlier display anxiety at the sudden arrival of strangers to the outpost, Price shows enthusiasm and sees an opportunity for business. Instead of questioning the men’s presence, Price and his wife provide them with food and drinks. Throughout the unexpected visit, Price ignores both Kayerts and Carlier, for he knows that they would probably thwart any prospects for profitable trade. Only later does he reveal that the strangers, in fact, are ivory traders from Loanda, which happened to

27 Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’ 25.
be the home town of Price’s wife. Ever pragmatic, Price knows what must be done to keep the trade going; most importantly, he knows that if the outpost thrives, so does he. Additionally, as he indicates to Kayerts and Carlier, he is aware that the station has not been productive: ‘Station in very bad order, sir. Director will growl. Better get a fine lot of ivory – then he say nothing’ (88). It is here that one sees Price’s skills at work; he is aware of the director’s demand, and like a good office manager, Price convinces Kayerts and Carlier to make the best business decision in the interest of the company. Unlike the supposedly cultured Europeans, who leave their civilized space to run the outpost and bring progress to the unknown area but prove themselves to be utterly incompetent, Price, a ‘Sierra-Leone nigger’ (77) and thus also a sort of outsider to this region, is the one who ensures the success of the outpost. With this juxtaposition, Conrad highlights the absurdity of the situation in which a subaltern, African worshipper of ‘evil spirits’ (77) is effectively running the business that his ostensible superiors from Europe cannot possibly manage.

The language used in ‘An Outpost of Progress’ helps to underscore the spatial discontinuities or contrasting forms of spatial organisation simultaneously present in the heterotopia of the outpost. The distinctiveness of civilisation and savagery breaks down as the two fold in on one another, and the formerly held beliefs in clear light and dark, right and wrong, amity and hostility, to name a few, become problematic. As the narrator explains, ‘the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble to the heart’ (79). The outpost is arguably a kind of ‘crisis heterotopia,’ a place reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis. The particular crisis is related to imperialism itself, and it affects not only the colonised peoples, but also those who enforce its rule, from petty functionaries of the Empire, such as Kayerts and Carlier, to distant leaders in metropolitan Europe. Hence the location itself and those within it represent a critical state that extends well beyond the limited space of the site in question. The author’s word choices (e.g., ‘unmitigated savagery,’ ‘primitive nature,’ and ‘profound trouble to the heart’) all point to a thoroughgoing psychological, cultural, and social crisis associated with the space and place.

Spatiality and Narrative Voice

The narrative voice in ‘An Outpost of Progress’ is as distinctive and mysterious as the place itself. As noted previously, Conrad does not create a fictional intermediary, like Marlow in Heart of Darkness, to stand between text and reader, interpreting the scenes, characters, and events as they are encountered. The narrator of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ appears to be an omniscient third-person, yet the narrative voice shifts frequently in the text, moving from the wide-ranging, distant overview of an omniscient storyteller to more pointed, ironic commentary, and even into variations of a free indirect discourse that places the reader closer to the characters themselves. Arguably, this movement is a key aspect of the narrative’s spatiality, since the stylistic choices replicate the various levels of distance between the individuals at the outpost and the world at large.

Previous readings of ‘An Outpost of Progress’ show a great deal of interest in Conrad’s authorship and style. Fraser, for example, astutely examines the author’s style and indicates that ‘Conrad explores political and moral issues by constructing a network of ironic parallels, juxtapositions, and allusions.’28 The narrator of the story actively engages the reader, exhorting the reader to view Kayerts, Carlier, and the outpost in a particular way, and unambiguously

28 Fraser, ‘Conrad’s Irony’ 156.
highlighting the absurdity of situation in the context of the high-minded rhetoric of Empire. As Fraser continues,

The ironic narrative perspective seeks to control and persuade us by inviting our recognition of significant incongruities and parallels. We are not asked to interpret, to fill in the gaps, but to discover the author’s meaning and to take a moral stand with him – in ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ against the imperialist writers in Blackwood’s Magazine and journalists in the daily papers.  

Fraser here refers to the very sorts of writers whose grandiose prose concerning civilisation and vivid descriptions of exotic locales had so enthralled Carlier. (Kayerts and Carlier had discovered an old newspaper with an article detailing ‘Our Colonial Expansion’, which fills Carlier with pride, as he imagines that one day he and Kayerts will be renowned as ‘the first civilized men to live in this very spot!’) Conrad’s narrator, employing irony with a sometimes heavy hand, does not encourage the reader to side with Kayerts, Carlier, or the propagandists of the civilising mission. As one reads the story, one cannot help but notice the narrator’s control over the reader’s perceptions and evaluations. The narrator, without any hesitation, discusses important topics of the time, especially imperialism and its ludicrous impact, not only on the colonised peoples, but also on those who are presumably part of civilised society. Conrad’s use of omniscient narration gives readers who are presumably situated in the metropolitan space of Western Europe access to the exotic experience of the far-flung colonies, allowing them to imagine, for a short period, what is like to be part of an outpost in a distant colony. Individuals like Kayerts and Carlier, who are supposed to represent ‘the very foundation of an “enlightened” social order,’ as Fraser puts it, are depicted as weak, incompetent, and almost totally dependent on the natives for survival. The reader, therefore, is forced to silently participate in the narrator’s stern evaluation of the regime. Only later does Conrad give his audience access to the minds of his protagonists through the use of free indirect style, but even then, the reader likely does not doubt which side of the political and moral divide to take.

In ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ the narrator persistently criticises society, imperialism, and those who are part of the imperialist regime. At first the narrative voice presents itself as a critical observer, commenting upon the baleful effects of societal influence over its citizens. The narrator exposes society’s predisposition to nurture its members, anthropomorphising the social formation in order to dramatise its effectiveness in conditioning the thoughts and behaviour of individuals in the society. Hence, when away from home, Kayerts and Carlier are incapable of caring for themselves, so dependent had they become on the comforting and familiar social matrix in which they had been formed prior to their arrival at the outpost. As Conrad writes,

Society – not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs – had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine – and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live in the condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on their sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of their freedom. (80)

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29 Fraser, ‘Conrad’s Irony’ 157.
30 Fraser, ‘Conrad’s Irony’ 156.
Civilisation moulds a person into a fine tool; a tool used for its own benefit. Additionally, as mere parts of a machine, the individuals lose their ability to function or even survive once outside the machine. The narrator refers to society as a ‘fostering home’ and then compares it to a prison, but here the sense is that prison is more like a home, and freedom is terrifyingly unfamiliar. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault examines the distinctive space—the heterotopia—of the prison, which serves as an exemplary figure for the ways that power operates in modern societies:

This enclosed space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, … in which power is exercised without division, according to a continual hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead— all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.31

Foucault’s representation of the prison’s distinctive spatial organisation, which becomes the overarching model of the modern society as a whole, correlates with the narrator’s view of society in ‘An Outpost of Progress’, a place where individuals are, in a way, under supervision and monitored, not only by the dominant class but by any number of minor functionaries along the various points in the social matrix, from neighbours and family members up to the police or the state apparatus itself. In order to ensure that Kayerts and Carlier perform their tasks adequately, society disciplines them. However, once outside society’s disciplinary mechanisms, which ironically is also the zone in which they are most comfortable and secure, both men are incapable of caring for themselves. Moreover, they are incapable of being themselves, at least as they formerly were, and must ‘form themselves’ in this new, unfamiliar, and largely unregulated space.

The omniscient narrator, as he continues to oversee places and people, comments directly on the colonial situation and the imperialist system of which the outpost is a part. Adding to the irony, literature itself plays a role, as Conrad indicts the culture industry, which provides ideological support for the imperialist project. For instance, while shirking their duties, Kayerts and Carlier eagerly read and vehemently discuss the novels of such writers as Dumas, Cooper, or Balzac left in the outpost by their predecessors. In the midst of a discussion, they find a copy of a newspaper article promoting imperialism in the lofty rhetoric of the civilising mission, which immediately elevates their own sense of moral rectitude as they see themselves as agents of progress:

They also found some old copies of a home paper. That print discussed what it was pleased to call ‘Our Colonial Expansion’ in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth. Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves. (83)

This passage uses the popular press to make a jocular criticism of imperialism, but it also indicates both men’s blindness with respect to the unpleasant truth about colonialism. Neither Kayerts nor Carlier, even after reading and discussing literary works, are capable of formulating an opinion about the regime and their own position within it. Although the narrator indicates their interest, opinion, and criticisms about the stories they read, both men fail to see the irony of

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a civilising mission that simultaneously serves as an excuse for a foreign power to invade other territories, subjugate their populations, and systematically replace the native culture and society with new institutions.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said observes that ‘The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who plans the future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.’ Indeed, the newspaper (if not the novels), which provides an authoritative narrative, reinforces the ideological power of an imperial, metropolitan state in its attempts to justify imperialism. Kayerts and Carlier, who – we are persistently reminded – are neither intelligent nor active, are almost ideally susceptible to this pro-imperialist rhetoric, for the reality that they witness at the trading station cannot compare to the glorious imagery of the colonists’ grand mission to bring light to the darkness.

At a stylistic level, Fraser has observed that ‘An Outpost of Progress’ contains ‘striking examples of innovative Conradian technique.’ Specifically, by creating ‘disruptive narrative shifts from ironic detachment to internal monologue,’ Conrad succeeds in ‘dislodging readers from their safe positions outside the tale; at the same time, his deployment of a sardonic narrative voice is controlled and rigorous in its attack on imperialist clichés.’ For much of the story, the narrator serves as a distant overseer, an omniscient narrator who occasionally editorialises, providing readers with opinions and criticisms of the characters in the tale and of the broader social or cultural formation in which they find themselves. At times, however, Conrad’s narrative style allows readers to have an idea of what is in Kayerts’s and Carlier’s minds. For the most part, one does not have direct access to the characters’ thoughts and emotions until later in the short story. As the plot approaches its climax, the distance between the narrative voice and the two main characters closes somewhat, and the reader is able to see into the psyches of the buffoonish company men.

After several months at the outpost, away from their nurturing European civilisation, Kayerts and Carlier begin to bicker more frequently, as each becomes testier and less collegial. A seething resentment, for their own condition and toward one another, takes hold of them. During one of their arguments, a petty dispute over whether to strictly ration the sugar or to use some for their coffee, Carlier calls Kayerts a ‘stingy old slave dealer,’ and the invocation of their ‘sin’ leads to a violent conflict. Kayerts loses control of his emotions and, in what he think of as self-defense, shoots Carlier. At that moment, using free indirect discourse, the narrator moves the reader closer to Kayerts’s mind:

> He had plumbed in one short afternoon the depths of horror and despair, and now found repose in the conviction that life had no more secrets for him; neither did death! He sat by the corpse thinking; thinking very actively, thinking very new thoughts. He seemed to have broken loose from himself altogether. His old thoughts, convictions, likes and dislikes, things he respected and things he abhorred, appeared in their true light at last! – appeared contemptible and childish, false and ridiculous. He reveled in his new wisdom while he sat by the man he had killed. … Incidentally he reflected that the fellow dead there had been a noxious beast anyway; that men died every day in thousands; perhaps in hundreds of thousands – who could tell? – and that in the number, that one death could not possibly

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32 Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii.
make any difference; couldn’t have any importance, at least to a thinking creature. He, Kayerts, was a thinking creature. He had been all his life, till that moment, a believer in a lot of nonsense like the rest of mankind – who are fools; but now he thought! He knew! He was at peace; he was familiar with the highest wisdom! (97)

This free indirect discourse makes available to the reader Kayerts’s unspoken thoughts, and one finally sees the protagonist’s mental instability and the terrifyingly formative effects of the place upon his character.

Up until this moment, Kayerts does nothing, questions nothing, and thinks about nothing productive; he simply complies with the orders he was given as best as he can. It is ironic that Carlier’s wrongful death becomes a moment of epiphany for Kayerts, who begins to think ‘very new thoughts,’ as ‘things appeared in their true light at last!’ The exclamation point, indicates that we are privy to the protagonist’s mind. Kayerts, for a brief instant, takes pride in these new thoughts. As he actively thinks, he scorns society and dissociates himself from it all: ‘He knew!’ He is now certain that ‘the rest of mankind’ are fools, since he alone had discovered the truth, ‘he was familiar with the highest wisdom!’ When he looks at Carlier’s corpse, Kayerts tries to justify the crime with the excuse ‘people died every day in thousands – who could tell?’ and tries to convince himself that Carlier ‘was a noxious beast anyway.’ The combination of indirect and free indirect discourse show the disturbed thoughts in Kayerts’s mind, but it also provides evidence of his unwillingness to face reality, all because of the way civilisation has molded him initially, and how he has formed himself in this place far away from that familiar space. In a sense, Kayerts becomes the quintessential civilised fool. Through this brief narrative, Conrad telescopically shifts the frames of reference from European society to the colonial outpost to the individual himself. This movement makes Conrad’s critique of imperialism all the more meaningful, as the reader can see its horrific results manifest themselves in recognisable characters.

Conclusion

As Fraser and others have argued persuasively, Conrad develops his critique of imperialism most powerfully through his use of narrative voice in ‘An Outpost of Progress.’ In “‘A Scrupulous Unity of Tone”: Irony, Narrative Focus, and the Representation of Africa(ns) in Conrad’s “An Outpost of Progress,”” for example, Nils Clausson examines the ways in which Conrad’s use of irony in the story serves his more generalised criticisms of both colonialism and racism. Paying close attention to narrative, tone, and characterisation, Clausson seeks to defend Conrad from an incisive, postcolonial critique, specifically Chinua Achebe’s famous denunciation of the author. Responding to Achebe’s notorious provocation, Clausson aims to prove that Conrad is not the ‘bloody racist’ that Achebe makes him to be. Clausson argues that, not only is Conrad not racist, but he is not even Eurocentric in his representation of Africans or Africa. In making his case, Clausson also challenges the claim, in this case by A. James M. Johnson, that ‘An Outpost of Progress’ endorses ‘an unexamined binary opposition between a “superficially ordered but ultimately false realm of culture (signified by Europe) and an anarchic realm of nature (signified by Africa).”’ On the contrary, Clausson notes, Conrad’s story shows that Africans are just as

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capable of progress as anyone else outside of the civilised areas of the world. Clausson indicates that the ‘civilised’ individuals, Kayerts and Carlier, are incapable of handling the station as well as the ‘savage’ Price (a.k.a. Makola): ‘Conrad’s irony reveals that the role of Makola in the story is to undermine the myth of a natural racial difference that was used to undermine the myth of a civilised Europe in opposition to a primitive Africa, which in turn justified European intervention in Africa in the name of Civilization and Progress.’ Clausson believes that many readers still tend to mistake the narrator’s voice for Conrad’s, and thus ‘ignore the subtle but unmistakable shifts in focalization in the story.’

However, at issue in Conrad’s narrative is not whether one can detect the author’s putative racism or anti-racism in the story. Rather, the better question is how race or racism connects to place, and more particularly to what Said in Culture and Imperialism referred to as the ‘attitudes of structure and reference’, which underlie the elitist, racist, and imperialist ideologies that shape men like Kayerts, Carlier, and even Henry Price. (The latter could perhaps be seen as an early representative of what Frantz Fanon called the national bourgeoisie, whose ‘psychology … is that of a businessman.’)

Through the use of a frequently ironic narrative voice, Conrad articulates the various boundaries marking the distance between a European-based mentality – complete with its morality and idealism with respect to its own justified mission to bring civilisation into the dark places of the world – and the reality of the colonial outpost. From a geocritical perspective, which highlights the relationships between space, place, and literary representation, one can see how Conrad invests his somewhat geographical narrative with a profound sense of psychological spatiality, as can be seen in the wild epiphany of Kayerts’s final moments. The relative distance between the metropolitan or ‘civilised’ space of Europe and the benighted realms of ‘savage’ Africa is both highlighted and suppressed, as the agents of civilisation are shown to be fools, then becoming slavers and murderers, while the purported beneficiaries of the civilising mission (here, especially, Gobila’s villagers) come to ruin and grief.

The title itself, ‘An Outpost of Progress,’ expresses at once both the idealism of the European ideology and the acerbic recognition of its hypocrisy when faced with the facts on the ground at the trading station. This ironic position is highlighted in the tale’s final moment, as we see the corpse of Kayerts appearing to stand at attention, with all the formal pomp and circumstance of that quasi-military attitude, but ‘irreverently, he was putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director’ (99). The macabre image of the dutiful civil servant blowing a final raspberry at his boss might be said to explode the discourse of progress and civilisation in a single, irrevocable moment, which could be seen as the narrator’s last laugh as well. As the unnamed servant on the director’s ship had predicted, Kayerts and Carlier had indeed ‘formed themselves’ at the outpost of progress, and Conrad makes clear that their formation, much like the form of European imperialism in Africa writ large, was one of absurdity and horror.

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35 Clausson 72, 73.
36 Said, Culture and Imperialism 62.
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Marketing Transnational Childhoods: 
The Bio Blurbs of Third Culture Novelists

Jessica Sanfilippo Schulz

Abstract

Many contemporary novelists experienced high levels of transnational mobility during their childhood and were thus raised ‘among’ different countries and cultures. Predominantly the offspring of diplomats, business executives, missionaries, military personnel and academics, these writers have compelling backgrounds of transnational and transient childhoods. Third Culture Kid (TCK), coined by the sociologist Ruth Useem, is the term given to this childhood experience. Until 2010, the term TCK was only used by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and cultural educators, but never before by scholars of literary studies. In 2011, Antje Rauwerda adapted this concept and coined the term ‘Third Culture Literature’ to describe the fictional writings by authors who share a ‘cultural background of expatriatism’. For Rauwerda, these novelists do not fit ‘a postcolonial, diasporic or cosmopolitan paradigm’ so that an up-to-date classification is needed for this new ‘subset of international writing’. The purpose of this article is to verify to what extent cultural identities are deployed in the marketing of Third Culture Literature. The article focuses on five contemporary well-known authors (such as Ian Martel and Ian McEwan) who have ‘grown up across worlds’ and analyses over 25 biographical details that are offered to readers by publishers in selected editions of their novels. The biographical details I examine are not only distributed in English but also, for example, in Arabic, Danish, German and Spanish. Not all publishers choose to portray their transnational authors in a ‘global’ light. However, due to the primarily international settings of Third Culture novels, many publishers either adopt the expatriate culture of their authors or adapt their biographies in order to kindle their target audiences.

Introduction – Transnational Childhoods

Many contemporary novelists experienced high levels of transnational mobility during their childhood and were thus raised ‘among’ many countries and cultures. Predominantly the offspring of diplomats, business executives, missionaries, military personnel and academics, these writers have compelling backgrounds of transient and transnational childhoods. Award winner Yann Martel, for example, was born in Spain and grew up in Costa Rica, France, Mexico and Alaska. Third Culture Kid (TCK), originally adopted by the sociologist Ruth Useem, is the name given to this childhood experience. In 2010, Antje Rauwerda adapted this concept and coined the term Third Culture Literature (TCL) to describe a new literary classification of fiction written by Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCK).

Because Yann Martel holds a Canadian passport, when he won the Man Booker Prize in 2002, he was on the one hand he was praised by the Canadian press for his achievement, but on the other hand, it ‘launched a controversy about what determines the ‘Canadianness’ of an

'Marketing Transnational Childhoods: The Bio Blurbs of Third Culture Novelists,' Jessica Sanfilippo Schulz. 
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author.¹ Journalists tend to locate texts ‘in terms of geography,’² yet in Martel’s case this is difficult. Publishers too, according to Rauwerda, identify authors by nation, and in publishing ‘there is little accommodation possible for authors whose origin is unclear, or whose “nationality” includes a lengthy series of countries.’³

Taking Rauwerda’s comment on publishers’ identification of Third Culture Authors (TCA) as a starting point, by focusing on the biographical details that are offered to readers in selected editions of contemporary novels of five TCAs (who all write in English),⁴ this paper will verify to what extent cultural identities⁵ are deployed in the marketing of TCL. It will be argued that publishers in different countries purposely construct the backgrounds of their TCAs on book covers in order to engage target readers. In doing so, however, they ignore the complex issue of identity in TCK discourse.

Firstly, the biographical notes of the emerging novelist Alice Greenway will be compared to those of the established TCA Ian McEwan; the bio blurbs of two sons of diplomats, Yann Martel and Nicholas Shakespeare, will then be analysed. In order to examine how TCAs choose to portray their résumés unrestrictedly, finally, the biographical notes on Heidi Durrow’s website will be compared to those published in her novel.

### Defining Third Culture Literature

TCK is the term coined by the sociologist Ruth Useem in the 1950s to describe children who spent a significant part of their formative years outside their parents’ culture. Useem believed that TCKs neither belong to their parents’ culture (the ‘first’ culture), nor to the new host culture (the ‘second’ culture), but belong to a ‘third’ expatriate culture of their own.⁶ In 1999 David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken expanded on this topic and added that TCKs’ ‘sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar experience.’⁷

A TCK is not necessarily still a child. However, the word ‘kid’ is significant because, according to Pollock and Van Reken, this international experience ‘must occur during the developmental years – from birth to eighteen years of age.’⁸ Sharing the views of developmental psychologists,⁹ Pollock and Van Reken believe that this is an important time when a ‘child’s sense of identity, relationships with others, and view of the world are being formed in the most unrestrictedly.’²²

² Rauwerda, Not Your Typical Diaspora 17.
⁴ Biographical notes in foreign editions of novels will also be analysed. The translations of the biographical notes into English have been translated by the author of this article.
⁵ For further discussion on ‘identity’ and ‘cultural identity’, see for example Erik H. Erikson, ‘The Problem of Ego Identity,’ *Psychological Issues* 1, 1 (1959) 101-64, and Peter Adler, ‘Beyond Cultural Identity: Reflections on Multiculturalism,’ *International Communication: A Reader* eds. Richard E. Porter and Larry A. Samovar (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1976) 362-78. For the purposes of this paper, Adler’s meaning of ‘cultural identity’ as published in the above mentioned article will be adopted: ‘Cultural identity is the symbol of one’s essential experience of oneself as it incorporates the worldview, value system, attitudes, and beliefs of a group with which such elements are shared. In its most manifest form, cultural identity takes the shape of names which both locate and differentiate the person.’ Accessed online (version of 2002), 24 June 2016 http://mediate.com/articles/adler3.cfm.
⁶ For the origins of this term see Ruth H. Useem, ‘Third Culture Kids: Focus of Major Study,’ *Newslinks* 12, 3 (January 1993) 1.
⁸ Pollock and Van Reken 27.
Accordingly, they argue that ATCKs must struggle with common challenges such as identity dilemmas, unresolved grief, ‘restlessness’ and ‘rootlessness’.\(^\text{11}\) Antje Rauwerda extensively examined these struggles in novels written by ATCKs. Up until 2010, the term TCK was used only by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and cultural educators, but never before by literary scholars. Innovatively, Rauwerda analyses the works of seventeen TCAs to prove that ‘there is a field of literature that, most simply, shares characteristics reflecting the third culture context out of which it is produced.’\(^\text{12}\) In contrast to diasporic and cosmopolitan authors who share one homeland or ‘centre’, having been raised in many countries and thus not being attached to one place or nationality, Rauwerda convincingly explains why a more fitting literary classification is needed for TCAs. Neither is postcolonial literature the apt categorisation for these TC novels. Rather than exposing binary dislocation, a clear feature of colonial and postcolonial literature, TCL ‘is distinguished by its tendency to avoid binary comparisons’\(^\text{13}\) and to display ‘multiple rather than binary displacement.’\(^\text{14}\)

Whilst discussing the contemporary understanding of world literature(s) and describing transcultural literature, Arianna Dagnino similarly asserts that in the transnation ‘binaries of center/periphery and national self/other are dissolved.’\(^\text{15}\) Transnational literature is ‘branching away from the tradition of (im)migrant and postcolonial literatures.’\(^\text{16}\) Obviously, many literary classifications, such as hybrid, migrant, expatriate, refugee, diasporic, transcultural and postcolonial, coexist, interact and overlap.\(^\text{17}\) Notwithstanding ‘the inevitable issues raised by categorization and the desire of most, if not all, writers to escape unwanted definitions,’\(^\text{18}\) Dagnino’s solution is to classify these transcultural literatures ‘in the context of the other subfamilies of the Literatures of Mobility.’\(^\text{19}\)

Following Dagnino’s line of reasoning, I propose that TCL, like transcultural literature, is a subfamily of Literatures of Mobility. What makes TC writings stand out from similar literary subsets is that they are produced by TC writers. Whilst they were growing up and their identities were developing, they moved from one country to the next. Theses transient childhoods have resulted in unique and fascinating fiction. Clearly, in all of these Literatures of Mobility a leitmotif is displacement. But in TCL, transit goes hand in hand with childhood. So the keynote in this discourse is childhood mobility and, in spite of discussing adult authors, the ‘kid’ of TCK must always be kept in mind. Nowadays in book marketing, the author is very much alive. But is the author’s transient upbringing important for publishers when it comes to promoting TC novels?

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\(^\text{10}\) Pollock and Van Reken 27.
\(^\text{11}\) See Pollock and Van Reken 121-129.
\(^\text{13}\) Rauwerda, Not Your Typical Diaspora 20.
\(^\text{14}\) Rauwerda, Not Your Typical Diaspora 21.
\(^\text{15}\) Arianna Dagnino, ‘Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s),’ CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.5 (2013) 6.
\(^\text{16}\) Dagnino 6.
\(^\text{17}\) Dagnino 6.
\(^\text{18}\) Dagnino 6.
\(^\text{19}\) Dagnino 6. For further discussion on ‘Literatures of Mobility’, see also Arianna Dagnino ‘Global Mobility, Transcultural Literature, and Multiple Modes of Modernity,’ Transcultural Studies 2 (2013) 130-160. In this article, Dagnino explains that Literatures of Mobility are ‘those literatures that are affected by or deal with travels/exploratory drives, migratory flows, exile/diasporic experiences, expatriate/transnational narratives, and, more recently, neo-nomadic trajectories.’

Blurs as ‘Curiosity Arousers’

The term ‘blurb’ was coined in 1907 by the American humourist Gelett Burgess to describe a ‘flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial.’\(^{20}\) Today the term means ‘the short note by the publisher or author describing and recommending a book and introducing the author’\(^{21}\) and blurbs on book covers may include a summary of the plot, praise from reviewers or other authors, quotes from the work and, most importantly for this analysis, a biography of the author. These author biographies that appear on book covers are now generally called ‘bio blurbs’, whereas the author details that are found either before or after the main text are sometimes given the title ‘A Note About the Author’ by publishers. In this paper, these notes are named ‘biographical notes’. Appearing alongside the main work, both bio blurbs and biographical notes are part of a book’s paratext.\(^{22}\) In paratextuality discourse, literary scholars have tended to concentrate on how paratexts construct a frame for the main text, thus primarily ‘frame stories’ within narratives have been analysed and very little attention has been given to bio blurbs and biographical notes.

Maria Luisa Gea Valor and Kate Douglas are among the few scholars who have analysed bio blurbs of novelists. They both argue that, because when wanting to know more about a book the reader usually looks at the information on its back cover, publishing companies spend much money, time and energy in designing their book covers to attract potential customers.\(^{23}\) Thus, behind the blurbs, which Gea Valor sees as ‘curiosity arousers’, which are ‘intended to pique the reader’s interest,’\(^{24}\) there are marketing strategies so that in the blurring discourse, the concept of the author is ‘manipulated to suit certain critical, ideological, and economic agendas.’\(^{25}\) These manipulative short biographical texts of TCAs will now be analysed.

Emerging vs. Established Third Culture Authors

Alice Greenway is the emerging author of two novels. Her debut novel *White Ghost Girls* was first printed in 2006 whilst her second work *The Bird Skinner*\(^{26}\) was published in 2014. Ian McEwan, on the other hand, has written over ten novels and many screenplays, librettos, articles and children’s books. Furthermore, in 1998, McEwan won the Man Booker Prize for his novel *Amsterdam*.

Born in 1964 in Washington D.C., Alice Greenway is the daughter of the journalist Hugh Greenway, who worked from 1962 to 1972 for *Time Life* in London, Washington, Boston, Saigon, Bangkok, and Hong Kong. ‘After *Time Life*, from 1972 to 1978 he worked for the *Washington Post* in Washington, Saigon, Hong Kong, and Jerusalem.’\(^{27}\) Thus, as the ‘offspring of an American correspondent to Vietnam’,\(^{28}\) Alice Greenway grew up in Hong Kong and also lived in Bangkok and Jerusalem.

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\(^{24}\) Gea Valor 42.


\(^{28}\) Rauwerda, Not Your Typical Diaspora 20.

Ian McEwan was born in 1948 in Aldershot, a military garrison town in England. The son of a soldier, McEwan spent his childhood in Singapore, Libya and Germany. In 1959, McEwan returned to England where he attended a state-run boarding school.

Greenway’s *White Ghost Girls* was first published in 2006. In both the American and British editions, readers are told that the author of the novel lived in many countries:

Alice Greenway is an American who grew up in Hong Kong. As the daughter of a foreign correspondent, she also lived in Bangkok, Jerusalem and the United States. She later returned to Hong Kong and now lives in Scotland with her family. This is her first novel.

Greenway’s debut novel was published in German in 2009 by marebuchverlag and subsequently by Fischer Verlag. Both editions inform readers that:


Ian McEwan’s award winning *Amsterdam* was first published in Great Britain in 1998 by Jonathan Cape. The 10th impression of the 1998 Vintage paperback portrays the author as follows:

Ian McEwan has written two collections of stories, *First Love, Last Rites* and *In Between the Sheets*, and nine novels, *The Cement Garden*, *The Comfort of Strangers*, *The Child in Time*, *The Innocent*, *Black Dogs*, *The Daydreamer*, *Enduring Love*, *Amsterdam* and *Atonement*. He has also written several film scripts, including *The Imitation Game*, *The Ploughman’s Lunch*, *Sour Sweet*, *The Good Son* and *The Innocent*.

In order to make the novelist more appealing to readers, the publisher portrays the author as an experienced and prolific writer by adding a long list of the works the author has previously written.

The German edition of *Amsterdam*, which was published in 2001 by Diogenese, mentions the prestigious prizes won by the novelist:


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31 Translation from German of biographical details found in the front matter of Alice Greenway, *Weiße Geister*, trans. Uwe-Michael Gutzschhahn (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 2011): ‘Alice Greenway, born in 1964 in Washington D.C., was raised in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Washington, Jerusalem and Massachusetts. She studied at Yale University. She lives with her family in Edinburgh, Scotland.’
32 Biographical details found in the front matter of Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, 10th imp. (Vintage: London, 1998). Translation from German of biographical details found on the back cover of Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*, trans. Hans-Christian Oeser (Diogenese: Zurich, 2001): ‘Ian McEwan was born in 1948 in Aldershot (Hampshire) and lives in London. His first stories were awarded the Somerset Maugham Award. In 1998, he was awarded the Booker Prize for *Amsterdam* and in 1999 the Shakespeare Prize from the Alfred Toepfer Foundation for his complete work.’
The biographical details provided on McEwan’s Amsterdam and Greenway’s White Ghost Girls show that whereas publishers promote Greenway’s hypermobile past and use her TCK background to arouse readers’ curiosity, McEwan’s transient childhood is neglected. The settings of the two novels and the age of the authors might explain why.

With the exception of a handful of his novels (such as The Innocent and Atonement), McEwan’s novels are primarily located in Great Britain. Some of the characters of Amsterdam travel shortly to the Netherlands, but otherwise, with vivid descriptions of the Lake District and of the life in London of the foreign secretary, the novel’s setting is very ‘British’. White Ghost Girls, on the other hand, is the story of two American sisters in Hong Kong who cherish the visits and adventurous stories of their father who works as a war correspondent in Vietnam. Until their sudden return to America, the sisters and their mother live in an expatriate environment. Thus, this novel spells internationalism and, accordingly, publishers might assume that Greenway’s novel would attract a different kind of readership from that of Amsterdam.

As it is set in Hong Kong, the publishers of White Ghost Girls play on the writer’s childhood in Hong Kong in order to represent her as an experienced author who can give an authentic view of life in Hong Kong. In fact, the English-speaking publishers exaggerate (one might also be tempted to say ‘misrepresent’) Greenway’s childhood in Hong Kong. As first detail, the reader is told that the writer grew up in Hong Kong. The second sentence informs that Greenway ‘also’ lived in Bangkok, Jerusalem and the United States but it is not specified when this occurred. The same is true for the statement ‘She later returned to Hong Kong.’ Was she a child, youth or adult during her travels to these above-mentioned countries? As the daughter of a correspondent, the reader can only speculate that she accompanied her father around the world as a child or youth.

The German edition, on the other hand, does not emphasise the author’s life in Hong Kong as the daughter of a correspondent but simply mentions it in the list of all the places where the author was raised. Whereas the English-speaking publishers represent the author as an individual who, due to her father’s profession, has acquired vast experience in and on Hong Kong, the German publishers depict Greenway as a person who has independently acquired ‘global’ experience and hyperbolise the places she has lived in. Instead of informing that the author lived in the United States, as the English-speaking publishers do, the German publishers reject grouping Greenway’s experience in America together and list the two states of Washington and Massachusetts separately. Furthermore, German-speaking readers are told that Greenway studied at Yale University, a detail that is not disclosed in the English editions. Thus, the German publishers are not only promoting the writer as a person who has lived in many places, but also enliven the biographical details by representing the emerging author as a knowledgeable individual who has studied at a well-known university.

Interestingly, when McEwan was still an emerging author in 1978, twenty years before Amsterdam, publishers chose to give relevance to his catalog of writings and the biographical details published in The Cement Garden disclose that:

Ian McEwan was born in England in 1948 and began writing in 1970. He lives and works in London. His stories have appeared in American Review, Transatlantic Review, Tri-Quarterly, Amazing Stories, Bananas, New Review, Encounter, Time Out, De Revisor and Avenue (Holland) and Nagy Világ (Hungary). His first book, First Love, Last Rites, won the Somerset Maughan Award in 1976. This, and his second book, In Between The Sheets, works. The novels Atonement and Saturday were international successes. Ian McEwan is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.’

34 See biographical details found in the front matter of Alice Greenway, White Ghost Girls.
are also published in Picador, together with his novels *The Comfort of Strangers* and *The Child in Time*.35

Clearly, for publishers, the list of McEwan’s publications has always been more significant than his transient upbringing. When analysing literary translation in current European book markets, Kovač and Wischenbart split authors into two groups: ‘cultural residents’ and ‘cultural migrants’.36 The first group of oldest (generally these authors were born before 1950) and most translated authors live ‘for the better part of their careers and so to this present day, in the country of their parents.’37 Cultural migrants, on the other hand, ‘move from one culture to another.’38 Many of these emerging authors ‘have managed to project themselves on high-speed and important international, or even truly global, literary trajectories.’39 McEwan’s author branding began before reading audiences were beginning to be lead towards ‘globally travelling authors,’40 thus he has been represented by publishers predominantly as a ‘British’ author.

Most of McEwan’s bio blurbs begin with the author’s birth details.41 Both places of birth and citizenship pose thought-provoking questions about identity in TCK discourse. Comments such as ‘I was a perpetual foreigner to the place of my birth’42 and ‘If you asked where I feel I belong, I couldn’t identify any geographical place’43 are often found in TCK studies and indicate that identity and belonging are major issues for TCKs. Yet the biographical details of McEwan and Greenway demonstrate that publishers tend to ignore this controversy and, in emphasising the authors’ place of birth and citizenship, as Rauwerda points out,44 choose to identify their authors by nation.

‘Diplombrats’: The Children of Diplomats

As the sons of diplomats,45 both the authors Yann Martel and Nicholas Shakespeare are TCKs and grew up in many countries. Born in Spain, where his parents were doing graduate studies and who later joined the Canadian foreign service, Martel grew up in Alaska, Canada, Costa Rica, France, Mexico and Spain.46 Martel’s *Life of Pi* was awarded the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2002 and in 2013 the film version of the novel won four Oscar awards.

37 Kovač and Wischenbart et al. 23.
38 Kovač and Wischenbart et al. 24.
39 Kovač and Wischenbart et al. 24.
43 Cottrell 66.
45 In TCK discourse these children are sometimes referred to as ‘diplobrats’ or ‘diplokids’.

Nicholas Shakespeare’s novel The Dancer Upstairs was also adapted to film and in an interview regarding this adaptation he speaks about growing up in South America: ‘I was growing up in Brazil during the Death Squads; I was growing up in Argentine during the Dirty War; and I was growing up in Peru during the Shining Path.’ Shakespeare also spent part of his childhood in the Far East.

Harcourt and Knopf originally published the American and Canadian editions of Yann Martel’s Life of Pi in 2001. The first US edition portrays Martel as follows:

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963 of Canadian parents. After studying philosophy at university, he worked variously as a dishwasher, tree planter, and security guard. Then he began to write. When he’s not living somewhere else, he lives in Montreal.

Interestingly, the first Canadian edition of Life of Pi and the subsequent Vintage Canada paperback edition do not mention that the author’s parents are Canadian:

YANN MARTEL was born in Spain in 1963. After studying philosophy at Trent University and doing various odd jobs, he began to write. He is the prize-winning author of The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios, a collection of short stories, and of Self, a novel, both of them published internationally. He lives in Montreal.

Canongate was the first British publishing house to release Life of Pi. The biographical notes of their 2003 reprint of the novel inform that:

Yann Martel was born in Spain but currently lives in Montreal. He is the highly acclaimed author of Self, a novel, and of the story collection The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios. Life of Pi is his third book and was shortlisted for the Governor General Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize and was the winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize.

On occasion of the film adaptation of Martel’s novel, Canongate reprinted the novel and revised Martel’s biography:

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963 of Canadian parents. After studying philosophy at university, he worked odd jobs and travelled before turning to writing. In addition to Life of Pi, he is the author of the novels Self and Beatrice and Virgil, the stories The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatios, and the collection of letters to the Prime Minister of Canada What is Stephen Harper Reading? Yann Martel lives in Saskatchewan, Canada.

The publishing group Éditions Gallimard first published the French translation of Life of Pi in 2003. Catering for the Canadian francophone market too, this edition emphasizes that Martel’s parents come from Québec:

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50 Biographical details found inside back flap of book cover of Yann Martel, Life of Pi (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2001). See also Yann Martel, Life of Pi (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002).
Né en Espagne en 1963, de parents québécois, Yann Martel, habite aujourd’hui à Montréal. Il a vécu dans de nombreux pays et a étudié la philosophie aux Universités de Trent et Concordia. L’Histoire de Pi, son deuxième roman, a été vendu dans plus de quarante-deux pays.53

Life of Pi was first published in Spain in 2003 by Ediciones Destino. Here the reader is told that Martel is the son of diplomats:

Yann Martel (1963) es canadiense pero, hijo de diplomáticos, nació en España y su infancia ha transcurrido en países como Francia, México o Alaska. Ya de adulto ha pasado temporadas en Irán, Turquía y la India. Estudió Filosofía en la Universidad de Trent y ha publicado el libro de relatos The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatio y la novela Self. Para Vida de Pi invirtió cuatro años que se han visto recompensados con el premio Booker, el favor de la crítica y cientos de miles de lectores en todo el mundo.54

His parents’ profession is also mentioned in the German (text 1), Arabic (text 2) and Italian (text 3) editions.

Text 1


Text 2

Yann Martel was born in Spain in 1963 into a family of diplomats. During his childhood, he moved around several times (with his family): Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska and

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53 Translation from French of biographical details in Yann Martel, L’Historie de Pi, 2001, trans. Nicole and Émile Martel (Paris: Gallimard Denoël, 2003): ‘Born in Spain in 1963, to Québécois parents, Yann Martel now lives in Montreal. He has lived in many countries and studied philosophy at Trent University and Concordia. Life of Pi, his second novel, has been sold in more than forty-two countries.’

54 Translation from Spanish of biographical details in Yann Martel, Vida de Pi, 2001, trans. John Martel and Bianca Southwood (Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, 2003): ‘Martel (1963) is Canadian, but as the son of diplomats was born in Spain, and his childhood was spent in countries such as France, Mexico or Alaska. As an adult, he sojourned in Iran, Turkey and India. He studied philosophy at Trent University and has published a book of stories The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatio and the novel Self. Life of Pi, which took him four years to write, was rewarded with the Booker Prize, the acclaim of critics, and hundreds of thousands of readers worldwide.’

55 Translation from German of biographical details found in the front matter of Yann Martel, Schiffbruch mit Tiger, 2001, trans. Manfred Allié and Gabriele Kempf-Allié, 17th imp. (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 2013): ‘Yann Martel was born in 1963 in Spain. His parents are diplomats. He grew up in Costa Rica, France, Mexico, Alaska and Canada, and later lived in Iran, Turkey and India. He studied philosophy and lives with his family in Saskatoon, Canada. Life of Pi is his second novel, which was nominated for the Governor General’s Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize and won the Booker Prize in 2002. In 2012 it was adapted into film by Ang Lee. Fischer Verlag also published The Facts Behind the Helsinki Roccamatio and Beatrice and Virgil.’ Here, it is worth briefly mentioning that a mistake was made in the typing of the German biographical details. Instead of writing that Martel currently lives in Saskatoon, the Canadian city has erroneously been spelt ‘Sarkatoon’ by the publisher.

Canada. As a youth, he went to Iran, Turkey and India. After studying philosophy at the University of Toronto in Canada, he took on odd jobs until, when aged 27, he began a career as a writer. Following a novel and a short story collection, *Life of Pi* is his third work. In 2002 he was awarded the Man Booker Prize for literature, which earned him a high reputation and admitted him entrance into the world literature. As yet, his novel has been translated into forty languages. Currently Yann Martel lives in Montreal.56

**Text 3**


*Inheritance* is the most recent of Nicholas Shakespeare’s novels and was published in Great Britain in 2010 by Harvill Secker. Similarly to *Life of Pi*, this novel takes the reader on a journey to many countries such as Australia, Armenia, France and Italy. The biographical notes in this novel represent the author as follows:

Nicholas Shakespeare was born in 1957. The son of a diplomat, much of his youth was spent in the Far East and South America. His novels have been translated into twenty languages. They include *The Vision of Elena Silves*, winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, *Snowleg* and *The Dancer Upstairs*, which was chosen by the American Libraries Association in 1997 as the year’s best novel, and in 2001 was made into a film of the same name by John Malkovich. His most recent novel is *Secrets of the Sea*. He is married with two small boys and currently lives in Oxford.58

The German and Spanish editions of *Inheritance* were both published for the first time in 2011. The biographical notes in these novels both refer to Shakespeare’s transient life, to the literary prizes he has won, and to the film adaptation of his novel *The Dancer Upstairs*:

**Text 4**

NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE, 1957 in England geboren, verbrachte als Sohn eines Diplomaten annähernd zwanzig Jahre in Asien und Lateinamerika. Er studierte Literatur und arbeitete als Journalist, bevor er zu schreiben begann. Auf Deutsch erschienen von

56 For the original text see the front matter of Yann Martel, Ḥayāt Bāy: Riwāyah, trans. Abū Hawāš (Cologne : Kamel Verlag, Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2006). Translation of biographical details from Arabic for this article by Dr A. Masarwa, Institute for Arabic & Islamic Studies, University of Muenster, Germany.

57 Translation from Italian of biographical details found on the back flap of Yann Martel, *Vita di Pi*. 2001, trans. Clara Nubile (Milano: Piemme, 2012):’The son of Canadian diplomats, he was born in Spain in 1963 and has lived everywhere: Alaska, British Columbia, Costa Rica, France, Ontario, Mexico and India. He currently lives in Saskatoon in Canada. Published in more than thirty countries, winner of the Man Booker Prize 2002, one of the most prestigious literary prizes, *Life of Pi* became a worldwide literary success. From England to the United States, it climbed the charts, winning millions of readers. The novel was adapted to a 3D movie, produced by 20th Century Fox and directed by award-winning director Ang Lee. His novel *Self* was also published by Piemme.’

Nicholas Shakespeare nació en 1957. Hijo de un diplomático, pasó buena parte de su juventud en el Extremo Oriente y Sudamérica. Se ha desempeñado como periodista para la BBC y editor literario. Sus novelas están traducidas a veinte idiomas. Entre ellas, La visión de Elena Silves, ganadora del Premio Somerset Maugham, Snowleg; Pasos de baile, elegida en 1997 por la Asociación de Bibliotecas de Estados Unidos como la mejor novela del año y trasladada al cine en 2001 por John Malkovich, y Secrets of the Sea. Ha sido finalista de los premios Booker, Impac y del Betty Trask.

Interestingly, whereas all the biographical notes for Martel specify that he was born in Spain, Nicholas Shakespeare’s place of birth (Great Britain) is not always mentioned. The biographies of Shakespeare always disclose that he is the son of a diplomat, whereas those of Martel primarily state that his parents are Canadian but rarely mention that his parents were diplomats.

Another striking feature is that, with the exception of the Spanish editions of Life of Pi and Inheritance, all publishers find it important to specify where the authors currently live (in the earlier editions of Life of Pi, Montreal is stated and in the recent editions, readers are told that Martel now lives in Saskatchewan).

Evidently, both authors are represented as wanderers. The English-speaking editions of Life of Pi do omit to list all the countries Martel has lived in and only mention his past in Spain (place of birth) and his present in Canada (where he studied and where he now lives), but by emphasising that the author ‘strayed’ from one job to the next, he is, nevertheless, portrayed as a ‘restless’ person.

Unlike other editions, the French edition of Martel’s novel, L’Histoire de Pi does not state that Martel’s parents are Canadian but specifies that his parents are ‘Québécois’. Moreover, whereas all other editions of Life of Pi mention that Martel studied philosophy at Trent University (in Ontario where predominantly English is spoken), this French edition points out that Martel studied at the universities of Trent and Concordia. The University of Concordia is located in Montréal, Québec, where French is the official language. It can be assumed that these details, which hint that Martel speaks perfect French, are pinned down by the French-speaking

59 Translation from German of biographical details found on the back flap of Nicholas Shakespeare, Die Erbschaft, 2010, trans. Hans M. Herzog (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, 2011): ‘NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE, born in England in 1957 as the son of a diplomat, spent almost twenty years in Asia and Latin America. He studied literature and worked as a journalist before he began to write. Six novels have been published to date in German, including The Dancer Upstairs, which was filmed by John Malkovich, as well as the authorised biography of Bruce Chatwin. His work won many awards, including the Somerset Maugham Award and the Betty Trask Award. Shakespeare lives alternately in Wiltshire in England and in a beach house in Tasmania.’

60 Translation from Spanish of biographical details found in the front matter of Nicholas Shakespeare, La Herencia, 2010, trans. Susana Rodriguez-Vida (Barcelona: Austral, 2012): ‘Nicholas Shakespeare was born in 1957. The son of a diplomat, he spent much of his youth in the Far East and South America. He has worked as a journalist for the BBC and as a literary editor. His novels have been translated into twenty languages. Among them, The vision of Elena Silves, winner of the Somerset Maugham Award, Snowleg; The Dancer Upstairs, chosen in 1997 by the Library Association of the United States as the best novel of the year and adapted to film in 2001 by John Malkovich, and Secrets of the Sea, chosen as finalist for the Booker prize, Impac and the Betty Trask award.’

publisher to captivate the Francophone market. After reading this description, and without looking at the imprint, a French-speaking reader might think that Martel wrote the novel originally in French.

In Martel’s case, another good example of how publishers try to represent the author according to the tastes of potential buyers are the opening lines of the biographies in Canongate’s 2003 edition and in the Spanish edition. Respectively, the readers are informed that ‘Yann Martel was born in Spain but currently lives in Montreal’ and that Martel ‘is Canadian, but as the son of diplomats was born in Spain, and his childhood was spent in countries such as France, Mexico or Alaska.’ These examples show that the use of a conjunction can play an important role in bio blurbs. By using the conjunction ‘but’, the English-speaking publishers wish to point out to the reader that Martel was indeed born in Spain, yet this does not mean that he is a Spanish man still living in Spain. He now lives in Canada, which on the one hand shows that he has moved around, but on the other hand, emphasises his attachment to Canada, a market with many English-speaking readers.

If the English publishers are aiming at ‘arousing curiosity’ in the English-speaking world, then the Spanish publisher wishes to do the same in Spanish-speaking countries, which represents a big market in the publishing world. The Spanish publisher writes that Martel is Canadian and this too is followed by the conjunction ‘but’ to emphasise that a contrast is coming. The author holds a Canadian passport; however, this should not put off readers who are interested in authors with affiliations to Spain. Thus, the reader is told that Martel was born in Spain and spent his childhood in ‘Francia, México o Alaska.’ Curiously, this Spanish edition omits mentioning that Martel also lived in Costa Rica, a Spanish-speaking country.

Baffling is also the list of countries mentioned in the biography of the Italian edition of Martel’s novel. The publisher stresses that the author has sojourned almost everywhere and lists ‘Alaska, Columbia Britannica, Costa Rica, Francia, Ontario, Messico e India.’ Iran and Turkey are omitted (these countries are mentioned in the Arabic, German and Spanish editions) and instead of mentioning Canada, like all other editions do, this Italian version, startlingly, pins down the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario. In both these provinces, English is the main language spoken, so the strategy used by the Italian publishers does not help to stress that the author is bilingual (English and French).

Nicholas Shakespeare is also depicted as a compelling traveller in all three biographies. He is always represented as the son of a diplomat, but, whereas in the English and Spanish editions he has merely spent ‘much of his youth’ in the Far East and South America, for the German-speaking readers, Shakespeare has spent ‘nearly twenty years’ in the Far East and South America. This is another good example of how publishers stress biographical details in different ways.

It is the German publisher that highlights that Shakespeare is a truly global author. This can be noticed at the end of his biographical details when it is stated that one moment Shakespeare is in the ‘rural’ county of Wiltshire and the next, he is in a house on a beach in Tasmania. Thus, here, readers are informed that currently Shakespeare, similarly to his childhood, leads an extremely transitional lifestyle.

All three of Shakespeare’s biographies mention prizes that the author won in the past, previous works published by the same author (once again to stimulate the reader so that they will buy other books), and that his novel The Dancer Upstairs was made into a film by John

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61 See text 4.

Malkovich.\textsuperscript{62} Furthermore, all the above biographies spell a global reality, but it is only the Arabic edition that attempts to give a name to an author’s location in the literary field. Exclusively this edition speaks literally of Martel’s place on the map of ‘world literature’.\textsuperscript{63} Dagnino sees as an essential element of world literature(s) the Literatures of Mobility,\textsuperscript{64} which, as previously stated, could also include TCL.

According to Kovač and Wischenbart, there is a new trend in book marketing. Book award juries favour either ‘globally travelling authors or the stories that the authors’ movements and whereabouts allow these authors to tell.’\textsuperscript{65} They believe that reading audiences share this taste as readers are ‘used to such panoramic cultural views from other culture and media content’.\textsuperscript{66} Evidently, the diversified ways in which publishers have chosen to represent the childhood mobility of Martel and Shakespeare show that features of their biographies are filtered to influence current global readerships. On book covers, the biographies of these two TCAs are depicted as ‘cultural migrants’, yet the authentic chronicle of TC upbringing is lost to marketing strategies. Fortunately, for the sake of comparison, the true experiences of TCAs can be found elsewhere, as the analysis of the bio blurbs of Heidi Durrow will demonstrate.

TCKs of Intercultural Marriages

It is striking that many TCAs, such as Chloe Aridjis, Tana French, Claire Messud and Joseph O’Neill, not only have been raised around the world but have mixed ethnic backgrounds. I have chosen the novelist Heidi Durrow in order to verify how publishers deal with both her TC upbringing and mixed background.

Born in 1969, the award-winning author of \textit{The Girl Who Fell from the Sky} says about herself that she is the ‘daughter of an African-American enlisted Air Force man and a white Danish woman’\textsuperscript{67} who, as part of a military family, ‘moved around every few years with stints in North Carolina, Turkey, Washington state, and Germany.’\textsuperscript{68} To the question ‘What are you?’ she replies: ‘I am a product of a peripatetic upbringing and a child of two cultures and languages. I am the result of a love across color lines that was illegal in many states until 1967.’\textsuperscript{69}

Although Durrow calls herself a ‘mixed-chick’ and has founded the \textit{Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival} to celebrate ‘the stories of the Mixed racial and cultural experience through films, books, visual arts and performance,’\textsuperscript{70} neither the American nor the British edition of her novel \textit{The Girl Who Fell from the Sky} mention her mixed background. After winning the Barbara Kingsolver’s Bellwether Prize for Fiction in 2008, Durrow’s work was first published in 2010 in America by Algonquin Books, one of the largest independent publishing companies in the United States. The novel was also published in 2010 in Great Britain. With the exception that the biographical details of the British edition do not mention Durrow’s previous publications, both editions write the following about her:

\textsuperscript{62} This text structure can also be noticed in the biographies of Yann Martel, thus confirming Gea Valor’s findings that bio blurbs comprise the author’s previous publications, awards won, hobbies, current place of residence and family details, see Gea Valor 51.
\textsuperscript{63} See text 2.
\textsuperscript{64} See Dagnino 8.
\textsuperscript{65} Kovač and Wischenbart et al. 26.
\textsuperscript{66} Kovač and Wischenbart et al. 26.
\textsuperscript{68} Durrow About Heidi.
\textsuperscript{69} Durrow About Heidi.

A graduate of Stanford University, Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, and Yale Law School, HEIDI W. DURROW has received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the American Scandinavian Foundation, and the Lois Roth Endowment, as well as a Fellowship for Emerging Writers from the Jerome Foundation. Her writing has been published in Alaska Quarterly Review, the Literary Review, and others.  

Considering the omission of references to her ‘mixed African-American roots’, in these biographical notes the publishers are identifying the novelist with the ‘white culture’ and not with the ‘black/white mixed chick culture’ that the author actively celebrates in her blog and podcasts. The Danish and French editions of 2010, on the other hand, explicitly state that Durrow was born to a Danish mother and to an ‘African-American’ soldier (see texts 6 and 7 respectively).

**Text 6**

Heidi Wedel Durrow er datter af en sort amerikansk soldat og en dansk mor og har tilbragt en stor del af sin barndom i Danmark. Hun er tidligere advokat og journalist.

**Text 7**


Whereas the Danish bio blurb, for obvious marketing reasons, emphasises that Durrow spent part of her childhood in Denmark, similarly to the American and British editions, the French edition does not mention the author’s transient childhood. However, what the French edition promotes and the other editions do not, is that Durrow is the director of cultural festivals and won a literary prize in 2008.

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72 Durrow’s podcast is now called The Mixed Experience. The former podcast Mixed Chicks Chat is no longer active.

73 Translation from Danish of biographical details on back cover of Heidi W. Durrow, Pigen der faldt ned fra Himlen, trans. Thomas Munkholt (Copenhagen, Denmark: Forlaget Punktum, 2010): ‘Heidi Wedel Durrow is the daughter of a black American soldier and a Danish mother and has spent much of her childhood in Denmark. She is a former lawyer and journalist.’


75 Spurred by the so different ways in which the backgrounds of these TCAs are represented, I contacted authors and publishers in order to determine how biographical details evolve. This research found that authors usually write the biographical details for the original edition of their debut novel (which can then be altered by the editors), and that depending on licencing agreements, publishing houses are mostly free to portray their foreign authors as they wish.

Conclusion – Fluid Identities

If ‘cultural identity takes the shape of names which both locate and differentiate the person’, the biographical details published on her home page, clearly show that through the compelling labels she gives herself, Heidi Durrow ‘locates’ herself within a ‘fluid’ and mixed group. Durrow’s publishers, though, generally ignore her notion of belonging and ‘differentiate’ her personal account on book covers. In fact, the bio blurbs of the five TCAs I have analysed show that not all publishers choose to represent their transnational authors in a ‘global’ light. However, due to the primarily international settings of TC novels and global trends that are shaping current book markets, such as the growing significance of Literatures of Mobility, many publishers disclose the expatriate culture of their authors. They do not always provide exhaustive TC details, but parts of their hypermobile histories are strategically ‘extracted’ and adapted to encourage target audiences to read the respective novels.

Alice Greenway’s novel, for example, is transnational in its subject matter. In an attempt to boost ‘the third culture context out of which it is produced’ and to attract target audiences, the publishers list all the countries the writer lived in, including Hong Kong, where the story is primarily set. With particularly British settings, Ian McEwan’s novels, on the other hand, are aimed at a different group of consumers, thus, the novelist’s mobile childhood is always overlooked on book covers and emphasis instead is placed on book prizes and previous publications. Interestingly, only McEwan was born before 1950. Therefore he fits into Kovač and Wischenbart’s group of national ‘cultural residents’, as opposed to the other four TCAs, who are ‘cultural migrants’. Undoubtedly, McEwan is branded by publishers as a ‘British resident’.

Yann Martel’s English-speaking publishers also choose to ignore the author’s TC upbringing, whereas the foreign editions of Life of Pi disclose his hypermobile childhood. The editions in English, however, mention that the writer was born in Spain. Generally, the short author biographies printed on book covers include novelists’ previous publications, book awards won, current place of residence, family details and, as in Martel’s case, place of birth. Frequently, however, TC individuals belong to a group of people and not to a place.

As Ruth Van Reken points out, culture for TCKs ‘may be something defined by shared experience rather than shared nationality or ethnicity’, thus, when discussing the issues TCKs face, ‘we need to rethink our traditional ways of defining diversity and identity.’ Van Reken’s studies have in fact shown that for TCKs, one of the hardest questions to answer is ‘where am I from, what is my place of origin?’ TCKs dislike being ‘labelled’ by their passport or birth country and must frequently ‘battle imposed identities’. Yet, this analysis of over twenty-five bio blurbs of TCAs has shown that in disclosing passport or birth countries and neglecting or emphasising childhood countries of residence for merchandising purposes, publishers tend to impose identities on their TCK novelists. But bio

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76 Adler 2002.
77 Durrow About Heidi.
80 Van Reken Third Culture Kids.
81 Pollock and Van Reken 121.

blurbs are brief advertisements and at the end of the identity/representation battle, book marketing wins.

**Jessica Sanfilippo Schulz** is a Third Culture Kid. After having grown up in Liberia, Italy and Great Britain, she relocated to Stuttgart in southern Germany. Her last journey in 2004 took her to Muenster, in northern Germany, where she received her Master of Arts in National and Transnational Studies: Literature, Culture, Language from the Muenster University, WWU. She is currently working as a research assistant at the Muenster University.

**Works Cited**


A Slaughterhouse of a Story: The Butcher Boy by Patrick McCabe

Review Essay

Marie McMillan

What is Patrick McCabe’s The Butcher Boy? It is not just one story but many. It is the story of Ireland, invaded by the Normans; the story of the commonly-held propaganda that the Irish were feral animals – ‘pigs in the kitchen Irish’¹ – portrayed in cartoons as pigs and boors; the story of poor parenting and abandonment; the story of institutionalism, of drunkenness; the story of what the Irish refer to as ‘tuppence halfpenny looking down on tuppence’; the story of the effects of injurious gossip and the un-Christian behaviour of townsfolk in a Christian town; the story of rural, third-world, Ireland in the fifties and sixties – well before her entry into the EU; the story of the creeping Americanisation of Ireland via technology; the story of a boy, of a people, stuck – emotionally and developmentally – in familial and historical memories. (There’s the joke about the pilot’s announcement prior to landing at George Best Airport in Belfast: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, fasten your seat belts and put your watches back three hundred years.’) It is the story of religious zealotry; the story about psychoses – of a boy, of a community, of a nation; the story of the relentless voice of madness; the story of a psychotic Peter Pan who whirls, manically, towards a revengeful and murderous act; the story of sly, literary, one-upmanship; the story of how to tell a story, Irish-style … with Rabelaisian humour, bathos and pathos; it is the story of and by a descendant of the fili² and seanachai³ of Ireland.

Or is it a story of a psychiatric patient who has bad dreams or maybe one who invents gob-smacking lies? Whichever or whatever, it’s all mirabile dictu.⁴

Many Irish have believed that the Anglo-Norman invasion of 1169 was the starting point of Ireland’s territorial and economic woes. Could The Butcher Boy be viewed as the Irish man’s/boy’s revenge on the plunderer? In Francie’s eyes (and note the diminutive use of the Catholic Christian name), the Nugents are the enemy. They originated in Normandy, accompanied William the Conqueror to England and fought in the Battle of Hastings.⁵ Nugents accompanied Henry II when he invaded Ireland. They became one of the most prominent Anglo-Norman families to remain in Ireland. Joe cautions: ‘Watch out Francie we’re in the wars with Nugent’ (3). And later: ‘If only the Nugents hadn’t come to the town, if only they had left us alone, that was all they had to do’ (167). Mrs Nugent’s son is called Philip. Surely such nomenclature – albeit with two ls – is a fitting name for a Queen’s consort (instance the current Duke of Edinburgh).

And in a final burst of insidious black humour: ‘No more hanging? I says. For fuck’s sake! What’s this country coming to!’ (9). The days of hanging Irish patriots are over. The Pig Toll Tax (11) is also reminiscent of a swathe of taxes and tithes the Irish had to pay to the English over the centuries, ‘The Mrs Nugent and Nobody Else At all Tax’ (14).

¹ Patrick McCabe, The Butcher Boy (Picador, 2001) 3. All further references are to this edition of The Butcher Boy and in parentheses in the text.
² Irish for poets.
³ The seanachai were traditional Irish storytellers.
⁴ Latin for wonderful in the relating.
The Irish are also known to be great haters. Irish on both sides of the religious and partisan divide have been known to carry a grudges for centuries. McCabe puns and plays with this and also Ireland’s sense of isolation and neglect by other nations. ‘O, I says, powerful hate! Powerful hate altogether’ (87). ‘She said that was all there was in this world, people who let you down’ (5). This, too, could be interpreted in the global, nationalist sense, for Ireland was indeed ‘let down’ by many over the course of her history – for example, by the French and the Spanish.

Pigs in the kitchen Irish. It’s no exaggeration to say that for centuries the Irish were lampooned and referred to as pigs, internationally, and there could be many reasons for this. The Irish are renowned for their Cead Mile Failte.6 Perhaps an errant piglet or two was spied running through the door of a thatched cottage by an Ascendancy landlord?

A small selection of Punch cartoons is illustrative of depictions of the porcine Irish. A cartoon in Punch from 1877, ‘Pigheaded Obstruction’, is one such example.7 ‘Second Thoughts’ (depicts a pig trying to run away from Home Rule) and ‘A Test of Sagacity’ (Lloyd George presents a pig) are but two further examples, amongst many, on a website of Punch cartoons.8 Irish mythology and literature have focused, too, on the lowly pig. Angus Og, son of the Dagda, promised to send a pig to Finn and the Fianna. Lady Gregory’s Gods and Fighting Men – Part II Book IV: The Pigs of Angus immortalised this turning of a boy into a pig, when Angus advises Finn, father of Oisin: ‘It was no common pig was in it, but my own son.’9

‘Do you know what Ireland is?’ asks Stephen in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man only to answer ‘Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow’;10 this is repeated in the Circe scene of Ulysses.11 And while Daedalus may have been referring to the Catholic Irish turning their backs on the English.

James Joyce referred to pigs, pig-like behaviour, bacon, crubeens (boiled pigs’ feet), sausages and so on in Ulysses, culminating in the Circe episode when Bella Cohen, the prostitute, turns Bloom into a ‘perfect pig’ in his imagination (the Homeric parallel being when Circe turned Odysseus’ men into pigs). With mounds of latrinal wit, Joyce writes of pigs and poo in this section of Ulysses – Bloom with bowel trouble and the bucket (U 445), ‘Li li poo lil chile’ (U 446), ‘The stye I dislike’ (U 477), ‘Dungdevourer’ (U 488), ‘This silken purse I made out of the sow’s ear of the public’ (U 502), says Stephen, later. And the brothel is a mess, a pigsty. In an earlier episode we see Bloom, ‘and he breathed in tranquilly the lukewarm breath of cooked spicy pig’s blood’ (U 61) who later tries to catch up behind a girl’s ‘moving hams’ (U 61). In Lestrygonians II we hear of ‘eat pig like pig.’ Did the Sassenach12 turn the Irish into pigs? The Joycean influences on McCabe’s work should be obvious.

Beckett’s characters also engage in dysfunctional behaviour and use porcine references. ‘Pig’, ‘hog’, ‘muckheap’ and ‘pigheaded’ are all thrown into the trough of Waiting for Godot and in Beckettian philosophical terms life was ‘a turd.’ ‘Pig in a poke’ is another term used colloquially in Ireland to describe deception and the sexual act.

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6 Irish for ‘a hundred thousand welcomes’.
8 punch.photoshelter.com/gallery/Ireland-Cartoons
11 James Joyce, Ulysses (Penguin Modern Classics, 1968) 524.
12 The English.

Maybe it’s all hogwash to the Australian reader, but the Irish were fascinated by pigs. They exported and ate them in all their various forms and culinary mutations. Pork, pork sausages, rashers, black pudding and crubeens were all part of the Irish breakfast and high tea menus of the fifties and sixties, the setting for this novel. ‘You eat your sassige, an’ never min’ Th’ Exile o’ Sibyria’, says ‘Captain’ Jack Boyle in Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock. James Plunkett, in his novel Strumpet City dubbed one of his characters Rashers.

Add a souçon of cabbage and you’ve got yourself a national dish – Bacon and Cabbage. In the sixties, sure there was even a stamp commemorating a pig – an muc. A piece of philatelic muckracking?

For many years during my childhood and later, the Irish Independent newspaper ran the comic strip Curly Wee and Gussie Goose. One of its many readers was the novelist John McGahern.

Madness is often associated with the arrival of a full moon. Beltane is an ancient Gaelic holiday celebrated around May 1. The holiday was often celebrated on the full moon nearest to the midpoint between the vernal equinox and the summer solstice. It was a day on which bonfires were lit. It was a day on which the Irish made pilgrimages to holy wells. Madness, fire, religious fervour … paganism. God himself only knows that the Irish were up to in those pagan days but, for whatever reason, there’s that quick association between madness and the Irish. ‘I’m going mad’ says Pozzo, and the aphoristic Estragon says: ‘We all are born mad. Some remain so.’

The Frenzy of Suibne: or The Madness of Sweeney is the last and best known of a trilogy about a seventh-century petty king who experiences a violent descent into madness at the Battle of Mag Rath in 637. Resisting Christianity, and having thrown Saint Ronan’s psalter into a lake, he receives a curse from the saint who condemned him to wander the world naked. T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, Flann O’Brien – and I would argue McCabe too – have all been influenced by the incensed Sweeney. And weren’t there mad monks living in their clochans since Saint Patrick’s arrival?

Madness is undoubtedly one of the major themes of this novel. But whether it’s about a young boy’s rapid descent into mania, the madness of his parents or of many of the characters – the drunk, the publican’s daughter, the detective, the priest, the gardener, the asylum inmate – or that of the cyclopean Irish who chose to live in the historical past and blame all their woes on the English, is conjectural. Or maybe it is all of the aforementioned … Perhaps it’s a madness brought about by the veneer of Roman Catholicism on centuries of paganism?

Jonathan Swift, too, discussed madness in A Tale of a Tub. Section IX starts satirically with ‘A Digression Concerning the Original, the Use and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth’. The introductory and certain other chapters alone in Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland serve to confirm this epidemiological profile: ‘Mental Illness and Irish Culture’; ‘Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenia’; ‘Problems in Rural Irish Socialising’; ‘Breeding Breaks Out in The Eye Of The Cat’. Such a daft place’, says Francie (201).

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14 Irish for pig.
16 Beltane (’bɛl.tɛn/) being the anglicised name for the Gaelic May Day festival.
17 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (Faber and Faber, 2006) 73.
18 Irish beehive-like huts.

Brendan Behan called the Irish ‘a nation of manic depressives’ and for those who subscribe to
Freudian psychoanalysis, Freud is alleged to have said of the Irish: ‘This is one race of people for
whom psychoanalysis is of no use whatsoever.’

One does not have to be wildly imaginative to recall that Bobby Sands, the Irish Republican
activist, was condemned to solitary in the H Block of the Maze Prison in Belfast during the
seventies. As an act of contempt for the British system of internment, he spread his excreta over
the walls of his cell, as did a number of other Republican prisoners. This scatological exercise assured
media headlines. Could Sands’ daubing acts and dirty protests in 1978 have also fuelled McCabe’s
imagination?

Apparitions, sometimes, can bring insight to unbelievers and believers alike. An apparition on
the road to Damascus was responsible for Paul’s conversion. Francie’s namesake, Saint Francis of
Assisi, heard voices and had visions of the seraph.

Marian shrines abound in Ireland. Statues of Our Lady kneading her rosary beads pray for the
safety of drunken drivers at corkscrew bends. Trainloads of Irish visit Knock, in County Mayo,
scene of a visitation from Our Lady, Saint Joseph and Saint John the Evangelist – witnessed by
fifteen people – in 1879. Annual diocesan pilgrimages fly the sick and infirm to Lourdes and
Fatima where Our Lady appeared to peasant children. Monday night devotions are still held in
Ireland for Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, who first appeared in the Chapel of Our Lady of the
Miraculous Medal, 140 Rue du Bac, Paris in 1830.

Yes, apparitions are newsworthy in rural Ireland and slops for an exploitative author like
McCabe.

Nobel prize winner, George Bernard Shaw wrote about voices, too. In Joan of Arc, the young
Joan hears voices – voices that command her to help the Dauphin of France oust the English
occupiers and restore the throne that should be rightfully his.

Joan: I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.
Robert: They come from your imagination.
Joan: Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.21

Later, Ladvenu’s verballing of Joan is chilling: ‘I have pretended to have revelations from God and
the angels and the blessed saints, and perversely rejected the Church’s warnings that these were
temptations by demons.’22

Joan, too, is deprived of her liberty and imprisoned by the English. Killed by the Church, she is
burned at the stake. Coincidentally, Cauchon (cochon is French for pig) was the Bishop of Beauvais
who was responsible for sending the girl to her incendiary end. In the epilogue to the play, she
ascends into heaven where she chats cheerfully with her former enemies.

In McCabe’s tragicomedy, the saintly protagonist of the Shavian tragedy is upended and inverted
as Francie burns his house and butchers his tormentor. As Joan of Arc said: ‘He gave us our
countries and our languages, and meant us to keep to them. If it were not so it would be murder to
kill an Englishman in battle.’23

Maybe McCabe is conferring a literary canonisation on poor Francie – mad gobshite that he is.
So, I submit that McCabe alludes and pays homage to all of the aforementioned and others.

22 Shaw 90.
23 Shaw 12.
The Butcher Boy is crammed, like a well-stocked abattoir, with carcasses of deceased Irish writers. His oeuvre is full of coy literary references and mnemonics, of which I can only mention a few.

The stream of the unconscious, the implied criticism of priests and the Church, the focus on garrulity, on defecation, on pigs, on political and religious myopia, are all reminiscent of Joyce. In Neil Jordan’s 1997 film of The Butcher Boy, surely it’s no coincidence that Philip Nugent bears an uncanny resemblance to the young, bespectacled Joyce. Attempts to impress through Bacchanalian behaviour, wild storytelling in a parochial voice, not to mention the gullibility of townsfolk, remind one of John Millington Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World and his use of the Kiltartan dialect. Madness has been a familiar sub-theme for many Irish writers, most notably Samuel Beckett, John McGahern and the omnipresent Joyce. Boozers and bawdy characters, as well as prisoners, have been highlighted by Brendan Behan. Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s School for Scandal might have prompted Francie’s ‘school for pigs’. Charles Kickham’s Knocknagow and Brinsley Macnamara’s The Valley of the Squinting Windows, with their depictions of the injurious effects of village-pump gossip, could also be considered. With a stretch of the imagination so too is Dion Boucicault’s The Shaughraun and The Colleen Bawn – colleen being the Anglicised diminutive of the Irish, cailín, or girl. Bram Stoker’s Dracula is not only named but evokes the creation of a monster and its creator.

The convoluted Man Eats Dog column in the Irish Times by Myles na Gopaleen,24 which the novelist John McGahern and, no doubt, McCabe, liked reading, also comes to mind. In McCabe’s inversion, however, it is the man – or rather the boy – who never grew up; who not only eats but kills pigs, who murders someone who called him a pig. Or, it could be argued, in a surrealistic twist, whom he imagined, in his paranoia, to have perceived him as being porcine.

Or perhaps it’s yet another immodest twist, with McCabe trumping the satirist Dean Swift. In Kathleen Williams’ introduction to A Tale of a Tub and Other Satires, she references Swift’s surgical prescription for Ireland’s overpopulation and economic problems: ‘Let the Irish poor be slaughtered for food at a tender age, so that they may be as useful, and as well treated while they are being fattened, as any other cattle.’25

The Butcher Boy is an Irish stew, cordon bleu style, a harsh commentary on parochial censure, an indictment of the effects of rural and emotional loneliness, a doff-of-McCabe’s-hat to the extent of psychiatric disorder in his Celtic land, of literary one-upmanship extraordinaire, a paean to the Irish man’s ability to tell a good yarn and a first-class lesson in how to do it.

‘Th’ whole worl’s … in a terr … ible state o’ … chassis’ mourns the drunken ‘Captain’ Jack Boyle in the last line of Sean O’Casey’s Juno and the Paycock, but Francie says ‘All the beautiful things of this world are lies’ (198). Maybe the whole story is a lie; maybe McCabe has been filling us ‘full of lies’ (215), as the bogman says; maybe it’s the imaginary tale of a mad Irishman. Many inmates of asylums – suffering from personality disorders, dementia, schizophrenia – can adopt multiple personalities, can engage in long monologues, can fantasise and imagine visions and voices, can regress and/or never develop emotionally. Many daub themselves and their surroundings with excrement. Francie tells the bogman the fantastical story of the orphanage going up (210). It is conceivable, too, in yet another possible scenario, that the butcher boy (alleged main character) never existed; maybe it’s all a bad dream: ‘I never want to dream that dream again’ (73). And, later, Francie says: ‘I slept like a top. I went curving through my dreams yamma yamma yamma right over the rooftops of the town’ (113). A whopping emerald gem of a nightmare,

24 Irish for Myles of the little horses, one of the two pseudonyms used by Brian O’Nolan aka Flann O’Brien.
25 Swift xxi.
perhaps? Or simply an imaginative metaphor for the dispatch of the invader? Enter the multiplier effect – maybe it’s not a case of double but quadruple entendre.

‘I have put in so many enigmas and puzzles it will keep the professors busy for years,’ said James Joyce of his Ulysses. It could have been McCabe’s slogan too, for this is a riddle of a book. Like the bogman, I could say ‘And what else?’ (210). Maybe it’s not Mrs Nugent’s leg but ours that’s being pulled.

In conclusion, McCabe has shovelled up the ordure of Irish parochialism, nationalism, psychiatric and literary identity to create the unforgettable tale of Francie.

Shit! Shite? What a porker!

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