the cosmopolitan novel

guest editors:
emily johansen and soo yeon kim
contents vol. 42.1

1 The Cosmopolitan Novel: Notes from the Editor by Pamela McCallum

5 Introduction by Emily Johansen and Soo Yeon Kim

articles

11 Once There Was Cosmopolitanism: Enchanted Pasts as Global History in the Contemporary Novel by Bishnupriya Ghosh

35 “Any Educated Person Would Know”: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste, and ‘Knowing Better’ in Peter Carey’s My Life as a Fake by Lewis MacLeod

63 Ethical Treason: Radical Cosmopolitanism In Salman Rushdie’s Fury (2001) by Soo Yeon Kim

85 Authoritarianism, Cosmopolitanism, Allegory by Jini Kim Watson

107 In and Out of the Spectacle: Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s The Vagrants by Belinda Kong

129 Risky Cosmopolitanism: Risk and Responsibility in Catherine Bush’s The Rules of Engagement by Emily Johansen

149 The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration by Brian Yost

interview

171 What is World Literature? by Wang Ning and David Damrosch
reviews

191  Wang Ning. *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives on Globalization and China.* (Sun Yifeng)

198  Sourayan Mookerjea, Imre Szeman, Gail Faurschou, eds. *Canadian Culture Studies: A Reader.* (Lily Cho)

201  Notes on Contributors
ariel

Editor Pamela McCallum
Associate Editor Jeanne Perreault
Reviews Editor Shaobo Xie
Editorial Assistant Sheba Rahim

Editorial Board Nancy Batty Red Deer College; Michael T. Clarke University of Calgary; Clara Joseph University of Calgary; Gugu Hlongwane St. Mary’s University; Jon Kertzer University of Calgary; Victor Li University of Toronto; Anne McWhir University of Calgary; David Oakleaf University of Calgary; Sara Salih University of Toronto; Stephen Slemon University of Alberta; Alexie Tcheuyap University of Toronto.

International Advisory Board Bruce Bennett Australian Defence Force Academy; David Dabydeen Warwick University; Graham Huggan Leeds University; Shirley Geoklin Lim University of California (Santa Barbara); Mbulelo Mzamane University of Fort Hare; Shyamala Narayan Jamia Millia Islamia (New Delhi); Richard Nile Curtin University of Technology (Australia Research Institute); Kenneth Ramchand University of West Indies (St. Augustine); Susie Tharu Central Institute of English & Foreign Language (India); Gauri Viswanathan Columbia University; Robert Young Oxford University.
Important Notice to Our Readers

ariel online

Readers will be interested to know that ariel: a review of international english literature is now available online at <http://ariel.ucalgary.ca>

We invite readers to visit the webpage and register. Many back issues are now available under “Archives,” and we will continue to add more. Current issues are available online only to subscribers. If you wish to subscribe, please contact the journal at <ariel@ucalgary.ca>

ariel’s online presence is part of Synergies, an innovative project to make Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities research available worldwide using a cost-effective public/not-for-profit partnership to maximize knowledge dissemination.

Making a difference. Making you think.

The University of Calgary Press is proud to publish ariel: a review of international english literature under its imprint. UC Press is also proud to be part of a team promoting journal participation in Synergies.
Midway through E. M. Forster’s canonical modernist novel *Howards End*, members of a wealthy English family, the Wilcoxes, discuss a young woman, Margaret Schlegel. “Oh, I forget, she isn’t really English,” the sister comments, to which her brother replies, “She’s a cosmopolitan…. I admit I’m rather down on cosmopolitans. My fault doubtless. I cannot stand them …” (81). What has marked Margaret as a cosmopolitan is her German father, her travels on the continent and her interest in other cultures. All of this seems quite unremarkable from the perspective of the twenty-first century, but in the intense nationalisms preceding the First World War—Forster’s novel was published in 1906—the Wilcoxes see the Schlegel sisters, both born and raised in England, as somehow failing to have a “proper” national character. Forster’s narrative, however, is less concerned with national identity than with working through the tensions within the root meaning of cosmopolitan: “citizen of the world” from the Greek *kosmos* (world) and *politēs* (citizen). The Schlegel’s German father sees himself as a “countryman of Hegel and Kant” (23), and, in the words of Evelyn Cobley, “what the Schlegel children inherit from the German side of their lineage is their cultural sophistication and idealistic intellectualism” (278). Unlike the Wilcoxes, the Schlegel sisters are able to respond to others with openness and empathy, and these qualities too form their cosmopolitan inheritance. They are citizens of the world in the sense that they approach others as potentially their co-citizens. In contrast, the Wilcox men can also claim to be citizens of the world, not in the sense of any interest in other cultures, but rather because their businesses traverse national boundaries in the name of global capitalism. As Cobley puts it, Forster foregrounds “the contrast between cosmopolitanism as the circulation of ideas forming
our cultural identity and cosmopolitanism as the circulation of capital in arena of economic activity” (278).

Forster is prescient in his juxtaposition of a cosmopolitanism of ideas and affect with the instrumental orientation of global capitalism, and there is no doubt that the interconnections and interpenetration of the two have deepened during the twentieth century and after as migration of populations across the world and the penetration of corporate investment into new spaces of production have increased exponentially. It comes as no surprise, then, that the contemporary British writer Zadie Smith returns to engage Howards End in her exploration of transatlantic ethnicities and aesthetics in her novel On Beauty. How might these questions and ideas translate into theoretical reflections? In the Clare Hall Tanner lectures at Cambridge University, delivered in the spring of 2001, Anthony Appiah, one of the foremost contemporary theorists of cosmopolitanism, argues that “soul making”—the production of human identities—is not given, but rather is produced “in the way in which we are seen and treated by others” (Hawthorn). Appiah suggests that it is possible to enter sympathetically and constructively into the life of another. The ethics Appiah sketches out here requires the ability to imagine social difference within the shared life-worlds of multicultural societies in the twenty-first century, and literature is one site where these processes might take shape. These experiences of reading will be challenging, marked by hesitations and sometimes by failure, and always subject to rethinking and revisiting, but they open up the possibility of respectfully entering the world of others.

This special issue on “the cosmopolitan novel” explores some of the questions raised by Appiah and other theorists of contemporary cosmopolitanism: Bruce Robbins, Pheng Cheah, Berthold Schoene, Timothy Brennan, Rebecca Walkowitz—the list could go on. Contributors take up a wide range of narrative and cultural texts both canonical and emergent: Salman Rushdie and Peter Carey; Yiyun Li, Catherine Bush and Dave Eggers. ARIEL is grateful to the guest editors of the issue, Emily Johansen and Soo Yeon Kim, who have brought together a productive and provocative group of articles. Thank you to Berthold Schoene, who initially contacted ARIEL about the project. It is our hope that “the
cosmopolitan novel” will generate wide discussion on this timely topic in postcolonial studies.

**Works Cited**


Vol. 29, No. 1 of Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature

Anita Brookner and the World, a special cluster of articles:

The Comic Operas of Anita Brookner’s Europe in England: An Aesthetic of Survival, by Phyllis Lassner


Anita Brookner’s Visual World, by Margaret Stetz

Michael Field in Their Time and Ours, by Joseph Bristow

Narrative or Network?: Eighteenth-Century Feminist Literary History at the Crossroads, by Paula McDowell

visit us at www.utulsa.edu/tswl
In his introduction to *Cosmopolitics* (1998), Bruce Robbins notes that we are connected to all sorts of places, causally if not always consciously, including many that we have never traveled to, that we have perhaps only seen on television—including the place where the television itself was manufactured. It is frightening to think how little progress has been made in turning invisibly determining and often exploitative connections into conscious and self-critical ones, how far we remain from mastering the sorts of allegiance, ethics and action that might go with our complex and multiple belonging. (3)

In this sense, cosmopolitanism cannot only be a reflection of sophisticated aesthetic judgment. In the nearly thirteen years since the publication of this seminal collection on the resurgence of critical interest in cosmopolitanism post Cold War, these causal yet unconscious connections have only multiplied. At the same time, the urgency of Robbins’ argument here about the inescapability—even necessity—of cosmopolitan thinking has only grown. In other words, along with multiplication of unconscious connections, the political necessity for thinking of ourselves as active citizens of a global *polis* has also grown exponentially.

Indeed, etymologically, to be cosmopolitan is to be a citizen of the world—suggesting ethical and political commitments to global others, often understood as developing out of global mobility and the resulting interaction with various kinds of difference. Many cosmopolitan critics have seen the novel as a central site for developing these commitments. In “Cosmopolitan Reading,” Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that “the novel [is] a testing ground for a distinction between cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on a dialogue among differences, and a different more monological form of humanism” (207). Martha Nussbaum places
Emily Johansen and Soo Yeon Kim

a reading program (though not necessarily confined to the novel) at the center of her cosmopolitan education program in “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism.” Yet, Bruce Robbins and other postcolonial critics of cosmopolitanism resist constructions of cosmopolitanism like Appiah’s and Nussbaum’s where “the term cosmopolitanism is ordinarily taken to [refer to] aesthetic spectatorship rather than political engagement” (Robbins, Feeling Global 17; emphasis in original). Appiah’s and Robbins’ different takes on what cosmopolitan worldviews consist of and what the goal of these worldviews should be point to a tension that undergirds a good deal of critical writing about cosmopolitanism: is it principally an aesthetic or a political category? Can genres such as the novel envision non-exclusionary cosmopolitan world-views or models of cosmopolitanism concerned with engagement? Do recent attempts to “re-cosmopolitanaize postcolonial studies” indicate critics’ assimilation into neo-colonialism or new forms of resistance to it (Cheah 89)?

These questions frame the debates in the essays collected in this special issue. In interweaving questions about aesthetics, politics, and cosmopolitanism, these essays consider the ways in which contemporary fiction—and, perhaps especially, postcolonial fiction—usher new cosmopolitan possibilities and diverse new ways-of-being into a radically globalized world. Methodologically, these essays all highlight the interventions and contestations postcolonial narrative fiction makes to normative theoretical and popular models of cosmopolitanism that are often marked by elitist notions of non-belonging and non-committal worldviews. In particular, the essays take issue with cosmopolitan theorists’ bifurcation between the global and the local, difference and identity, and politics and philosophy, so as to demonstrate the ways that contemporary cosmopolitan fiction imagines cosmopolitanism as always in a state of becoming, refusing to categorize cosmopolitan ways of being as only one thing or another.

These essays expand on the work begun by a variety of recent cosmopolitan scholars such as Rebecca Walkowitz, Berthold Schoene, and Shameem Black who consider different ways the novel imagines new ways of talking about and inhabiting global modernity. All three pose questions about the relationship between the novel and the world; par-
particularly, they respond (explicitly or not) to Benedict Anderson’s famous linking of the novel to the birth of the modern nation-state. If, for Anderson, the novel “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (25; emphasis in original), Walkowitz, Schoene, and Black all query what kind of community the contemporary cosmopolitan novel creates. Schoene, for instance, asks while “traditionally the rise of the novel has been studied in intimate association with the rise of the nation state, might increasing globalisation currently be prompting the development of a less homebound and territorialist sub-genre of the novel, more adept than its national and postcolonial counterparts at imagining global community” (12)? For Appiah, Nussbaum and other liberal cosmopolitan critics, the community imagined by narrative is the global community of human beings (a category that remains relatively under-theorized in this discourse). However, Walkowitz, Schoene and Black suggest that the contemporary cosmopolitan novel imagines a community defined by contestation and mutability—one that is not easily contained by existing categories of communal attachments, and that is a process, rather than biologically determined. Indeed, Black wonders whether “three of the most accepted ways to organize literary scholarship—shared nationality, shared ethnicity, and shared gender—can limit our ability to apprehend the intellectual contours of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century… Fiction in English at the turn of the millennium participates in a wider planetary conversation” (11).

Schoene, Black and Walkowitz all query the relationship between the novel and global communities—moving the debate from the more binary-focused opposition between Appiah and Robbins to consider the inseparability of the aesthetic and the political. As Walkowitz notes, “a cosmopolitan style is not an alternative to or replacement for a cosmopolitan politics… rather it describes an analytic feature of critical cosmopolitanism, which has been used politically by writers” (28). In part what this shift might represent is a movement from looking at novels as representations of cosmopolitanism to, instead, prescriptive models. In other words, a move from depicting “realistic” cosmopolitan identities and commitments, to imagining what cosmopolitanism should or could
look like. The essays in this special issue argue for the need to move away from a focus on only the representation of “emergent contemporaneity” (Schoene 14) to emphasize the necessity for contemporary transformation.

The essays here suggest, then, that the cosmopolitan novel has the potential to re-create the global polis; indeed, all the essays in the issue take novels seriously as, simultaneously, literary, ethical and political texts. One way this recreation takes place, the authors in this issue argue, is that the texts they examine take up ideas that are typically excluded from cosmopolitan discourse as a way to locate new, more engaged or situated versions of cosmopolitanism. They model the alternative or invisible practices that might produce a new cosmopolitanism. In other words, the essays contribute to the vision and revision of existent cosmopolitan thinking by illuminating histories and ideas conventionally ignored but conducive to envisaging a new cosmopolitanism. These revisions might take the form of making visible hidden cosmopolitan genealogies (Ghosh), reimagining testimony (Yost), the geographical power relations of aesthetic judgement (MacLeod), considering cosmopolitan memory (Tomsky) or embracing risk (Johansen) and treason (Kim). Other essays map out ways of thinking about cosmopolitan commitments outside the typically Euro-American context of cosmopolitan studies (Kong and Watson), thereby highlighting the increasing role of Asia in the reconfiguration of cosmopolitics in the twenty-first century. What characterizes the cosmopolitan novel as mapped here, then, is a (perhaps typically cosmopolitan) multiplicity of foci and interests. Yet what they share is a commitment to thinking through the consequences and responsibilities of global connections and interactions. Rather than seeing novels as either the sole way to cosmopolitanism or as an indictment of cosmopolitanism’s apoliticism, these essays position literary texts as central to the expansion of cosmopolitan discourse.

Notes

1 While cosmopolitanism has a long history, many critics date its current critical moment to the end of the Cold War. See Beck, Cohen, Dharwadker and Schoene.
Works Cited
Postcolonialism, Economies, Crises: Interdisciplinary Perspectives

2nd Biennial Conference of the Postcolonial Studies Association

University of Birmingham
7-8 July 2011

At a time when the current global financial crisis is prompting profound reassessments of economic models, practices and transnational relationships, how can postcolonial studies inform our understanding of relations between local cultures and global capital? This interdisciplinary conference aims to explore the relationships between postcolonialism and economic structures, historicising crisis as well as engaging with contemporary concerns. How might we situate present economic relations within longer (post)colonial histories of capitalism, deprivation, debt and dependency? How do moments of crisis interrelate with ongoing economic struggles outside the west? To what extent are economic relations a central feature of postcolonial cultural representation? What are the relationships between economic crisis and the content, marketing and consumption of postcolonial artistic and cultural productions?

Keynote Speakers:
Elleke Boehmer, Sarah Brouillette, Suman Gupta

postcolonialstudiesassociation.co.uk
Once There Was Cosmopolitanism: Enchanted Pasts as Global History in the Contemporary Novel
Bishnupriya Ghosh

There were no histories of Palestine. I mean I had to reconstruct the history, partly. Well, I had to deconstruct the official history that one saw in the western press and western scholarship and then somehow try to advance a notion of what our history was, and I did it largely through the optic of what Zionism did to us. That is to say we were the effect of Zionism, which is not a correct way of doing it, but that was all that was available to me at the time. And I think it was at that time I became much more convinced that the study of literature, for example, was a historical enterprise, not just an aesthetic one.
Edward Said to Tariq Ali, in Conversations, 97–8

Scene One
Smoke whirls rise mingling with the exhausted breath of armies at battle’s close. The valorous Balian of Ibelin has just ceded Jerusalem (October 1187) to the mighty emperor, the righteous Sultan Yusuf Salah al-Din Ayyub (commonly known as Saladin), at a famous close of the third crusade that wrought an uneasy peace (the Treaty of Ramala) between bitter enemies. As the stately Salah al-Din strides into the abandoned city; as the marble crescent is hoisted above the walls to signal the return of the Muslims to their Holy Land; as the historically-reputed tolerant and cosmopolitan victor purposively picks up a fallen gold cross, his feet (shot in closeup) marking territory, but with respect for all; as the orchestral score rises to underline a new day; and as his minions follow scattering rose petals, bright reds against the grayish blue pall of battle, Ridley Scott’s controversial Kingdom of Heaven draws to its close. The bell tolls; Salah
Bishnupriya Ghosh

al-Din (played by the intensely regal Ghassan Massaud) kneels to pray. By this time, we are exhausted by Balian’s exertions but relieved peace has come to the Holy Land for we live in times when news from those parts only comes in the form of bombs, missiles, artilleries, embargoes, walls, permits, unsettlement, and stones. Lost in the historical spectacular, we are willing to be transported to that fragile moment—lasting momentarily, but now enshrined in beautifully crafted audiovision.

But only momentarily—for Salah al-Din’s victory, obscuring the humanist victory of Balian, would take precedence for audiences who responded to the film with mixed feelings. The reasons for this are too many to elaborate; but the signs of a mixed reception were quite clear. Known for his fast-paced action films, the venture was a labor of love for Scott, as he discloses in the director’s cut (complete with special features on authorities who vouch for the film’s historical accuracy2), a secular humanist take on the ongoing war between Christendom and the Islamic empire. But such visionary history was precisely the problem. For one, it was not commercially viable: Twentieth Century Fox insisted on a final product minus 45 minutes of the original director’s cut, in order to market an action-adventure flick and not a historical epic. Still the film flopped in box offices, garnering $47 million in the United States, well below its 130-million production budget; in Europe and worldwide (including Egypt), however, it grossed over $211 million. For another, its subject provoked a knee-jerk hatred toward Salah al-Din (historically, widely respected by his opponents, such as Richard the Lionheart), fueling the reading of the end as a “tragic” defeat of the historical (read Christian) West. If this was history, some refused its enticements; if Scott depended on the sheer power of cinematic thrills and sensations to present an alternate possible world, few seemed willing to lose themselves in the historical memory. The epic would reopen a wound; the story would not close over the hurt of recent history.

Scene Two
A melodious strain (“manmohana, manmohana” or “the charmer of my heart”) wafts into the splendour of the imperial darbar (a court in session) in Emperor Akbar’s sixteenth-century fabled city, Fatepur
Sikri, tearing the lovelorn king away from his courtly deliberations. As the Rajput princess (played by the glamorous Aishwarya Rai) sings to the prince of her heart, the Lord Krishna, within the sanctuary of the temple (built *inside* the Muslim fort) that she negotiated with her imperial husband in exchange for her trust, Akbar (played by the lithe smoky Hrithik Roshan) strides toward the source of the luscious A. R. Rahman-composed *bhajan*—once more enamored of the recalcitrant princess whose heart (and body) he still has not won. Thin gauze colored curtains dreamily brush his face and body as the emperor walks slowly through long takes, for several minutes, from court to courtyard to palace entrance to hall to temple. The motion is light, slow, graceful; the architectural space intricate, weaving around us; the vibrations of intense devotional music fall deliriously heavy upon the ear; soft textures highlight a virile masculinity resplendent in kingly costume. A scene made for love, inspiring desire in the spectator by now disinterested in the historical accuracy of the unfolding love story—caught in that willing suspension of disbelief that romances us now and then.

A lush historical epic, Ashutosh Gowarikar’s *Jodha Akbar* (2008) pays homage to a popularly remembered love story of the unforgettable passion of Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar, the Mughal Emperor widely loved as the bringer of peace between his Hindu and Muslim subjects in the newly conquered land (Hindustan) he strove to make his home, and the (fictive) Jodha Bai, his greatest, and avowedly Hindu love of stellar aristocratic heritage (hailing from valiant Rajput stock, warriors known for their resistance to Muslim conquerors of India). One need hardly belabour why such a legend would persist in a nation rife with ever resurgent Hindu-Muslim tensions; why the cosmopolitan humanist Akbar, known for his patronage of all arts irrespective of religious sanctity, would continue to captivate; why a director, in collaboration with Bollywood’s most exciting production company (UTV, headed by Ronnie Screwala) would seek to bridge communal bitterness, even as historians protested historical inaccuracies (especially, the fictitious nature of Jodha Bai and the elision of Akbar’s historical syncretic religion, the *Din-e-Ilahi*); and why such a secular humanist endeavour would spur protests and bans in the Hindu right-dominated states of
Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Uttarkhand, and Rajasthan. First off to a slow start (24 crore rupees or $533,333) in the opening weekend, box office profits rose to 50 crores ($1.1 million) by the fourth weekend; across the seas, in North America alone the spectacle would gross $1.3 million in its opening weekend. Remade history would come to stay, enchant by story, set design, costume, music, choreography, and the sumptuous sway of star bodies.

* * *

In this half-discovered world everyday brought news of fresh enchantments. The visionary revelatory dream-poetry of the quotidian had not yet been crushed by blinkered prosy facts.


It is not that we have not seen these historical episodes cinematically recounted before. But the memorable productions—for instance, K. Asif’s Hindi-language *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), a beloved period piece for Bombay film audiences, or Youssef Chahine’s homage, *The Victorious Saladin* (1963), equally popular in Egypt—were largely national treasures, both made in less war-like times (before the 1967 six-day war in Palestine, before the post-partition eruption of Hindu-Muslim violence in the 1990s). Neither had the global distribution of *Jodha Akbar* or *Kingdom of Heaven*; neither the urgent call to history as enchantment. Their scale of distribution, high production values (signaling financing for world, and not domestic, markets), and historical temper would propel both films beyond quotidian commercial mass entertainment; muddying customary low expectations, they would come to be judged for their world-making politics, their willed interventions into rising religious tensions, despite their obvious incitements to dream. I begin with them not only because they share the project of historical cosmopolitanism with their print media counterparts, historical novels, but also because beginning elsewhere—in the powerfully immersive media that is cinema—only highlights the specific cultural work of literature, especially high literary works that are reflexive about their knowledge production and therefore have fairly limited readerships. I will return intermittently to the scenes above, but here, as we turn to literature, they
give me necessary critical tread to pose a few key questions. If ours is a historical epoch when cultural practitioners (artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, musicians, videogame designers, among them) across faiths have been mining historical pasts for evidence of a secular humanism that could remake our world of military and religious expansionism, how do they enchant us variously in different media practices? What is the nature of world making in contemporary historical novels in this regard? How might we characterize the cosmopolitan pasts we find there?

These questions circle the specific kind of cultural practice in contemporary novels that is historical cosmopolitanism: a recuperation, and inevitable reinvention, of discontinuous “pasts,” usually told from localized perspectives but threaded into the greater story of a global history. At the heart of such a history of modern nations, regional or dispersed cultures, and civilizations, is exchange—a trade of goods, information, and people—that has increased global connectivity so exponentially in our time that we rummage for critical templates expressive of the consequent “sense of mutuality” (Breckenridge 578). Cosmopolitanism, a hotly debated and often-disliked term, has become a placeholder for this sense of mutuality, as we become more and more self-reflexive about our inevitable global connectivity. In fact, one might say the reflexivity regarding global connections, made possible because of the massive transformations in communications infrastructures (including the global distribution/exhibition of the two films with which I began), is the signature of our phase of globalization. We project inhabiting a world more than any other epoch, for the world materializes in the mass media everyday in living rooms, handheld devices, shops, public squares and private spaces, all saturated with screen cultures. Such connectivity more often than not mandates a sense of mutuality and, subsequently, its opposing force—that is, a chauvinism which sends us scuttling into protected corners. As global connections intensify, newly provincializing imperatives, personal (e.g. radical individualism) and geopolitical (e.g. ethnocentrism), mushroom, energized by the unrelenting fear of the other. Amid the conflict at the heart of exchange, even as we continue to fight over land, energy, goods, information, and people, one articulation of provincialism endures: religious expansionism, a world-making
project recursively aggrandizing new territories in the name of the gods. The crusades and *jihad* return—often, chillingly, in remembered guises, nursing (projected) “ancient” grudges.

Such continuities, in turn, send us back to the past to ask: what resources did *they*, our counterparts in the foreign country that is the past, have against religious orthodoxies, ethnic cleansing, or military expansionism? Cosmopolitanism (rearticulated with axiomatic modernity, secularism, and humanism) arrives as a privileged stop in a genealogical quest, an old idea constantly poured in new bottles. When we look at its many guises, we recognize we have never been fully cosmopolitan; chauvinism has always scuttled living with difference. Always a *becoming* in the world, never finished, cosmopolitanism glimmers ever so briefly, in enchanted pasts—always suffused with reason, and yet alluring in their aesthetics. Cultural practitioners lure us there, immersing us in truncated episodes deftly woven into a “global history.” Once historical, we enter these discontinuous, disconnected, but often parallel, portals; as post-enlightenment subjects we begin to *objectify* the sense of mutuality they evoke in us, “seeing” connections once lived only as a structure of feeling—at best, a living with alterity; at worst, a fear of the other.

If the stakes for finding a capacious self-reflexive articulation of a sense of mutuality are so high—they can explode in airports, burn holes in lungs of migrant workers, starve the children of the other—then we also comprehend why the genealogical baggage of a particular term, cosmopolitanism, can be the subject of vociferous debate. At its broadest, cosmopolitanism is a set of practices that configure our sense of mutuality in the face of coming (or continuing) conflict. It would be impossible, indeed unnecessary, to rehearse the debate over cosmopolitanism extensively, partly because I have rehearsed it elsewhere; so I will be somewhat telegraphic here. At worst, cosmopolitanism captures a sociality born of privilege and nurtured in the disaffected ennui, the political inertia, of elite bourgeois subjects: they “belong” to the world because they move freely within it; their relationship to strangers only serves to celebrate a rich bourgeois interiority. At best, the same relation between strangers—uneven, complicated, and possibly transformative—has the potential for rethinking sociality and, consequently, an alternative glo-
bality (the image of the place where we now live) beyond the shadows of financial, industrial, and military empires. In both respects, one only has to travel these days to have the dream of mutuality evaporate at ports; after all, the consequences are starkly different from those who die crossing borders to those just annoyed at body searches at airports when security personnel touch their “junk.”

But the fact cosmopolitanism is a dream continues to variously irk contemporary critics of global capital. In its current phase of flexible accumulation, capital turns the philosophically thick optic that is cosmopolitanism into its handmaiden: the outcome is a much-celebrated, consumer cosmopolitanism. A globalizing managerial drive, consumer cosmopolitanism fragments and projects the world as market where we are sold neat packages, each placed in equivalence to the other; as new economic blocs (such as India and China) arrive on the world stage, a cosmopolitanism that accentuates their difference only to epistemologically equalize them as ancient (competing and parallel) civilizations can become the means for forging consensus on how to survive this fast-paced, changing, economic transformation. Cosmopolitan, configuring mutuality, returns, its potentiality more keenly advanced as argument when we are in the midst of massive socioeconomic and/or political transformations. A willed forgetting of irreconcilable difference, often connected to traumatic events in the past, accompanies this flattening of the field of exchange; such revisionism further projects the participants in the unfolding of the drama of cosmopolitanism as once pure, unmixed, or separate entities. Given this “once upon a time” temporality, cosmopolitanism has always been historical in temper, even when celebrating the multicultural new. History in the form of narration establishes a pure difference in the past that can be put to rest now with equanimity; we can consume difference without the hurt of history. Muslim emperors fall in love with fictive Hindu princesses who are portrayed as their equal; great humanists (Balian and Salah al-Din) understand each other’s deepest desire—peace—over the coveted prize of the Holy Land.

Historical cosmopolitanism can therefore willfully reinforce the separation, the core project of modernity as the editors of the Public Culture millennial volume on cosmopolitanism remind us, between entities
that begin to appear flat, localized, and accessed as manageable difference. Cosmopolitanism becomes the conciliatory practice of mixing, the sense of mutuality necessary for generating consensus on shared interests in the present; it is at once future-oriented, a praxis to be perfected, still to come, as it is revisionist in simplifying complex histories between these adjacent and interactive cultures. This is a rather different localizing imperative, however, from other varieties broadly categorized as “critical cosmopolitanisms,” all antithetical to the instrumentality of the managerial cosmopolitanism described so far. If the major critique of cosmopolitanism has come from the left, often highlighting internationalism as the still-not-forgotten geopolitical mutuality of interests, then some scholars have taken up the challenge in proposing a series of critical cosmopolitanisms that eschew the global in the interests of a situated, avowedly localized politics—a “cosmopolitics” in one famous revision, “vernacular” or “lived” cosmopolitanisms in others, always attentive to differences that cannot be erased, forgotten, flattened, or managed even as one commits to living with them. One could get lost in nuances here, so let me remain with the question of history with which we are concerned. In critically informed historical cosmopolitanism, history does not rest easily as cultural practitioners elaborate intensely networked historical relations that were always mixed, always entangled—and often in painful and inextricable ways. Such historical cosmopolitanisms muddy the projected “pure” separation, revealing the entities to have always been in each other’s business and often with irreconcilable differences. Such a critical perspective on networked relations advances a “planetary conviviality,” as Walter Mignolo terms it, that ensures living with difference such as heavy histories, continuing disputes, or unassimilated tastes. Always future-oriented, a constant becoming, this historical cosmopolitanism, too, posits the tactical management of difference either as constant adaptation (giving rise to vernacular cosmopolitanisms) or as the reopening/touching of a historical wound (undigested trauma as the source of difference). Both forms of historical cosmopolitanism question the historical desire to conjugate entities within the overarching telos of a coming reconciliation. Both narrate “pasts,” discontinuous with each other, sometimes missing, and
sometimes available in contradictory accounts; hence these historical cosmopolitanisms inevitably take on epistemology as their real concern.

If cosmopolitanism hovers shakily upon the horizon of expectations, in the cultural practices of critical cosmopolitanism we are invited to inhabit it precisely as a structure of feeling. The best storytellers enchant us in their overtly affective and sensory works. One could find evidence of historical cosmopolitanism in a range of historical texts, but here I look at those that cannot be understood in any other way. That is, these cultural texts, specifically historical novels often characterized as modern epics, perform cosmopolitanism in their self-reflexive turning of archive into expressive repertoire (a project suggested in the Edward Said comment prefacing this essay). Different, difficult to recuperate, missing in institutional archives, and discontinuous with any history of progress, the cosmopolitan pasts we find there lure us into luscious time-space capsules that bring news of a sense of mutuality that once was—sometimes embodied by great figures such as the educated, tolerant Salah al-Din or the benevolent Akbar, but often by the small or the subaltern, those overlooked footnotes in the world historical record. Several contemporary novelists have been long engaged in the creation of such repertoires, many quite explicit in their search for the entanglements, crossings, and seepage accompanying global exchanges.

That the novel has borne the burden of history rather heavily in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—often telling “in another place, another time” those pasts that cannot be told or that were willfully buried—is a commonplace. The novels with which we are concerned, all novels in English driven by present concerns to reframe global history, take on another kind of burden: the dual task of simultaneously projecting (far in the distant past) and simulating (immersing us in it for a while) an alternate globality, an image of an inter-connected world that was once governed by the sense of mutuality we stand to lose at great cost. For many postcolonial writers for whom “world making” has always been the project, the contemporary Middle East as the locus of conflict has been a central preoccupation; if humanist enterprises, old and new, have materialized the human in multiple guises, inevitably bounded by its other, a secular humanism that once promised a sense of
religious mutuality seems up for grabs again—celebrated, vilified, interrogated, or negotiated. If Middle East has come to stay in our imaginations, these novelists seem to ask, how might we understand the cultural field of differences that accompany it in our everyday lives?

The two novels I will focus on are both written by British writers of South Asian origin better known as public intellectuals who seek to provoke us: Tariq Ali’s *The Book of Saladin* (1998), a central tale (and second volume) in his recently completed Islamic quintet, and Salman Rushdie’s *Enchantress of Florence*, another historical fiction that returns to Christendom and Islam as had the infamous *Satanic Verses*, but perhaps less directly. Rushdie and Ali’s respective political stature (quite apart from how one values their oeuvre) credentials the historical enterprise of the two novels14 we shall pursue at greater length shortly. Now the plotting of the essay might become clearer to the reader. The films, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Jodha Akbar*, immerse us in the very same memorable pasts made history in the two novels, set in the twelfth and sixteenth centuries respectively; together they vertiginously traverse the geographies of South Asia, the Middle East, and continental Europe, and touch the shores of Europe’s fifteenth century new world. The backcloth of the films more finely clarifies the very different expressivity of print media, especially novelistic immersion and critique, even as their collusion with novels on popular world making highlights which pasts have become more urgent to re-tell in our times. As politicized literary practice, these novels has continued Edward Said’s postcolonial project, with Palestine (the singular and paradigmatic postcolony) an ever freshly opened wound; in this they join a host of other historical endeavors where we find the cosmopolitan pasts of the Middle East, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s *The Ship* (1979) or Naguib Mahfouz’ *The Harafish* (1977). In reflecting on these media, this essay, too, responds to the historical urgency of re-telling global history.

* * *

The geographical sense makes projections—imaginative, cartographic, military, economic, historical, or in the general sense cultural. It also makes possible the construction of various
kinds of knowledge, all of which are in one way or another dependent on the perceived character or destiny of a particular geography.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 93

Tariq Ali and Salman Rushdie need little introduction to readers of the “postcolonial” or “world” literatures of the contemporary period. So I will restrict myself to two short caveats that frame the will to history behind the two historical enterprises. Best known for his editorial work at the *New Left Review* and for the Channel Four programs his television company, Bandung, produced, Tariq Ali notes he was inspired to a greater global history by Edward Said, who, after reading the first of the Islamic quintet, *The Shadow of the Pomegranate Tree*, exclaimed: “You’ve got to tell the whole bloody story now. You just can’t stop midway” (qtd. in Campbell). Ali would take the insistence to heart, he maintains, realizing the political stakes of the “pasts” he could assemble as history in a work of fiction—pasts that could captivate, and therefore, could be revivified in popular memory. For Rushdie, the historical stakes for *The Enchantress of Florence*, one of few novels where he returns, if only obliquely, to religious history (and to the Mughal Empire, so briefly referenced in *The Satanic Verses*), are prodigious: the novel, he explained in a conversation preceding a reading of his new work, was a labour of love, twelve years’ worth of reading the fifteenth-century *Baburnama* (also known as the *Tuzk-e-Babri*, the founder of the Mughal empire, Zahir ud-Din Mohammed Babur’s memoirs) followed by methodical research into the parallel world of sixteenth-century Florence ruled by the infamous Medicis. It was not a flight of fancy, he insisted, like *Jodha Akbar*, released right before the novel hit the stands. These disclosures tell us, faithful to their ongoing critique of military, economic, and political world-making, history becomes the all-consuming love for both men as they embark on these novels.

Yet they are not period pieces, but devoutly geopolitical stories of empires that rise, stabilize, and fall as the powerful (Akbar and Elizabeth Tudor, Salah al-Din and the Knights Templar) eye each other across continents. If, as Said once suggested in *Culture and Imperialism*,
geographical notation” makes territorial takeovers possible and foretells the manifest destiny of lands, then these novels map quests, campaigns, escapes, and adventures to etch an alternate “globality”—the contingent spatial image of the world we inhabit. The cosmopolitan play of difference is exteriorized as a cultural geography sutured by the two travelers, both fictive storytellers, who reflexively fascinate us (and implied listeners in the novelistic worlds) with their fables. At the center of Enchantress is chameleon yellow-haired traveler, wearing difference in his parti-colored coat made of leather lozenges, supposedly the grandson of Emperor Babur’s sister, Qara Köz (Lady with the Black Eyes)—written out of the historical record because she had deserted her brother for his enemy. Born in the new world, the illegitimate child of incest, he is the true cosmopolitan, a trickster (posing as an “English ambassador” bringing Elizabeth Tudor’s letter to Akbar) who makes his way through Florence to Fatepur Sikri; moving over Central Asia, between bustling cities vibrant in crime, political intrigue, and sex, Niccoló Vespucci (alias Ucelli di Firenze or Mogor dell’Amore/the Mughal of Love) assembles parallel worlds in his travels, a figure for living in mutuality. Similarly, in Saladin, Ali invents a Jewish scribe, Ibn Yakub, who, to tell the “true” history of the great Emperor, must travel with him from Cairo, to Damascus, to Jerusalem. (The greater quintet is more ambitious in gathering Granada, Damascus, Paris, Sicily, Lahore, and Istanbul within its cultural geography, re-worlding through Islam’s vicissitudes the world annotated by European conquest). Ibn Yakub, too, falls in the shadow of the great physician-philosopher Ibn Mayumun (better known as Maimonides, Ali notes, carefully transcribing the Islamic version of the name) and his rival, the Sultan’s advisor and court historian, Kadi al-Fadi. The precarious status of the characters as historians, together with the illegitimacy of historical reference, grants them poetic license—to vivify history without “blinkered prosy fact” (Rushdie 12). Both witness the personal transformation of emperors, effectively providing first-hand, affective and interested accounts of world history.

In short, they can enchant without reservation, relating worlds they have passed with a sensuousness that concretizes the past and immerses
us in it. Often richly nuanced descriptive passages flamboyantly stage cosmopolitanism as cultural opulence fit for kings. At these moments, cultural cosmopolitanism is the expression of political and economic power. This is particularly true of the countless descriptive passages, often stilling narrative action, often highly expressive (in the manner we expect of Rushdie), in both novels as they eulogize the great cultural meccas of Florence and Fatepur Sikri, Cairo and Damascus. For example, after the games in Palazzo Medici, Florence, we find

… zuppa pavese to drink, and peacocks to eat, and pheasants from Chiavenna. And Tuscan partridges, and oysters from Venice. There was pasta made the Arab way with much sugar and cinnamon, while all the dishes involving the flesh of swine, such as fagioli with pork skins, were avoided out of consideration for the sensibilities of the guest of honour. (Ali 366)

Cosmopolitan pasts illuminate cultural thoroughfares on such occasions, spreading feasts before our eyes in the vein of consumer cosmopolitanism with its flattening of differences. Yet the always self-reflexive memory work of the novels, locating us in time-space capsules of deliciously strange places where strangers meet, underscores the fragility of these pasts flashing upon us as chimerical moments that are largely forgotten. For why else would they need fiction to revivify them as a sensuously lived cosmopolitanism? As Ibn Yakub reflects on his historical models (Ibn Mayumun, Ibrahim ibn Suleiman of Damascus, and the great Tabiri) in his conversations with the Sultan, he insists upon historical “truth” as a hypothesis gleaned from multiple narrators; and as Mogor dell’ Amore captivates the Mughal court with his tall tales, even as he keeps the secret of his birth (the fact Qara Köz was barren, and his mother was her servant’s child), their doubts infect the time-capsules they narrate with complex affect. We know the worlds they narrate are not true, but that they are popular embodied memories struggling to enter the cognitive field of historical reason.

In these subjective takes, the enchantment we ascribe to the scared endures, despite their privileging of secular reason in both novels: Rushdie portrays an educated, secular Akbar for whom the aesthetic sublime
Bishnupriya Ghosh

has replaced the sacred, while Ali directly interrogates the repressive orthodoxy that scuttles the luminous, enduring love affair between two begums in (the equally tolerant) Salah al-Din’s harem. We are seduced into history as it were, in complex sequences that yoke our senses: as Salah al-Din describes his early love, Zubayda, light and texture—“a soft moon-entangled cloud”—combines with color, “…a silk robe, the colour of the sky…. richly patterned with a variety of birds,” even as these senses are overwritten by the ear: “All this one forgot when she played the lute and her voice accompanied the music” (282). Drawn into the body, as we move into the foreign we encounter difference as a structure of feeling rather than an abstract cognitive field of perceptions. As Ucello do Firenze contemplates the legendary Fatepur Sikri, freezing narrative action (and therefore time, much like his grandmother, the enchantress of Florence), his still habitation of the moment turns Sikri into embodied memory, into frissons of remembered sensations:

As the light faded the city seemed to grow. Dense neighborhoods huddled outside the walls, muezzins called from their minarets, and in the distance he could see the lights of large estates. Fires began to burn in the twilight, like warnings. From the black bowl of the sky came the answering fires of the stars. (10)

We feel the city’s voluminous amorphous shape; we see its lights; we feel the overturned depth of the sky. Here we shuttle between the haptic and the visual, while elsewhere one sense turns into another: earlier in the day, Ucello sees/hears/feels “shrieking parrots [that] exploded like green fireworks in the sky” (8). Media theorists describe such sensory shuttling, the crossing and overlapping of the senses as synaesthesia, an immersive experience that habituates the viewer/player into the media world (usually of cinema or the videogame). Certainly the sensuous immersion in novels is rather different from the immediacy of synaesthesia in audiovisual and digital technologies; in print we are at one remove from the senses, moving toward them through the linguistic sign. The indirection defers that “cosmopolitan feeling” as something toward which we reach—a becoming, rather than a complete experience. In
Enchanted Pasts as Global History

turn the incompletion marks our discontinuity from a cosmopolitan vibrant once upon a time.

With such extreme localization, the writers of historical cosmopolitanism overcome the vast stretches of the cultural geography of the novels. We know “when” and “where” was cosmopolitanism. But our enchantments never eschew the critical imperatives behind their romance with world history; hence these are works of “critical enchantment,” the term Bhaskar Sarkar transcribes for the sensuous memory work of the partition in Indian cinema. The will to a different version of the historical past clearly marks the advent of narration in both works. As Saladin commences, Ali underscores the importance of imagined pasts as correction to the ideological distortions that constitute the great chronicles of Islam and Christianity:

Should actual historical evidence be disregarded in the interests of a good story? I think not. In fact the more one explores the imagined inner life of the characters, the more important it becomes to remain loyal to historical facts and events, even in the case of the Crusades, where Christian and Muslim chroniclers often provide different interpretations of what actually happened. (xiv)

Ibn Yakub, who explores different models of history, biography, and chronicle, decides to gather evidence of Salah al-Din’s life from multiple narrators; the novel unfolds as a series of embedded accounts, chronologically arraigned, that unravel the commonly-held contemporary perception of Jews and Muslims as eternally opposed forces caught in never-ending wars over al-Kuds (the Muslim name for Jerusalem). “Never absent from our world of make believe” (33), the Holy Land, Ibn Yakub insists, has always invited revisionary histories tailored to redefine its territorial destiny. In the twelfth century, for instance, the rapacious Franj (the French) “wished to wipe out the past and rewrite the future of al-Kuds” (33), inflicting damage on the “People of the Book,” the Jews and Muslims who share a destiny in the Holy Land. No wonder the great Salah-al Din would invite a Jewish scribe to pen his story, a more personal biography than the many official court versions of the
emperor’s life. And for Ibn Yakub, dreaming of al-Kuds since he was a boy, contradictory personal investments would muddy the objectivity of his critical revisionism: he would feel jealousy toward his subject of narration, Salah al-Din, on the appearance of the exquisite Halima, as both emperor and scribe became equals in their desire for her; he would stray from his chronologies to relate Halima and Jamila’s passion (in an effort to rectify, as Ali remarks in his preface, the silence on women’s history in official records), his sexual fascination and growing intellectual respect for Jamila overcoming his duty to emperor; he would experience anger against his fellow Jewish historian, Ibn Mayumun, when he finds him in bed with his wife, Rachel; he would be rent by guilt at his survival of the French raid upon his house in Cairo, leading to the destruction of his entire family. After all, he had been living his boyhood dream of re-taking Jerusalem for the People of the Book, riding confidently at Salah al-Din’s side, while his loved ones perished. The accidental, surfacing as untimely trauma, would silence the scribe for years. But with narration, the present of the book, would come the healing rush of memory:

These are painful memories. I keep them submerged. Yet today, as I begin to write this story, the image of that doomed room where everything once began is strong in me again. The caves of our memory are extraordinary. Things that are long forgotten remain hidden in dark corners, suddenly to emerge into the light. I can see everything now. It comes to my mind clearly, as if time itself had stopped still. (3)

Now for any scholar familiar with historical meta-fiction, this self-reflexive affective history, bracketed by personal trauma, would comprise a common postmodern literary practice.21 One is compelled to read it as a performance of historical cosmopolitanism, however, because of the novel’s rigorous revision of a particular configuration of contemporary differences—the present face-off between Judeo-Christian and Islamic cultures—as a global history of mutuality (of interests, of projects, of loves). Difference simmers in the belly of bitter enemies, both within and without. Certainly the Christians (represented by “the Franj”) are not unified, as the story of Bertrand Toulouse the Perfecti’s infiltration
of the belligerent Knight Templars and his subsequent defection to the Salah al-Din’s camp reveals. But nor are the Muslims: they are internally divided over the uncertainty over the status of the hadith, the news of the orthodox repression of Abul Hassan al-Bakri’s life of the prophet (Sirat al-Bakri), and Halima’s shocking conversion to hereronormativity show and tell. The peacemaker Salah al-Din acknowledges these complications, “they are as divided as we” (200), he notes, and therefore remains opposed to jihad as permanent war. Internal differences, unresolved traumas, accidents and ruptures disrupt the smooth play of differences, destabilizing any easy consumption of pleasurable cosmopolitan pasts. Historical meta-fiction is no axiomatic postmodern enterprise here, but a painful reminder that remembering those richly lived cosmopolitan pasts is no simple task. They are at best unstable correctives for the present juncture; pasts always on the edge of disappearance, they fall around us as the historical narration that carries them falters.

The Enchantress overtly sutures less painful pasts through the antics of the (ostensibly) lost scion of the Mughal house, a sturdy survivor who turns tricks with his secret. The mystery of his “origin,” not revealed until the bitter end, drives the self-professedly self-centered narration as Ucello/Niccolò/Mogor searches for the one true ear for his story: “Himself a teller of tales, he had been driven out of his door by stories of wonder, and one particular story that would make his fortune or else cost his life” (12). Like other historical meta-fiction Rushdie has sketched, here, too, our path to the origin is derailed; we wander lost in multiple embedded tales until we, too, fall under the sensuous spell of the parallel and mirrored worlds of Florence and Sikri. Held in the thrall of great empires, we realize our hero—the son of an incestuous union between father and daughter, Vespucci and Angelica (Mogor’s mother)—confuses the very genealogies of inheritance upon which these empires rest. The elderly women Akbar summons to confirm the Mogor’s unsavory claims finally acknowledge their complicity in writing the exquisite Qara Köz out of history: “It is a fact that he has told us things that have been buried very deep. [They murmur] Had he not spoken up then we old women would have taken the story to our graves” (141). The unwilling admission is wrested from the heart of power by the untimely skeleton
in the closet that is Mogor dell’ Amore, the Mughal of Love; and subsequently, we are treated to the classic convulsions of the byzantine birth stories we have come to expect from Rushdie. On full disclosure, the birth story reveals Niccoló (alias Ucello or Mogor) to be cosmopolitan not by design, not out of the natural privilege of aristocrats, but out of sheer historical necessity. As he drifts from world to world in search of a home, his sense of mutuality is born of dislocation—a historical lesson we might learn to our advantage, Rushdie suggests, his charming portrait of the enduring eternal foreigner. The cosmopolitan who can dream in seven languages will not inherit empires, but, at the very least, he has won the right to tell a global history eclipsed in the narrow enterprise of realpolitik.

But the right to tell comes at the cost of a precarious life, as Mogor is driven from city to city, much like his fabled grandmother whose genealogy hails from Genghis Khan to Timur. If Mogor is the figure of cultural mutuality, she practices the arts of embodied mutuality—the ability to love across battlelines, the capacity to rule both Sikri and Florence by her sheer beauty. Therefore her story (that he narrates) bristles with rambunctious sex, Qara Köz’ real cosmopolitan legacy; by the novel’s close, loving beyond generations, she has seduced her great-nephew, the Emperor Akbar. As the imaginative king ruminates on the role of fantasy (figured as Jodha Bai, the apparition who rules his harem) in the exercise of power, sex interrupts the hardy work of realpolitik. The story of passion following Qara Köz’ phantom tread across Central Asia and the Middle East stills time; in her hands, the history of empires grinds to a standstill, Sikri and Florence materializing as sensuous pasts undisturbed by political victories, defeats, campaigns, wars, and strife. Passion emerges as the true enemy of empires, the harbinger of peace, the image of a vibrant mutuality across difference poetically figured in Qara Köz and comically exteriorized in Mogor’s two loves, the corpulent Mattress and the emaciated Skeleton. And yet mortality, hounding the flesh that pleasures, returns in the story in diseases, decay, poisonings, punishments, and physical harm, even as the emperor, momentarily lulled into incestuous ecstasy, wonders when Qara Köz will disappear: “I have come home,” she told him. ‘You have allowed me to return,
and so here I am, at my journey’s end. And now, Shelter of the World, I am yours.’ Until you’re not, the Universal Ruler thought. My love, until you’re not” (443). With her Sikri will pass, he thinks, like Florence in the tale he has just heard—one more mirage of ever-mutable cosmopolitan pasts.

And so in these tales, once upon a time there was cosmopolitanism. The fairytale seduces, but does not reassure since empires and cities fade; cosmopolitanism appears as sheer potentiality once more to be actualized. Behind the global history these novels assemble, behind their imaginative cartographies, we see the dim fear-driven shape of our interconnected worlds. Living in the mutuality born of historical necessity, we ask again: when was cosmopolitanism? Can cosmopolitan pasts teach us how to become cosmopolitan once more?

* * *

Best to close where we began, with the open wound that will not go away; best to close with what is always the exception, Palestine, as the center of the historical urgency for enchanted pasts; best to close with affiliation to the yearning voice to which this essay is dedicated:

I really have very little time for the idea of belonging to a national community. It seems to me not very interesting. And above all not very nourishing intellectually. I find it so disappointing. And so impoverishing, that the spontaneity of affiliations, rather than filiations, are what I really cherish. (Ali Conversations, 120)

Notes
1 The text is based on an interview recorded at Edward Said’s Riverside Drive apartment in New York City (June 1994); the interview was first edited into a documentary, A Conversation with Edward Said (Bandung Film production for Channel Four, British television), 1994.
2 The longer version was the one Scott hoped to release in the theaters, but Twentieth Century Fox vetoed the decision and refused to advertise the release of the director’s cut (December 2005). The extended version became available on DVD May 2006.
3 Gowariker’s critique of religious orthodoxy is once again apparent in two spectacular music sequences: the manmohana episode, featuring the privacy of devotion better known as bhakti, a popular religious and social movement that ran against the dictates of institutionalized faith; and the Sufi dance that lures the Emperor into a rare display of ecstasy, with Sufism, once more, a syncretic faith, tolerant of the private ecstasies of all.

4 Gowarikar had already made a splash as the daring new director of the cultural behemoth that is Bollywood (the moniker for the commercial Bombay-based Hindi-language film industry that reinvented itself after India’s trade liberalization, 1991) in Lagaan (2001), nominated for an Oscar. No wonder he was able to pull off financing this massive venture with its extravagant sets, costumes, and star salaries.

5 Several historians insist there was no Jodha Bai (there is no mention of her, for instance, in the Akbarnama), Akbar’s favorite queen, although the Rajput Harkha Bai who converted to Islam and became Marian-uz-Zamani (referred to first in the eighteenth-century Tuzk-e-Jahangiri) is possibly the source of the legend; the great love thesis is made “historical,” in Lieutenant Colonel James Todd’s Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, a century later. Whatever the scholarly debates, the legend would hold as Hindu and Muslims eyed each other with increasing suspicion under a land rent by British divide and rule policies. Its persistence in contemporary India, past partition and post-partition riots, Gowariker seems to suggest, is a sign of the popular desire to remake history—if only to heal the present.

6 Early reviews compared the film to previous acclaimed Bombay period films featuring the beloved Akbar, most memorably K. Asif’s Mughal-e-Azam (1960) with its star royalty (Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar, Durga Khote). But soon criticisms abated in light of the film’s obvious privileging of the love story above any periodizing imperative.

7 Youssef Chahine’s The Victorious Saladin (Al-Nasir Salah al-Din 1963), often read as a rebuttal of Cecil B. DeMille’s The Crusades (1935), is a three-hour epic spectacular scripted by Naguib Mahfouz that draws thinly-veiled parallels between Nasser and the historical Salah al-Din—both tolerant, strong leaders with significant impact on the Middle East’s relationship with the (historical) West.

8 Writing about newly opened global markets for “Indian writing in English,” my first book, When Borne, argued for the potential of a situated cosmopolitanism to intervene in national and regional politics and culture. Written soon after the Public Culture volume on cosmopolitanism, there I argued for literature, in the hands of the fourth generation of Indian writers in English (who share Rushdie’s thematic and stylistic preoccupations), as a situated cosmopolitics. For other treatments of cosmopolitanism in novels, see Walkowitz and, more recently, Schoene on cosmopolitanism and literature.
“Touching my junk” is the phrase used by a passenger boarding a plane in San Diego who aggressively challenged a TSA official for a pat down. For full story, see: http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2010/11/tsa-investigating-passenger

For Beck, Latour, Cheah and Robbins, and Brennan, to name just a few interlocutors of cosmopolitanism, the term still provides an optic for our structural location in global exchanges.

The introduction to the Public Culture volume (12.3, Fall 2000) on cosmopolitanism, co-written by Breckenridge, Pollock, Bhabha, and Chakrabarty, describes cosmopolitanism to be a “sense of mutuality under conditions of mutability” (578).

See Williams on “structures of feeling” that are not yet cognitively an emergent formation.

I am quoting Caruth’s famous designation of trauma memory and its tellings: literature, Caruth maintains, always a story told in another time and another place, effectively serves as working through trauma memory; its indirections and deferrals precisely disallow a full (and impossible) confrontation of the traumatic event.

Gowariker (post-Lagaan) and Scott (post-Alien), too, are well-respected auteurs with their signature directorial styles; but as industrial products, their films are just as much judged by box office returns as they are by awards and critical reviews in the press. In this sense, literary novels (as opposed to pulp fiction) are slightly different; limited commercial proceeds are far less important to assessments of their cumulative value.

Born in a South-Asian Muslim family in Lahore, Ali, like Rushdie, was radicalized in 1960s England and gained cultural prominence in the black British anti-Thatcherite milieu of the 1980s. He has just recently completed the Islamic quintet with The Night of the Golden Butterfly, a series of works that spans Islamic empires and cultures over several centuries.

Rushdie launches a critique of Hindu fundamentalism in The Moor’s Last Sigh, but in a subdued and hidden manner (see Ghosh, “Invitation”). The Enchantress of Florence is his first full return to Islamic history (via the benevolent pluralist Akbar) after the infamous The Satanic Verses (1988).

Rushdie mentioned his reading of Jodha Akbar at a casual conversation before his talk on Enchantress (conducted by Pico Iyer) for the University of California, Santa Barbara Arts and Lectures series, May 4, 2008. He noted his labours with history, which include an accurate representation of Jodha Bai as a composite figment of Emperor Akbar’s imagination—the phantasmatic Hindu equivalent to Qara Köz.

Ucello steals Elizabeth I’s letter to her contemporary, Jalaluddin Mohammed Akbar, from a Scottish captain of a pirate ship that had been sent to India on state business. This early act establishes his character as a clever charlatan who lives by his wits. The letter, he knows, will transform him into legitimate emis-
Bishnupriya Ghosh

sary, granting him the Mughal emperor’s ear for the longer story that festers in him like an unhealed wound.

19 See Barker’s elaboration of the term in *The Tactile Eye*.

20 Engaging in trauma theory, Sarkar sees the work of cinema as both critiquing official nationalist accounts of the partition as historical event even as it engages with the affects of trauma through audiovisual technologies.

21 See Hutcheon’s famous essay on historical meta-fiction for a reading of the sub-genre as postmodern.

22 This is a thinly-veiled reference (*Saladin* 11) to the *Satanic Verses* affair, when Ali came out in Rushdie’s defense, naming him a “warrior” writer. Soon after, Ali would turn to historical fiction, to join the campaign for retelling Islamic history (misinterpreted in the West and by Islamic fundamentalists, alike).

**Works Cited**


symploke

editor-in-chief
Jeffrey R. Di Leo

associate editor
Ian Buchanan

advisory board
Charles Altezi
Michael Bérubé
Ronald Bogue
Mates Calinescu
Edward Casey
Stanley Corngold
Lennard Davis
Robert Con Davis
Henry Giroux
Karen Hanson
Phillip Brian Harper
Peter C. Herman
Candace Lang
Vincent B. Leitch
Faisley Livingston
Donald Marshall
Christian Moraru
Jeffrey Nealon
Marjorie Perloff
Mark Poster
Gerald Prince
Joseph Ricapito
Robert Scholes
Alan Schrift
Tobin Siebers
Hugh Silverman
John H. Smith
Paul M. Smith
James Somerski
Henry Sussman
Mark Taylor
S. Títoy de Zeghetne
Joel Weinheimer
Jeffrey Williams

submissions
Editor, symploke
School of Arts & Sciences
University of Houston-Victoria
Victoria, TX 77901-5731
email editor@symploke.org

subscriptions
University of Nebraska Press
1111 Lincoln Mall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0630

www.symploke.org

please enter my one-year subscription (two issues) to symploke
✓ Individuals: $20  ✓ Institutions: $40  Add $15 for subscriptions outside the U.S.

Name ____________________________

Address ____________________________

City __________________ State _______ Zip _______

2000 CELJ PHOENIX AWARD FOR SIGNIFICANT EDITORIAL ACHIEVEMENT

PRODUCED AND DISTRIBUTED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
“Any Educated Person Would Know”:
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste,
and ‘Knowing Better’ in
Peter Carey’s My Life as a Fake
Lewis MacLeod

Culture [is] the great human invention [...] the greatest of them all; a meta-invention, an invention setting inventiveness in motion and making all other inventions possible.

Zygmunt Bauman (Wasted 97)

In the real world, Peter Carey’s My Life as a Fake finds it origins in a furious indictment of both provincialism and inferior aesthetic tastes. In 1944, two Australian poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, frustrated with what they perceived to be the inferior quality and shallow faddishness of their country’s aping of high modern poetry, surreptitiously submitted a collection of gibberish poems, The Darkening Ecliptic, to one of the country’s leading journals, Angry Penguins. The poems arrived with a letter from the non-existent poet’s non-existent sister claiming they were the work of her recently deceased brother, a bike mechanic named Ern Malley. The poems were duly accepted and Stewart and McAuley rejoiced at having demonstrated that the Australia’s emperor of modernist aesthetics, editor Max Harris, had no clothes. They seemed to have shown that a supposedly sophisticated and influential taste-maker could not tell a good poem from a bad joke. In one decisive move, Harris and his acolytes lost their credentials to cosmopolitan good taste, and urbane sophisticates were compelled to play the role of clueless and gullible rubes.

The nature of aesthetic sophistication and the relationship between good taste and provincialism are central to the historical Ern Malley hoax, the fictional My Life as a Fake and to the intellectual discourse of cosmopolitanism in general. Despite its loud calls for “inclusive, egal-
tarian heterogeneity” (Dharwadker 7), cosmopolitanism’s stand “against parochialisms” (Anderson 267) entails at least a flirtation with the elitist, even imperialist, discourses it purports to critique. Leela Gandhi’s description of the imperial encounter applies to cosmopolitan aesthetics insofar as cosmopolitanism tends to produce conversations in which “one of the participants invariably ‘knows better’ than the other, whose worldview must be modified or ‘improved’” (28). Bluntly, citizens of the world must teach primitive tribalists to think on a larger, more enlightened, scale. The disciplinary “flow” (Wars of Position 208) of cosmopolitanism’s apparently eclectic conversations, Timothy Brennan argues, is such that cosmopolitan “hybridity itself [becomes] a coercive lesson imposed on outlying populations” (Wars of Position 206) by a self-satisfied centre. The European avant-garde might have felt “out there” and peripheral in London, Paris and Berlin, but its apparently dissembling procedures also functioned as an “educative spectacle” (Wars of Position 206) in far-off Australia, a spectacle enacted and managed by a centre which was often too sophisticated (or too disingenuous) to acknowledge itself as such. It took something as dramatic as the Ern Malley hoax to make these power relations (enacted through aesthetics) clear.1

Vinay Dharwadker has argued that the critical “return to cosmopolitanism has been freighted with politics rather than aesthetics” (2), yet recourse to good taste (a strategy that amounts to “sophisticated abuse”) pervades cosmopolitan discourse to such a degree that even racism sometimes registers as gauche more than politically or morally wrong. “The cosmopolite,” Ghassan Hage reminds us, “is a class figure […] capable of appreciating and consuming ‘high-quality’ commodities and cultures” (201). Without the ability to differentiate “high” from “low” quality, the claim to cosmopolitan good taste disappears, and once this claim evaporates its numerous attendant advantages come under pressure. What is unique about the Ern Malley scenario is the degree to which (or perhaps the very brief timescale in which) the disciplinary cultural voices of those who “know better” start to sound like know nothing voices who would do well to defer to their betters. In McAuley and Stewart’s terms, the Australian devotee of European High Modernism, far from being a taste-making arbiter of aesthetic value, becomes instead
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste, and ‘Knowing Better’

a blinkered and parochial “devotee insensible of absurdity and incapable of ordinary discrimination” (McAuley and Stewart 4).

The move from high to low, from elite to ordinary is hard to miss, as are the geographic and political implications of being assigned one or the other group. Before the hoax is revealed, Harris commands the refracted cultural authority of Europe. Afterwards, he is a second class Australian. Brennan sees this “spilling over of the cultural into the political [as] endemic to cosmopolitanism’s functionality” (Wars of Position 218). Cosmopolitanism’s “political utopia,” he claims, “is constructed as aesthetic taste” (218). The underacknowledged and didactic project of cultural improvement that motivates much of cosmopolitan discourse fuels the majority of the action in Carey’s novel as a crew of self-conscious sophistcates struggles to be both elemental (local, connected) and elevated (learned, smart, sophisticated); they want to be alive to aesthetic innovation (cutting edge) but impervious to fads which would reveal them as gullible and naive. Questions of taste are pervasive in the novel and offer important glimpses into the challenges facing cosmopolitan aesthetics. In My Life as a Fake, no mere human can manage to balance cosmopolitanism’s desire to be “local while denying its local character” (Wars of Position 204). Nobody can to be “classy” while still being “street.” It takes a supernatural being, a great artist and/or a fake to reconcile the forces which underlie cosmopolitanism’s “aesthetically enjoyable cultural mixing” (Robbins, “New and Newer” 59).

I. Disposable Objects Designed For Immediate Obsolescence: Of Aesthetics and Time

In The Cosmopolitan Novel, Berthold Schoene argues that “nations are inclined to assert themselves most vehemently when their boundaries are drawn into doubt by being revealed as porous, arbitrary or transient[;] a fierce vying for predominance is set in motion” (9) when apparently rigid categories begin to break down. Cultural territories are subject to the same anxieties as nations, and a hoax of the Ern Malley type demonstrates the fretful militancy that arises when self-identified cosmopolitan sophisticates find their prized territories under siege. If we imagine culture as a “sacred” space clearly demarcated from “the
coarse, vulgar, venal [and] servile” (Bourdieu 7), then any unsanctioned incursion of “the low” into the territory of “the high” (as when self-consciously bad poems are mistaken for high quality aesthetic innovations) amounts to a significant transgression in need of redress. Determined to mark the boundary between bogus and legitimate (fake and real) works of art, the possessors of good taste (those who know what “any educated person would know” [Carey 39]) cannot afford to have their authority called into question, yet this authority simultaneously depends upon an openness to new and unanticipated things. As a result, they must fear entrenchment and faddishness at one and the same time. They appear “all posh and frosty” but carry fears of being proven “an utter fool” (Carey 243).

This anxiety is particularly pronounced under the conditions of postmodernity, where what’s at stake is nothing less than the nature, duration and reception of aesthetic objects. Of particular importance is the cultural value assigned to innovation. Faced with what Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquid modernity,” we confront a contemporary life which “dissembles” time so that it is “no more a vector, no more an arrow with a pointer or a flow with a direction” (Discontents 89). The result, Bauman claims, is that life no longer feels like a sustained journey or a pilgrimage, but rather “a loose assembly, an arbitrary sequence” (Discontents 89). In a context in which the “world constructed of durable objects [has been] replaced with disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence” (Liquid Modernity 85) cultural artefacts and works of art seem to be subjected to the same detemporalization and improvisational attitudes as everything else. In an amnesiac culture, Bauman argues, newness displaces “greatness” as a primary determinant for artistic success, and in place of beauty we get fashion. If in the past great works of art seemed to declare that “the things that man creates […] are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive and outshine death and decay” (Ernest Becker qtd in Bauman, Wasted 97), they now operate in a more generalized economy in which “today’s useful and indispensible objects […] are tomorrow’s waste” (Bauman, Wasted 97). As Bauman recognizes, the ubiquitous nature of lists proclaiming “What’s Hot” and “What’s Not” make this very plain. The result of all this is that
“the link between eternity and beauty, aesthetic value and durability” (*Wasted* 118) collapses, and, for Bauman at least, “beauty, in its orthodox meaning [as] an ideal to strive for and to die for, seems to have fallen on hard times” (*Wasted* 117).

Such a context presents serious problems for the champions of good taste because the conditions under which one might be said to build aesthetic competence (in the traditional sense) have been so thoroughly undermined. If, with Bourdieu, we imagine a work of art to have meaning and value only to “someone who possesses the cultural competence […] into which it is encoded” (2), what happens when the notion of competence itself is under threat by a timescale which precludes anybody from clearly possessing the necessary codes? If no structure is expected to endure, no argument for accumulated expertise can be sustained, and we seem to collapse into a heterogeneity and egalitarianism so complete that nothing gets to be “good” for very long for very many people.

Bauman’s argument sounds like a pretty conservative and nostalgic lament, and it *does* fit well with the conservative intentions of McAuley and Stewart. Clearly, they regarded modernism as a “what’s hot” type of fad and felt that any claim to sophisticated good taste derived from modernism was necessarily fraudulent. In place of modernist aesthetics, they championed instead the values of “harmony, proportion, symmetry [and] order” (Bauman, *Wasted* 113), values they located in all great art throughout history: no improvisation or *bricolage* here. With Bauman, they believed that sound aesthetic judgment required a long view of history, that what’s considered good today ought to be weighed against the standards of the past and imagined in terms of a very distant future. In this construction both time and the desire for timelessness are necessary preconditions for beauty and necessary preoccupations for those who purport to assess it. Without past and future, beauty disappears and good taste becomes unintelligible.

Still, some people like it!

In apparently sharp contrast to the above, Schoene sees the perpetual present as both a political defence against modernity’s totalizing ambitions and as a way of resisting staid conventions that hinder great art. For Bauman, great art is the art which “will never lose its value,
never be redundant, will never be disposed of and so will never turn to waste—instead it is all further search and experimenting that will from now on be redundant” (Wasted 114). For Schoene, however, the “novelty” of the novel is its great strength; search and experimentation are the name of the game, and game-changing is the sign of genius. There’s not much time for harmony of design and symmetrical structures in Schoene’s enthusiastic description of a cosmopolitan art in which “compositeness forges narrative assemblage out of a seemingly desultory dispersion of plot and characterization” (14), an aesthetic of “differently paced and oriented trajectories” (14) bumping up against each other in “edgy, boxed in solipsism” (14). In place of any pursuit of eternal value, Schoene champions a cosmopolitan culture in which “everyday life in the present is prioritized over the pursuit of any grand utopian designs of unanimity or perfection” (18); in place of long-term apprenticeships, he calls for “a radical unlearning of all definitive modes of identification” (21).

What we have here, then, are two totally antithetical visions both of what constitutes aesthetic value (idiosyncratic innovation or proportion and harmony) and of the timescale in which it is to be evaluated (the perpetual present or with a view toward eternity). What is the same for both Bauman and Schoene, however, is the implicit and didactic appeal to good taste. Each has a belief that he has the authority to frame and outline what’s good and what’s not. Although Schoene is opposed to the pursuit of unanimity and perfection, he maintains his pretty unambiguous status as an arbiter of what’s aesthetically good and what’s not. Despite both an emphasis on an inclusive unlearning of identity and a high volume affirmation of “deconstructive diversification and renewal” (31), Schoene can’t help but resort to hierarchized opposition between a valorized art of the “singular, privately secluded mind” (184) of a true artist and the vulgarized commercialism he finds in “conglomerates of hot-desking studios sponsored by the state and/or corporatist power”(184). Art of the latter type, he makes clear, is in very bad taste. Novels Schoene doesn’t like are “of no consequence, devoid of truth, beauty and community” (185). The ones he likes have vast amounts of all three. Perhaps more problematically, given the primacy of the per-
petual present in Schoene’s vision of the cosmopolitan, the books he doesn’t like are condemned for their lack of durability; they’re “entirely forgettable airport reads” (185).

What becomes clear here is a problem inherent in what Bruce Robbins calls the “very partial universalism” (29) of cosmopolitanism. No matter how we rework our standards (or even if we advocate abandoning them), both the appeal to sophisticated good taste and the implicit condemnation of the bad taste and parochialism of others persist. Crudely, Bauman and Schoene might disagree about how time functions and how bleak contemporary culture looks, but they agree when it comes to truth and beauty. They both know where real aesthetic value is and where it isn’t, and they can’t believe so many other people are taken in by fakes.

II. Trusting My Taste: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics and Vulgarism

In My Life as a Fake, Carey’s protagonist, Sarah Wode-Douglas, is often at “the limits of [her] social confidence” (15), but she is never unsure of her position as cultural arbiter. As “the editor of an internationally respected poetry journal” (35) Sarah faces the good taste dilemma on a daily basis. Her accumulated expertise isn’t easily reconcilable with an instinct toward innovation, and so she feels a simultaneous desire both to oversee the cultural landscape and to yield to an unanticipated-yet-elemental, transcendental-yet-visceral mode of art and life. The tension between these two impulses is encapsulated nicely when, upon reading a new poem, she says: “If I can trust anything it is my taste—or, to risk a vulgarism, my heart” (35). This construction speaks to cosmopolitanism’s twin anxieties about elitism and naïve populism. Here, Sarah seeks both the appeal of elevated, aesthetic detachment (her good taste) and to recognize the impact of the poem at a more elemental and direct level (her heart). To risk a vulgarism is to abandon the safety of rarefied aesthetic evaluation and to participate instead in what the editors of Cosmopolitanism regard as the “vernacularization” (6) of contemporary culture, its move to street level. The effort to establish a link between learned, abstract aesthetic principles and the thumping and pumping of the human heart is the trick cosmopolitan artists and thinkers repeatedly
attempt, and, as I suggest above, it’s one that’s very difficult to get right. To revert to “the heart” or “the gut feeling” is to forego the structural advantage of “knowing better” than everybody else, but the necessarily distanced nature of elevated, impartial knowledge lacks the very blood the heart pumps, and it is exactly this bloodless quality that fuels Robert Pinsky’s complaint that the cosmopolitan fantasy would only be possible “if people were not driven by emotions” (87). For Sarah, at least, a world structured around high-end aesthetic contemplation and devoid of deep, daily emotional investments _does_ seem possible; Carey doesn’t make it look especially attractive, though. Thoroughly detached from the world and entrenched in her role as literary editor, Sarah doesn’t risk vulgarism often enough; the result is that her wordliness often seems _otherworldly_. She’s so invested in the rarefied world of art that her daily life becomes empty and/or sterile.

Sarah opens the novel in first person, but, by the second sentence, she switches to a second person interrogative: “I have known John Slater all my life,” she says, “Perhaps you remember the public brawl with Dylan Thomas.” In the space of the next few pages, Sarah links John Slater, an English poet of Carey’s invention, with (at least) Unity Mitford, Robert Lowell, W.H. Auden, F.R. Leavis and Cyril Connelly. Through this process, Carey effectively punctures the boundedness of the novel’s fictional world, staging ontologically curious interactions between fictional characters (who originate in his book) and historical personages many readers know to be “real” outside of it. More specifically, though, the second person “you” Sarah addresses is the possessor of a pretty detailed understanding of the (primarily, but not exclusively) British, mid-Century, literary-cultural milieu. The average North American English undergraduate stands a strong chance of running into Auden, a solid chance of running into Thomas and Lowell, and virtually no chance of running into Connelly or _any_ Mitford. I don’t think Leavis has much of a chance anymore, either. Somebody with a university education, then, isn’t enough to qualify as Sarah’s addressee, a person with the cultural competence to decode the code. She requires people who can differentiate their Edith from their Osbert Sitwells, who know W.H. Auden as “Wystan.”
These august personages, of course, are approached and regarded as peers and friends to both Sarah and Slater, not as revered objects of study. The distinction between knowing about great literary figures and actually knowing them is clearly foregrounded throughout, and it's not just any old everyman “you” she imagines; it’s a you she greets as a highly educated and sophisticated contemporary, someone who’ll know (and appreciate) what she means when she speaks of the tedium of “reading garbage for half your life” (21) and the frustrations of dealing with “a tin ear” (3). Sarah is not alone in her frustration with other people's aesthetic and intellectual shortcomings, and many, perhaps most, of the novel’s major characters flirt with and/or embody the elitism dubious critics often associate with cosmopolitanism.

III. Tourists and Vagabonds: On the Nature of Cosmopolitan Travel

Bauman has provocatively argued that “tourists and vagabonds are the metaphors of contemporary life” (Discontents 93). Like tourists and vagabonds, cosmopolitans often function outside any stable or inherited notion of “home,” yet there are clearly many different ways to have “no fixed address,” and cosmopolitans tend to have vexed relationships with both tourists and the homeless. On one hand, tourism represents an outward-looking curiosity, a desire to embrace the diversity the world has to offer, a desire to transcend the insularity of local circumstances and allegiances. “When we travel in the cosmopolitan spirit,” K. Anthony Appiah says, we aspire (even if we can’t always manage) to move “in a spirit that celebrates and respects difference” (207). At the same time, however, tourism also seems to embody the worst aspects of global capitalism, exacerbating the differences between the happily hypermobile elites on permanent vacation, the tourists, and their hopelessly rootless subordinates, the vagabonds. “If the tourists move because they find the world irresistibly attractive,” Bauman claims, “the vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably inhospitable” (Discontents 92). My Life as a Fake demonstrates the varying strains of contemporary rootlessness, as its peripatetic procedures connect (but never assimilate the differences among) European “high” culture, Australian literary history and Malaysian national trauma. The novel takes place primarily in
Kuala Lumpur, but none of the main characters is Malaysian. Everyone is from somewhere else and (with one notable exception) nobody is deeply connected with any other person.

The primary difference between all these characters is agency. Some (Sarah and Slater) are “on holiday” and propped up by European financing; others (Chubb, his estranged daughter, her adopted Chinese mother) have more or less “washed up” in the city and have no viable method of escape. What the novel reveals, then, are the different modes and motivations that underscore the movements of cosmopolitans, tourists and vagabonds. Everybody is seriously detached, but the characters’ modes of detachment are decidedly different.

Bruce Robbins links the cosmopolitan attitude to both “physical travel” and to a more figurative travel achieved through “thoughts and feelings entertained while one stays at home” (*Cosmopolitics* 4). Sarah’s worldliness is very much the latter type. By her own admission, she is “an awful tourist” (7) and she finds the streets and markets of Kuala Lumpur overwhelming. Content to do her exploring through the words and experiences of others, she finds the unmediated experience of being alone on a bustling Kuala Lampur street to be disconcerting and unrewarding. Faced with what Schoene calls “the specific, unassimilable singularities of the local” (24), Sarah recognizes that she “actually [prefers] to sit inside my hotel room and read” (11). She opts out of the pulsing vulgarism of the street and into both the neutered sterility of a hotel room and the stylized harmony of literature. Faced with the prospect of adding what the advocates of constitutional patriotism call “supplements of particularity” (Müller 100) to her more detached aesthetic pursuits, Sarah opts not just for “detachment from ordinary, provincial loyalties” (Anderson 268), but from any form of lived experience. She prefers a purchased space, a hotel room, that is just about the same everywhere in the world. Whatever else we might say about Sarah’s worldly refinement and detached sensibilities, she’s not a very good example of “a true cosmopolitanism from below” (Dharwadker 11). “I read,” Sarah says, “I have no other life” (7).

Slater, in contrast, appears to have the “below” part of the construction well-covered. He risks vulgarisms with vigour as an inveter-
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste, and ‘Knowing Better’

ate womanizer, boozier and traveler into shady regions. He is, in many ways, the quintessential (and/or nightmare) cosmopolitan male, someone who knows the local customs and the best restaurants wherever he goes (and who probably has a woman just about everywhere, as well). Unlike Sarah, he’s also very much at home with the joys and indignities of the human body. Sarah is appalled by the physical intimacy suggested by the hand-made and “roughly molded brown pills” (25) Chubb offers her to help her with her diarrhoea, and she treats them with great hesitation and suspicion. In contrast, Slater unself-consciously gulps them “down without aid of water [while] standing in [an] open doorway” (34). He then goes on to chat freely about the “amoebic dysentery” (34) he went through on a previous trip. For Slater, bodily illness isn’t an embarrassing disclosure of physical weakness, but a kind of credential, an anecdotal souvenir of an adventure. While Sarah retreats to her hotel room, Slater disappears from the city and returns with “a very detailed account of his hike through the jungle with an Anglophile Chinese poet” (12).

He’s also, of course, a famous poet, and this seems to save his more dubious adventures (cutting a birthday cake with his hands, riding a horse into the kitchen, etc.) from the suggestion of straightforward buffoonery. More importantly, perhaps, he has a surprising and astute eye for the details of his surroundings. While Sarah cannot contend with the street, Slater is both thoroughly engaged in his local circumstances and informed by his learned good taste. The result is that he can spot “the 1923 Insel-Verlag edition” of “Die Sonnette an Orpheus” (12) in somebody’s hand as he is walking down the street. If Sarah exhibits many of the worst characteristics of a “thought only” cosmopolitanism devoid of lived experience, Slater seems to gain a lot from his physical movement through different spaces, circumstances and cultures. He seems to embody both the attractiveness and sophistication of cosmopolitanism, balancing “recklessness and hedonism” (10) with sensitivity and refined good taste. If cosmopolitanism involves “a complex tension between elitism and egalitarianism” (Anderson 268), then Slater’s highbrow literary career and his lowbrow tastes for booze, women, and streetlife seem to resolve this tension in a pretty positive way.
But, in the end, they only seem to. His impressive social performances are also pretty shallow and pretty showy. Slater cuts a dashing figure and sees “cosmopolitanism as an attractive lifestyle option” (Schoene 7), but he is also chronically irresponsible and immature. He’s fun to have at parties, but you wouldn’t want to count on him to get you out of a difficult situation. As one of his ex-wives more succinctly puts it: “the thing about dear old Johnno [is] he always does exactly as he damn well likes” (10).

The multiple ex-wives, of course, speak to the compactness of Slater’s timescale, his preoccupation with the perpetual present, and his reluctance to build long term, durable relationships. More importantly, perhaps, this business of doing what one damn well likes haunts the discourse of cosmopolitanism, speaking to its “profound investment in the exceptional individualism of the intellectual class [and their] anomalous detachment from ordinary, provincial loyalties” (Anderson 268). Slater interacts with many cultures, but always in the “crypto-imperialist” (3) fashion Schoene condemns, and his easygoing manner might not be a sign of openness so much as impregnability. In Appiah’s terms, cosmopolitan inclusiveness is often derived from the fact the world (even the “foreign” world) has been configured to the cosmopolitan’s advantage: “the ease with which we find ourselves taking pleasure in […] difference—the cosmopolite’s jouissance—reflects the fact that it has been produced in forms we have learned chez nous” (207). Slater’s assumed sense of advantage and superiority, his insulated sense of self-confidence, is a source of frustration to the bankrupt and marginalized Chubb, who makes explicit what Slater’s behaviour in Malaysia only implies: “You own us all, is that it?” (208).

As he ages, Slater has no long term relationships, no stable employment and, perhaps most problematically, he has “betrayed his promise” (10) as a poet. More to the point, he has betrayed his talent through the very procedures of his cosmopolitanism. He lives his life in the present and engages energetically with a variety of local circumstances, but a lifetime of such behaviour has crowded out his career as a writer; “if he had written more and whored and sucked a little less”(10), Sarah concludes, he would be happier and more fulfilled, less desperate for atten-
tion, recognition, etc. This isn’t just Sarah’s sour grapes; it’s an opinion Slater shares. In a moment of self-disclosure, Slater despondently admits he has never written a great poem. Despite his manifold successes on the ground and in the present, and despite the barrenness of Sarah’s daily life, Sarah pities Slater at least as much as she envies him. Unable to contradict Slater’s damning self-assessment of his failure as a poet, she has only “an awful thing to offer—sympathy” (166). The simultaneousness of Slater’s success as citizen of the world and his failure as a poet points to a disconnection between the easy sophistication of cosmopolitan travel/tourism and the difficulty of producing enduring cultural products and/or works of art. Insofar as John has allowed his life to become his art, he has surrendered his art to the “nowness” of cosmopolitanism. His poems were “hot” for a while a few decades ago, but even he knows they will not stand the test of time. As a result, he regards his otherwise rich life as something of a failure.

IV. The Chain of Being: Of Art and Ontology

Despite the differences in their life-strategies, then, and despite their respective failures in publishing and poetry, Sarah and Slater basically agree that the puny rewards of everyday life cannot compete with the epic achievements of great art. They believe that “nothing is unthinkable for poetry,” that poetry marks the territory of “civilised man,” and that “for a civilised man poetry is beyond diamonds” (243). Just as Bauman’s view toward eternity and Schoene’s perpetual present merge at the point of aesthetic assessment, both Sarah’s problematic cosmopolitanism of the mind and Slater’s presumptuous cosmopolitanism of the body merge when they venerate the great work of art above all else. Even though neither Sarah nor Slater achieves their stated aesthetic goal, the goal itself (of publishing and/or writing one truly great poem) remains in place throughout; in fact, it’s the only durable signpost in either of their lives.

In this relentlessly cultured, art-oriented context, the term “civilised man” often seems like something of a redundancy. Civilization is what makes people human; to be uncivilized is to be less than human. To be more than just civilized, to be a great artist, is to approach the status of
a god. Nowhere is this hierarchy more apparent than in Christopher Chubb's relationship with the purportedly fictional Bob McCorkle, Carey's stand-in for Ern Malley. McCorkle is conceived as a hoax by Chubb, but he ultimately becomes real enough to permanently disrupt Chubb's life. When a real person appears in the world of the novel claiming to be Bob McCorkle, the reader originally assumes that s/he is simply encountering someone in the grip of a delusion, that the man is real, and the claim that he is McCorkle is false. As the novel continues, however, McCorkle's ontological status becomes more and more confusing; he gains ever-increasing amounts of ontological weight. In a context in which nothing is impossible for poetry, the “possibility that [Chubb] had, with his own pen, created blood and bone and a beating heart” (152) becomes more and more plausible. Bauman argues that we are now in a context characterized by an “underpowered institutionalization of differences” (*Discontents* 123), a scenario in which rigid boundaries and categorizations have collapsed. The result, he claims, is that the apparent “givenness [and] obviousness, the ascribed and immutable nature of every man's or woman's place in the chain of being” (*Discontents* 122) is no longer solid. For him, the functional non-personhood of refugees, for example, speaks to the instability of their ontological station; in one sense, they're obviously “real,” but they aren't treated with any of the seriousness or respect associated with the status of “human.” Devoid of any claim to belong anywhere on the earth, they disappear from the community of humans even though their human bodies continue to present nasty “waste disposal” problems for the undeniably real citizens and governments of affluent nations.

Chubb's descent from Australian literary provocateur to Malaysian vagrant marks his journey from real person to functional non-entity. Although obviously real in one sense, Chubb gradually loses his status as human, first when he comes to be regarded as a kind of devil or ghost, a *hantu*, then more prosaically when he finds himself destitute in Kuala Lampur. He sees only two possible returns to personhood, possibilities which reveal both the functional non-personhood of vagabonds and the link between aesthetics and citizenship. First, he wants Sarah to “write him up” in her poetry journal, effectively positioning narrative
existence as structurally superior to bodily existence, recognizing that discursive affirmation in a “classy” venue must precede any affirmation or recognition of his crumbling body. Second, he thinks a new suit will save him from what Bauman calls “the nowhere land of non-humanity” (39). “You will think me such a beggar,” he tells Sarah, “but I could never afford another suit, not ever […] Without [a] suit I am trapped here until I die” (140). The suit, then, is a signifier not just of class, but of ontological position. Without it, he doesn’t exist. With it, he has a chance. Not surprisingly then, “real” people, those endowed with ontological, financial and legal weight, regard Chubb’s attempt at ontological rehabilitation with scepticism. They are unwilling to permit Chubb to re-enter the realm of the human. When Sarah attempts to buy him the suit that will reconfigure his place in the chain of being, the shopkeeper says: “He not your friend. He not a person” (119).

McCorkle, by contrast, first becomes real, then almost mythic. Originating as a figment of Chubb’s imagination, he enters the narrative as a “wild man” (59), someone without language or culture and, more basically, without papers confirming his right to existence. Stuck in a legal and ontological no man’s land, a citizen of nowhere, the anguished McCorkle asks Chubb, “Do you know what it’s like to have no birth certificate?” (94). Spawned spontaneously from a cynical imagination, McCorkle enters the novel devoid of what Gertrude Himmelfarb calls “the givens of life: parents, ancestors, family, race, religion, heritage, history, culture, tradition, community—and nationality” (164). An ontological refugee in advance of his peculiar birth, McCorkle seeks to acquire what others are simply “given,” and this motivates a great deal of his behaviour.

Once he gets a birth certificate, and thus a level of legal reality, McCorkle is able to obtain a passport and, from there, to begin his remarkable, upward ontological progression: from imaginary non-entity, to paperless vagrant, to citizen, and, ultimately, to mythic creator. For him, the birth certificate is simultaneously an assertion of belonging and a gateway to elsewhere. It begins a move from the hopeless wandering of the vagrant toward the self-directedness of cosmopolitan physical and intellectual mobility. Under the curious logic that governs citizen-
ship, McCorkle can only leave Australia once he’s demonstrated he’s
from Australia. With documents in hand, however, McCorkle is spared
the fate of the refugee and travels from Australia to (at least) Indonesia
and Malaysia. As he does so, he acquires languages, local knowledge
and friends; more importantly, perhaps, he becomes a great poet. After
many years of chasing McCorkle, Chubb comments, “He had overcome
me. I had brought him ignorant into the world, but now he knew six
languages, five of which I never heard of. [He was] so learned now. He
knew the holy books of Buddha and Mohammed. He knew the name
of everything that lived on the Malaysian earth” (250). This charac-
terization is instructive as it retains both high minded, even esoteric,
learnedness and an emphatically earthy interest in how things work “on
the ground.” This is precisely the balance that Sarah, Slater and Chubb
can’t manage. As a result, McCorkle becomes the rarest of things: an
engaged and connected cosmopolitan with aesthetic depth and without
cosmopolitan pretensions. It speaks, perhaps, to the difficulties trou-
bling cosmopolitan aesthetics that it takes a miraculous birth to produce
a culturally-aware, mobile, down-to-earth artist.

In the context of the novel, at least, these reversals of fortune are re-
garded as somewhat just. If we value poetry above all else, then the great
poet, McCorkle, ought to surpass the mediocre Chubb, whose obsession
with the technicalities of poetic form (he loves, for example, the double
sestina) renders his poetry devoid of energy and passion. Here again, we
confront the opposition between good taste and pumping blood, a con-
fusion not lost on Chubb himself. Aware that Sarah and Slater only toler-
ate him because of his connection with the prized McCorkle poems,
Chubb sometimes attempts to pass off his own poems as McCorkle’s.
He is always found out because the cynical sensibility that spawns the
hoax is simultaneously overdetermined by its own sophistication; the
problem with Chubb’s refined poems resides in the very learnedness and
refinement that make them possible. Sarah says:

If this was his ‘real’ poetry, then I preferred the fake. True,
these had none of the obfuscations that sometimes marred the
‘McCorkle.’ Nor did it have its life, its wildness, its nasal pas-
sion. Frankly, these dry yellow pages were priggish, self-serv-
ing, snobbish. The Poet in these verses was a paragon of art, of learning. (86)

The implications are clear. To be a paragon of art and learning is to be a bad poet, and poetry, not learning, has the price “beyond diamonds” (243). The bloodless quality of Chubb’s poems aligns them with the bloodlessness often attributed to cosmopolitanism, and, if whoring and sucking ruin Slater, Chubb’s determined sophistication ruins his work, and, by extension, his life. Sarah comments: Chubb “had been born into a second-rate culture, or so he thought, and one can see [in his poems] all the passion that later led to the birth of Bob McCorkle—a terror that he might be somehow tricked into admiring the second-rate, the derivative, the shallow, the provincial” (84). A child of the suburbs, Chubb is born on the margins of a city into a country on the margins of the cultural landscape, and his lifelong project of escaping his origins both underscores his poetic failure and comes back to haunt him in the form of his permanent vagrancy.9 Near the end of the novel, Chubb complains that he has become “a homeless traveller [although he] never wished to leave [his] street” (249), yet his repeated and excessive renunciations of home (renunciations made in the name of a cosmopolitan sophistication) reveal the sense of entitlement attached to cosmopolitan movement; he always wanted to leave his street; he just didn’t expect to end up “on the street” in a foreign city.

In distinct and poignant contrast to Chubb’s sterile sophistication, McCorkle’s artistic language is “a private patois, woven together from English, Hokkien and Bahasa Melayu” (238); his poems are fuelled by what Sarah calls “nasal passion.” Both the idiosyncratic syntax and the “rudeness” of his poetic form speak to the singularity of McCorkle’s existence, and his artistic achievement isn’t intellectual, but elemental: “He had ripped up history and nailed it back together with its viscera on the outside, all the glistening green truth showing in the rip marks” (235). Upon reading the poems, Sarah sees her challenge as an editor as a matter of preserving McCorkle’s bile, maintaining the punctures and fractures that make the poems great. She tells herself, “I [can] not
tamper with it. I [can] not try to civilise it, or argue with it, or straighten out the shocking disconnected bits” (246). In short, she must refrain from putting it “in order;” she must refuse to bring her learnedness to bear upon it. Here, disconnection and ignorance are poetic strengths. By his own admission, McCorkle is “a poet who does not know the names of things” (151), yet he is not hampered by his inability to classify and systematize according to existing standards. Instead, he learns and/or invents names and constructs massive journals detailing the flora and fauna of Malaysia, a self-directed project that surpasses “the ‘nature notes’ of any poet who ever lived” and amounts to “one of the greatest projects of Malaysian natural history” (238). McCorkle clearly wants to know things (he’s no noble savage), but, as his trying living conditions make clear, he has no desire to be worldly or sophisticated. He tells Chubb, “I have been called a genius […] and perhaps that is why I have very little experience of the world. What I know and what I don’t know are difficult to categorise for people like you—who understand so much of the world and so little about me” (80).

Here, as elsewhere, worldliness becomes a counter-credential; genius is specifically at odds with a self-conscious cosmopolitan understanding of (or even engagement with) worldliness and high culture. After spending a lifetime adhering to, and enforcing, aesthetic standards, Sarah is disarmed when she finally encounters McCorkle’s great poems because they are so far “outside the laws of taste and poesy” (235), free from both overdeveloped fealty to “tradition” and from the fashions of the day. Although Chubb trades heavily on the things that “any educated person would know” (39), these are the very things that separate the learned and self-conscious aesthetics of Chubb, Sarah and Slater on one side, from McCorkle on the other. Schoene derides the “wearing [of] cosmopolitanism like some kind of protective shock-proof overcoat” (27), yet this is exactly what Chubb and Sarah’s self-conscious sophistication amounts to. Not surprisingly, “shock proof” and “disconnected” tend to travel together. When “good taste” and learnedness come to be regarded as universally applicable standards and credentials, they become aligned with what Dharwadker calls the “easy portability of self-sufficient theory” (3) in contemporary critical discourse. In each case, there is a sense that the
possessor of these credentials is justifiably insulated against/protected from calamitous exposure to the specific conditions of individual circumstances, and this failure and/or refusal to contend with ground-level conditions has a sterilizing effect on both art and criticism.

V. “We are all familiar”: On who knows what, and where
In the space remaining, I’d like to briefly investigate how this type of “cosmopolitanism from above” might operate in the wider discourse of cosmopolitan studies. In particular, I want to demonstrate the degree to which some cosmopolitan thinkers duplicate the procedures of Carey’s hapless sophisticates, how universalized assumptions that there are things “any educated person should know” continue to thrive, and, perhaps perversely, how these assumptions speak to the still underexamined partiality of cosmopolitanism’s purported inclusiveness.

In “Cosmopolitan Reading,” K. Anthony Appiah opens by recognizing the massive shift, more properly the dispersal, in academic cultural repertoire that has accompanied the “opening up” of the canon over the last several decades: “at […] Harvard law school fifty years ago,” he writes, “if anyone had thought to bring up The Tempest, it would not have been thought proper to admit to ignorance of its plot” (198). These days, he says, it’s acceptable not to know Shakespeare, and the fact that a student can be forthcoming about her ignorance of “reputably central authors” (199) reflects both the heterogeneous nature of contemporary syllabi, and the fact that, for many, there is “no ground for an argument that there are books that everyone must have read” (201). As a result, he claims that, “in ten years [of] coming to the English Institute [there have been] very few papers that required one to arrive with a real familiarity with any literary text” (199).

Anyone who’s been on the conference circuit would find it tough to contest this claim, but the implications are pretty serious and still underrecognized. The declining significance of what were once called primary texts can be read as a further de-localizing of critical discourse, a de-localizing that duplicates the political, social and economic procedures of globalism. Armed with a universalized theoretical discourse, we are like Chubb in our disinclination for local affiliations and affairs; we don’t
need to know the weather conditions in the little neighbourhood represented by any individual text, just the generalized climate dictated by the jetstream that is contemporary theoretical discourse. The frequency with which we hear phrases of the type, “I haven’t read the book, but …” at conferences ought to give us more pause than it generally does. Appiah, it seems, isn’t much bothered by any of this and makes the standard claim that efforts to resist “the appeal of hierarchies among texts” (201) work both to broaden the scope of what people read and to increase the number of people reading. “One thing I know for sure,” he says, “is that many, many more people are having conversations about literature than did so forty years ago” (200).

I find the inclusiveness of Appiah’s argument appealing, but it can’t disguise the fact that Appiah continues to traffic in solid, if different, notions of both canon and community. Appiah’s essay itself reflects an implicit and underacknowledged set of fairly elitist assumptions, a clear debt to the types of things “any educated person would know.” A graduate student might well get along without The Tempest, but it seems clear that s/he would be expected to arrive with the ubiquitous and portable theory outlined above. We might not need to know Shakespeare anymore, but could we get along without Freud, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Spivak, Said? Don’t the “many, many” conversations Appiah imagines to be taking place still depend on a common vocabulary commanded by a still-insular, still-elevated, community? Without any irony that I can detect (and in the middle of an argument about expanding understandings and suspending territorialized notions of cultural legitimacy), Appiah claims that “we are all familiar with the skeptical antiuniversalism of Dick Rorty” (215).

In this sentence, skeptical antiuniversalism yields to a decidedly universalist “we” that assumes a very great deal about what everybody thinks and knows. It’s a “we” that goes very well with the “you” that Sarah uses to open Carey’s novel. The clearly “in-group” nature of “Dick” (as opposed to Richard) Rorty only adds to the smug and self-congratulatory tone. In the remainder of his essay, Appiah also assumes that “we” all have a reading knowledge of Greek, German and French; he also can’t resist adding the “[sic]” when he quotes from Sterne, distancing himself
from the accusation of ignorance the same way Sarah seeks to distance herself from the vulgarism of her own heart. Both want to contain the indecorous and emphasize their erudition. Demonstrating the vastness of their respective understandings, both Sarah and Appiah problematically seek to convey “a sense of mastery” (Hannerz 239) over cultural territories; both also seem to fear exposure. With Ulf Hannerz, they seem to think of cultural attainment as a means of bringing the world to heel, as an assertion of authority. As “one’s understandings have expanded,” Hannerz writes, “a little more of the world is somehow under control” (240). Schoene rightly reads this as an effort to subdue the world and protect oneself in a shock-proof overcoat.

The same kind of argumentation underlies Bruce Robbins’ interpretations of both The Remains of the Day and, to a lesser extent, The English Patient. In each case, Robbins’ zealous pursuit of his larger theoretical/political point tends to obscure the specific practices and procedures of uniquely stipulated literary neighbourhoods. Attempting to defend cosmopolitanism against what Robert Pinsky dismissively describes as “the village of the liberal managerial class” (Secular 87), Robbins argues that it is possible for cosmopolitan academics to embrace both “planetary expansiveness of subject matter [and] unembarrassed acceptance of self-interest” (Secular Vocations 181). Basically, cosmopolitanism need not be completely altruistic to do good in the world. I think such a position is both fair and defensible, but Robbins’ mode of argumentation and his programmatic, under-nuanced reading of Ishiguro’s novel aren’t exceptionally convincing examples of what a sensitive and productive cosmopolitan criticism would look like. Indeed, Robbins’ argumentative and interpretive strategies point to exactly the kind of ivory-tower isolated “we” that Pinsky derides.

In his response to Pinsky, “The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class,” Robbins perceptively links the respect and influence of the aristocracy of the past with “professionalism now” (23). In so doing, he connects two previously divergent notions of cultural authority, one based on birth, the other based on acquired skills/practices. Clearly, professional proficiency (which can be attained) is a more inclusive category than aristocratic status (which can’t), but Robbins’ veneration of a cliquish
kind of international cosmopolitanism doesn’t escape classist implications; in fact, it champions them. When he approvingly imagines *The English Patient* in terms of “a bonding via literary quotations ranging from Herodotus to Stephen Crane [to] *Paradise Lost*” (24) and when he applauds a “postpatriotic love, an eroticizing of professional knowledge” (26), he participates in precisely the kind of self-congratulation that informs the conversations of Sarah, Chubb and Slater. It’s exactly the kind of dubious position Chubb exploits when he fills the McCorkle poems with “many classical allusions” (32) to appeal to the pretentiousness of the Australian literary elite. This type of bonding operates through an explicit process of exclusion. “Who cares about poetry?” Chubb asks, “Fifty people in Australia? Ten with minds you might respect” (46). Bonding according to literary allusions, with its transparent elitism, isn’t just a “very partial universalism [that] involves solidarity with *some* people outside the nation, not solidarity with humanity as a whole” (Robbins, “Village” 29); it’s both partial and hierarchical, a means of separating a sophisticated “we” from a benighted “they,” a way of determining who “knows better” and who needs improvement. Those who recognize Herodotus are in the community; those who don’t are out.

It’s hard, of course, for me to make an argument that Robbins is an insensitive reader while positioning myself as a champion of inclusiveness, but such is the nature of this type of discussion. It’s not quite a race to the bottom in an intellectual or ethical sense, but it is, and perhaps ought to be, a race to the ground, an effort to step “out of narrow, self-incarcerating traditions of belonging” (Schoene 21) and see what different territories look like and how they feel. The professionalized cosmopolitanism Robbins proposes is exactly the kind of self-incarcerating identity that ruins Christopher Chubb’s life; Chubb’s self-identification as poet, and his desire to associate only with those who recognize his classical allusions, might well be post-national, but it ushers in an even more narrow, less inclusive community, a community so small that he can’t imagine more than ten people in Australia as members. Moreover it produces the kind of simultaneously elitist and petty conversations we witness when Chubb and Slater nearly come to blows about whether “ulcerated” is a more elegant term than “ulcered” (109).
Robbins’ affection for these kinds of conversations leads to some very strange assumptions about what professionalism means. Although he briefly accepts that “something [odd] is clearly going on if the term professionalism” (28) can be applied to both butler and diplomat in The Remains of the Day, his blanket affirmation of the professional fails to fully recognize the widely divergent nature of the activities and the people he groups under the single term. Despite weak protests to the contrary, Robbins basically attempts to conflate (or at the very least closely compare and mutually validate) an international diplomat’s professionalism with a butler’s. In so doing, he overlooks (even as he seems to note) the presence and/or absence of self-directedness that each profession entails, and the different trajectories different lives and professions follow. It’s like conflating a tourist and a vagabond because they both move around a lot. It’s true that Ishiguro’s butler treats his profession with utmost seriousness and sincerity, but the profession itself is service; the butler functions as an extension of the master’s will. He suspends his selfhood for “the wishes of [the] employer” (Ishiguro 149), a fact made clear when Stevens overlooks his personal tragedy to do the work of the house. In very sharp contrast, the diplomat extends his will onto the nation. He exercises a kind of extraterritoriality, while the butler empties himself out. Crudely, Stevens does what Darlington wants; England does what the diplomats want. That Robbins can overlook this in his zeal to defend professionalism—and by extension cosmopolitanism—as basic goods is highly problematic, and speaks to a disconnection from both ground-level reading of texts, and, I fear, from any experience with the ground-level existence of people outside the liberal managerial class. As with Slater’s many travels, Robbins’ version of professional cosmopolitanism involves a member of the elite claiming the privilege of being “one of the guys” (“We’re all professionals…”), even though his subordinates can never afford to lose sight of the functions of both positionality and hegemony. As Chubb puts it, “you own us.”

VI. Conclusion: In Praise of Tactility
In his very interesting book on the role of theory in contemporary criticism, Valentine Cunningham argues against what he calls the “stock
responses” (88) theory often produces and argues for “meaning-full, pleromatic, hands-on textual encounters” (167). For Cunningham, reading is a matter of “tact,” of tactility, of “gentle touch, caring touch, loving touch” (155), the type of contact that can’t happen if one arrives in a shock-proof overcoat. Here, I’ve tried to approach Carey’s novel with this kind of tact. I’ve tried to feel it and follow its contours and resist the impulse to subordinate it into my overarching scheme. I’ve also tried to demonstrate (in as quiet a way as possible) that cosmopolitan reading might productively be regarded as a mode of close reading, that cosmopolitanism’s openness to the specificity of new territories ought to include the specificity of individual story worlds. Along the way, I’ve attempted to demonstrate the shortcomings inherent in any cosmopolitanism that reads as an extension of globalism, that operates in terms of a self-sufficient theory that excludes differences and perpetuates a kind of sophisticated abuse. Both inside Carey’s novel and the wider discourse that surrounds it, successful reading and life strategies must involve a direct engagement with things that move on the ground if they are to avoid the pitfalls of an overdeveloped and disconnected reliance on the stuff “any educated person would know.”

Cunningham invokes Iris Murdoch’s largely overlooked assertion that the novel is a form which, at its best, provides “‘free’ characters built out of respect for ‘the otherness of the other person’” (qtd. in Cunningham 149). Accepting and engaging with the otherness of other people is cosmopolitanism’s great and laudable goal, and most people who think about cosmopolitan aesthetics rightly applaud the novel as a form with the capacity to demonstrate (without domesticating) difference. Still, both *My Life as a Fake* and cosmopolitan discourse in general seem to show how difficult it is to suspend our affiliations, not least our allegiances to the theoretical models from which our claims to learnedness and good taste are derived. This being the case, we must avoid the fate Sarah sees so clearly in Chubb’s manifold social, political and aesthetic failures. We must avoid a cosmopolitan aesthetics that is “grotesque and self-deceiving in [its] love of ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’” (Carey 33).
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste, and ‘Knowing Better’

Notes
1 This type of assertion of cultural supremacy is what Hage describes as “sophisticated abuse” (185), the abuse the learned and enlightened inflict on their cultural inferiors. Despite the fact that it is generally mobilised in defense of multiculturalism, hybrydity, etc., sophisticated abuse is “ultimately conservative” (185).

2 My Life as a Fake spans most of the period regarded as postmodern, and deals explicitly with the legacy of High Modernism. It depicts events that occurred in 1972, recollected and narrated in 1985. The novel itself was published in 2003.

3 Despite their conservative intentions, McAuley and Stewart did not occupy a dominant position in Australia’s cultural discourse. That position was commanded by an apparently edgy but functionally orthodox European modernism.

4 Indeed, she regards the literary hoax as a bad faith gesture, not a telling revelation. For Sarah, the main point of the Malley/McCorkle poems is that the hoaxers have “preyed upon the best, most vulnerable quality an editor has to offer [...] the hopeful, optimistic part [...] so you might find [...] a great, unknown talent” (21).

5 Sarah is also, of course, a daughter of the English aristocracy. If we remember Robbins’ link between the aristocratic cosmopolitanism of the past and the current cosmopolitanism of professionalism (“Village” 23), then we see Sarah’s simultaneously aristocratic and professional cosmopolitanism as doubly legitimized.

6 Indeed, when the employees of Sarah’s hotel wish to make Chubb disappear, they destroy his suit when he sends it out to be cleaned, pulling it apart at the seams. Without it, they know, he can never return.

7 Because Chubb isn’t always able to track McCorkle’s movements, there are times when McCorkle’s whereabouts are unknown.

8 It’s also an example of the productive life-strategy Müller endorses when he describes people and cultures that are “animated by a set of universalist norms and enriched and strengthened by particular experiences and concerns” (96).

9 Schoene doesn’t endorse this construction of the cosmopolitan, but recognizes it as significant to many modes of cosmopolitan thinking and cosmopolitan behaviour.

10 Robbins’ argument that Lord Darlington’s plan to lessen German debt repayment might actually have saved the world from WWII seems similarly disingenuous. Darlington’s apparently transnational affection for the Germans is not motivated by any positive force, even if it might have produced some residual good. The possibility that Darlington might have been right in supposing debt relief would help avoid war does precisely nothing to mitigate the partiality and unseemly nature of his classism and anti-Semitism. If I only want male children and murder female ones as soon as they’re born, I suppose I am incidentally helping to control population growth and lessening the burden on the environment, but that doesn’t make it a good idea or me a good guy.
Works Cited
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste, and ‘Knowing Better’

——. “The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class.” Dharwadker. 15–32. Print.
GLOBAL STUDIES CONFERENCE
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
18-20 July, 2011

http://www.GlobalStudiesConference.com

The Global Studies Conference and the Global Studies Journal are devoted to mapping and interpreting new trends and patterns in globalization. The conference serves as an open forum for exploring globalization from many perspectives in a wide variety of locations. The Global Studies Conference was inaugurated at the University of Illinois, Chicago in 2008, the second conference was held at Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in 2009, and the third was held at Pusan National University, Busan, South Korea.

Along with the general themes, each year the conference focuses on a different special topic. This year the special theme is Latin America and Globalization: Emerging Societies and Emancipation. This topic will be explored in depth as participants immerse themselves into the setting of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

As well as an impressive line-up of international plenary speakers, the conference will also include numerous paper, workshop and colloquium presentations by practitioners, teachers and researchers. We would particularly like to invite you to respond to the conference call-for-papers. Presenters may choose to submit written papers for publication in the Global Studies Journal. If you are unable to attend the conference in person, virtual registrations are also available which allow you to submit a paper for refereeing and possible publication in this refereed academic journal.

In addition to organizing the Global Studies Conference, Common Ground publishes papers from the conference at http://www.GlobalStudiesJournal.com, and we do encourage all conference participants to submit a paper based on their conference presentation for peer review and possible publication in the journal. Whether you are a virtual or in-person presenter at this conference, we also encourage you to present on the conference YouTube Channel. We also publish books at http://www.onglobalisation.com in both print and electronic formats. We would like to invite conference participants to develop publishing proposals for original works, or for edited collections of papers drawn from the journal which address an identified theme. Finally, please join our online conversation by subscribing to our monthly email newsletter, and subscribe to our Facebook, RSS, or Twitter feeds at http://www.onglobalisation.com

Ethical Treason: Radical Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury* (2001)*

Soo Yeon Kim

While one reviewer sarcastically comments that *Fury* “sounds more interesting in synopsis than it actually is to read” (J. Leonard 36), Rushdie’s novel resists a coherent outline. The novel revolves around Malik Solanka, a 55-year-old former Cambridge professor of ideas turned dollmaker. Solanka creates a beautiful and smart doll named Little Brain, who becomes the host of a BBC talk show featuring philosopher dolls such as Spinoza, Machiavelli, and Galileo. After Little Brain becomes an unprecedented global hit and “tawdry celebrity” (Rushdie 98), Solanka becomes disillusioned by Little Brain’s sellout to global consumerism, develops a murderous fury toward his English wife and the world, and exiles himself to Manhattan. Two major events occur while he is there. First, Solanka starts an affair with the traffic-stopping Indian beauty Neela Mahendra. A cosmopolite from the imaginary island of Lilliput-Blefuscu, loosely based on Fiji, Neela is modelled after Padma Lakshmi, a real-life Indian model and Rushdie’s fourth ex-wife; she is also the dedicatee of this novel. Second, Solanka launches an Internet saga on PlanetGalileo.com, relating a galactic battle between cybernetic Puppet Kings and their human master. The digital story of the “PKs” becomes an entrepreneurial success worldwide. In the novel’s last chapter, however, Solanka returns to London, howling “the cry of the tormented and the lost” (Rushdie 259), after Neela kills herself in a political coup on Lilliput-Blefuscu, and he witnesses the revolutionary puppets of his creation being misinterpreted by fanatical nationalists in the fictitious island nation.

By criss-crossing the boundaries of the real/fictional/virtual, national/global/planetary, and textual/intertextual/extra-textual, Rushdie’s novel condenses disparate themes, settings, and tones deemed incompatible and extravagant by many critics even for a Rushdie novel. Reviewers
have received the novel with furious criticism. According to some, "Fury signifies nothing" ("Signifying Nothing"; Mendelsohn; Patterson and Valby), is written by a "trivial monster-ego" (qtd. in Tonkin), and "exhausts all negative superlatives" (Wood). Amitava Kumar notes that Rushdie is "utterly complicit in what he wants to lampoon" (35), pointing to Rushdie's lack of critical distance in portraying Manhattan's cultural politics—the culture of "celebrification" (Brouillette 154)—that this novel condemns and reinforces simultaneously. In other words, Rushdie's satire of the culture of celebrification remains powerless, insofar as the author seems to take too much pleasure in describing what he purports to denigrate.¹

Other critics find it difficult to pin down Fury, and label it a "failed" postcolonial novel because it abandons the centre versus margin distinction assumed in postcolonial discourses, or a "failed" postmodern novel, an example of "junk lit" adorned with superficial exuberance (Gonzalez, "The Aesthetics" 126). Anuradha Bhattacharyya's essay exemplifies the first reading frame as it reproduces the duped Indian versus the manipulative Western paradigm. Bhattacharyya brands Rushdie/Solanka as an "Indian adopting a western theory as a garb" (153). Deploring Rushdie/Solanka's "unconscious attraction towards the West," Bhattacharyya argues that Rushdie/Solanka "wears a mask" because of a "lack of confidence in his Indianness" (153, 154).² From a postmodern perspective, Madelena Gonzalez argues that the "celebratory aesthetics of magic realism" in Rushdie's early work has given way to the "rampant technophilia of postrealism" in Fury (Fiction After Fatwa 189). While the meaning of "postrealism" is unclear, Gonzalez critiques Rushdie's novel as mimicking "the trashy technobeat of contemporary McCulture" ("Artistic Fury" 767).³

Perspectives I find more fruitful for the purpose of this paper come from another group of critics who read Fury as representing an "American cosmopolitanism." If The Satanic Verses, arguably Rushdie's greatest contribution to postcolonial and world literature, mediates the discourse of "the trans and the post," the postmodern valorization of "mobility, mutability, and newness," and a discourse of the "re," "return and restoration" (Gane 26) valorizing continuity, stability, and identity, these critics note
that *Fury* has lost sight of the tension between these two discourses. Instead, Rushdie “has written himself into the center … the multicultural mainstream of the US” in *Fury*; hence, an “Americanization of Rushdie” has occurred (Kunow 369). Yet this narrow notion of cosmopolitanism as an Americanization of global elites, like the postcolonial and postmodernist interpretations, cannot fully illuminate the novel’s ambivalence toward America, what a frustrated critic calls the “equivocation” of *Fury* (Keulks 162).

In this essay I attempt to broaden the discourse of cosmopolitanism in order to make room for what I call “radical cosmopolitanism.” I define radical cosmopolitanism as a type of non-allegiance that deconstructs a utopian rendition of cosmopolitanism and refuses to commit to either cosmopolitanism or nationalism. *Fury*’s chronic ambivalence and equivocation, then, do not stem from the lack of critical positioning, but indicate a strategic complication of the issues of cosmopolitanism and nationalism as valid critical and practical discourses. That is, rather than mediating “migrant and national” as Rushdie’s earlier works do, this novel illustrates the extent to which discourses of both cosmopolitanism and nationalism are saturated by media-frenzied and celebrity-obsessed cultural politics (Spivak, “Reading” 219). I argue that *Fury*, a novel about Manhattan’s celebrity culture, is a cosmopolitan novel par excellence not because it endorses American cosmopolitanism, but because it reveals cosmopolitanism and nationalism as false ideologies concocted by an American empire and, in renouncing allegiance to both, embodies a radical cosmopolitanism instead.

If postcolonial, postmodernist, and elitist cosmopolitan readings turn out to be ineffective in explaining *Fury*’s “inexplicable” (9) contradictions, it is because this novel is less interested in negotiating positions between margin and periphery, postmodernist and realist, and cosmopolitan and nationalist, than it is dedicated to questioning such binaries per se. Rushdie’s emphasis on “contradictions,” “excess,” and “uncertainties”—some of the words reiterated most often in *Fury*—earns him the name of traitor and accusations of having become an elite liberalist and assimilationist who shows less interest in committing to meaningful global or national causes than in chasing his personal success. As
Rebecca Walkowitz argues, however, Rushdie’s seemingly insincere style, which includes irreverent thinking, flirtation, and mixing-up are “ethical or subversive” for they “extend perception, make it more various,” and “offer an alternative to the opposition between accommodation and antagonism” (18, 133). Similarly, Fury’s play with contradictions does not aim at judgment or resolution, but creates room for the new and “better” by shaking up existing categories. Herein lies an ethic of betrayal inspired by Fury’s act of treason against both cosmopolitanism and nationalism.

In place of the prior criticism of Fury in the light of American cosmopolitanism, the first part of this essay draws on Fredric Jameson’s dystopian vision of a “world culture” dominated by the American market in order to illustrate the detrimental workings of celebrity culture, which turns both cosmopolitanism and nationalism into political commodities in Fury. Rushdie’s novel is a felicitous portrayal of the world culture fostered by the American empire. The latter part of this paper demonstrates how Fury challenges this cultural empire of America using two examples, Solanka’s eloquent defence of “messy humanity” (Rushdie 74), and Neela’s recantation of her ethnic loyalty. In Other Asias, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cogently remarks, “The ethico-politico task of the humanities has always been rearrangement of desires” (3). An embodiment of a treasonous yet trans-valuing desire in defiance of the American empire, Fury’s betrayal of (inter)national loyalty constitutes an ethical project that looks forward to political transformation.

I. Cosmopolitanism Post-Festum

If the postcolonial and the postmodern critics of Fury lament Rushdie’s desertion of the postcolonial and his crossing over to a “tabloid celebrity” (Kumar 36), other critics deprecate Rushdie’s novel as an endorsement of “American cosmopolitanism” (Mondal 181). Rüdiger Kunow argues that Fury epitomizes a carefree cosmopolitanism with a non-committal view from above. Less a victim suffering from globalization than a member of the global elite profiting from it, Rushdie has left the diaspora and has integrated with mainstream America. Similarly, Anshuman Mondal states that Rushdie’s aesthetics of excess has become
an aestheticization of hyperbole in *Fury*. Rushdie’s style aptly describes today’s “fragmented cultures” and its “obsession with surfaces where style is more important than substance” (176). Given Rushdie’s own status as global literary celebrity sustained by popular US media, Mondal notes that his hyperbole causes *Fury* to be complicit with “the vacuous empire of signs” rather than critical of it (176). In consequence, Rushdie’s novel vacates the political in favour of the aesthetical: “What had been a political act now becomes an existential fact … a species of cosmopolitanism, more philosophical, a world without frontiers” (181). If Mondal indicates that *Fury*’s philosophical turn to cosmopolitanism signifies the loss of transformative power in the socio-political field, my contention is that *Fury* struggles to find new ways of changing society in a post-political age. When the division between nationalists and cosmopolites, Right and Left, and “us” and “them” is not clear-cut, and when both parties are guided by self-interests and capital (hence the “post-political”), Rushdie’s novel destabilizes postmodern America by tackling its ethos, shown in Manhattanites’ avid pursuit of “hip-isms” as lifestyle choices. From this perspective, Rushdie’s turn to cosmopolitanism has less to do with a blind celebration of it than with a deconstruction of it—its fascination and perilousness.4

According to Mondal, an American cosmopolitanism embraced by *Fury* glorifies “non-belonging” as “broad-minded global pluralism,” and disparages “belonging” as “narrow chauvinism” (181). Kunow’s and Mondal’s use of American cosmopolitanism, however, reflects an outdated view of it as a privileged position of non-belonging and mobility. Since the 1990s, cosmopolitanism has resurfaced as an area of academic inquiry following the lost causes of multiculturalism and globalization. Recent cosmopolitan theorists are distinguished from earlier cosmopolitan critics insofar as they are wary of the conventional notion of elitist cosmopolitanism and emphasize the need to be attentive to the local and the national as well. In other words, be it founded upon a philosophical ideal of “a spaceless cosmopolitanism of the mind” (Fine and Cohen 158) professed by the Stoics, or in Kantian social theory striving for global democracy and alliance-making, the core achievement of today’s cosmopolitanism lies in its presumed ability to negotiate two
opposite sets of values: identity, homogeneity, and unity, and difference, heterogeneity, and hybridity.

Some of the terms, as conceived by major scholars of the field, illuminate the need for such mediation. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “partial cosmopolitanism” eliminates “an unpleasant posture of superiority toward the putative provincial” (xiii). Stuart Hall’s “vernacular cosmopolitanism” underscores “the importance of community and culture … [while] acknowledging the liberal limit on communitarianism” (30). Walter Mignolo polarizes “global designs,” the “managerial” globalization from above “driven by the will to control and homogenize,” and a “critical and dialogic cosmopolitanism,” which can be “dissenting or complementary” (“The Many Faces” 157, 179). A list of the terms that redefine cosmopolitanism in light of the local is ongoing. While the mediation between global and local, universal and specific, and identity and difference proves an undisputable task of cosmopolitanism, the question of how to achieve it in reality remains unresolved. Pheng Cheah argues that despite people’s increased sense of belonging to the world, cosmopolitanism has not “resulted in a significant sense of political allegiance or loyalty to the world” (107). In contrast to a “notoriously nonphilosophical or underintellectualized” nationalism, cosmopolitanism lacks “a mass base of loyalty” that the nation has (Cheah 108). To borrow the words of Ulrich Beck, patriotism is “one-sided and petty” but is “practical, useful, joyous and comforting,” whereas cosmopolitanism is “splendid, large, but for a human being almost too large” (1). Cosmopolitanism’s ambition to reconcile the global and the local may be “in the end just a beautiful idea” (Beck 1).

Cosmopolitanism’s “beautiful” idealism presents itself in the idyllic concept of culture shared by different cosmopolitan theories. On the one hand, Kant defines cosmopolitan culture as a “universally normative ideal” a priori (Cheah 83). On the other, theories of postcolonial hybridity asserted by James Clifford and Homi Bhabha oppose Kant’s canonical view of culture. If Kant assumes that culture is “an organic and coherent body, a process of ordering, and a bounded realm of human value determinable by and coextensive with human reason,” for Clifford and Bhabha, culture is nothing but “syncretism and parodic inven-
Radical Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s Fury

tion”; hence the Bhabhaian terms “mimicry and ambivalence” (83, 84). “Hybrid, inorganic, and indeterminate,” culture has been constructed in the permanent encounters between the histories of local and global, which are best demonstrated by “the diasporic and migrant cultures” of servants, guides, and translators (Clifford and Bhabha 84, 87). Yet, as Cheah points out, the attempt of hybridity theorists to “recosmopolitanize postcolonial studies” repeats the utopian notion of culture suggested in Kant’s cosmopolitan world order (89). If Kant’s view of culture as “the promise of humanity’s freedom from or control over the given” underpins his normative cosmopolitanism, hybridity theorists’ placement of migrant culture in “the human realm of flux and freedom from the bondage of being-in-nature” is as idyllic as Kant’s (Cheah 97, 89).

This utopian concept of culture shared by a wide range of cosmopolitan theorists is diametrically opposed to Jameson’s dystopian vision of “world culture.” If scholars of cosmopolitanism distinguish globalization and cosmopolitanization as “affecting different spheres of life (economic vs. sociocultural)” (Schoene 1), Jameson highlights “the becoming cultural of the economic, the becoming economic of the cultural.” The inseparableness of the cultural and the economic is what Jameson articulates as the logic of the world culture controlled by an American “ideology” called “free market” (“Notes” 60, 63). Under the rubric of world culture, allegedly democratic yet highly discriminatory, “all the cultures around the world … placed in tolerant contact with each other in a kind of immense cultural pluralism” are soon to be followed by “the rapid assimilation of hitherto autonomous national markets and productive zones into … a picture of standardization on an unparalleled new scale,” becoming a “world-system from which ‘delinking’ is henceforth impossible and even unthinkable.” For instance, Jameson argues that exported North American television programs and the Hollywood film industry make a “cultural intervention … deeper than anything known in earlier forms of colonization or imperialism, or simple tourism” (“Notes” 57, 58). For this cultural neo-imperialism, which obliterates the boundary between the cultural and the economic through the commodification of every cultural production, resorts to the rhetoric of freedom, not only of free trade but also of “the free passage of ideas and intellectual ‘proper-
ties,” such as copyright and patent, thus turning “ideas” into “private property … designed to be sold in great and profitable quantities.” In the current global “free” market of culture, it is within the American system that the world culture emerges by incorporating “exotic elements from abroad—samurai culture here, South African music there, John Woo film here, Thai food there, and so forth” (“Notes” 60, 61, 63).

Jameson’s notion of world culture, shored up by America’s financial encroachment on national cultures, exposes cosmopolitan theorists’ utopian belief that cosmopolitan culture can be free from the American market. My argument is that Rushdie’s Fury depicts this American Empire of world culture, a version of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s “empire” that denotes a postmodern global rule. Without segregating centre and margin, or the colonizer and the colonized as modern European empires did, Hardt and Negri’s empire commands a new hybrid rule that has no visible centre-government, but reorganizes the world under the fluid and heterogeneous sovereignty of global capitalism. To put it differently, if Spivak defines the colonizer as an alien nation that “establishes itself as ruler, impresses its own laws and systems of education, and re-arranges the mode of production for its own economic benefit” (Other Asias 6), the American Empire in Fury does not have to “establish itself as ruler.” Far from forcing its system on other cultures through military might as past empires did, America entices the world with attractive, consumer-oriented commodities which it has ransacked from global cultural archives, so that people from all over the world voluntarily move to America for better living or education without being “impressed”; therefore the terms “neo-colonialism” or “cultural imperialism” are used for what appears to be the “optional” worldwide rule of the American system. Fury manifests this contradiction inherent in American imperialism, its seduction and damage. Solanka is at once captivated and repelled by Manhattan, its opulence, its overloaded atmosphere and speed, and its voracious simulation and jumbling of foreign cultures to revamp them as “American” products. Then, a question poses itself: if there is no “beyond” or “outside” of this American Empire, how would one find a location where a rebellion against the Empire can be undertaken?
II. Radical Cosmopolitanism: On Abandoning Allegiance

Fury’s rebellion against the American Empire starts with Rushdie’s portrayal of it. That is to say, how is New York City, the life-altering and death-inducing city “boiled with money” (Rushdie 3), described in Fury? What would be the core, if extricable, of such a topsy-turvy metropolitan culture with “its hybrid, omnivorous power” (44)? Manhattan as painted by Rushdie incarnates late-capitalist superfluity and velocity. Exhibited in the breathless cataloguing of “things,” such as “limited-edition olive oils, three-hundred-dollar corkscrews, customized Humvees, the latest anti-virus software [and] waiting lists for baths, doorknobs, imported hardwoods, antiqued fireplaces, bidets, marble slabs,” America’s wealth and decadence matches past empires, although the current imperium is more “undeserving” and “crass” than those of the past (3, 87). Solanka opines that America is not entitled to the name of empire because America, as the “melting pot or métissage of past power,” bases its might on “plundering and jumbling of the storehouse of yesterday’s empires” (43). Abounding in examples of these jumbles, the city’s cultural scene is ruled by “Caesar Joaquin Phoenix’s imperial Rome,” if only in “the computer-generated illusion of the great gladiatorial arena” (6). This “most transient of cities’ eternal imitation game” culminates in the “Viennese Kaffeehaus … the city’s best simulacrum.” Solanka calls Manhattan a “city of half-truths and echoes that somehow dominates the earth” (44).

While Rushdie’s criticism of America is scathing and astute, his profuse use of American pop culture references in Fury has been belittled by critics as evincing the author’s attraction to, rather than his disgust with, American culture. For example, Solanka’s doll Little Brain is made a real-life celebrity, moves to “Brain Street” in “Brainville,” has a movie star “John Brayne” for a neighbour and a lab called “Brain Drain,” stars in “Brain Street,” “out-Hurley[s]” every starlet (an allusion to model Elizabeth Hurley), and becomes “the Maya Angelou of the doll world” (Rushdie 96, 98, 97). Little Brain is attacked by Andrea Dworkin for degrading women and by Karl Lagerfeld for emasculating men. Gonzalez calls Rushdie a “word junkie” for exhausting “all of the toys … crass puns, tasteless word-play, sick jokes” (“The Aesthetics” 125).
Kumar derides Rushdie, noting that the “difference between a tabloid celebrity and a serious writer is not so much worth addressing” although he fails to clarify what he means by a “serious writer” (36). In contrast to these critics, however, I would argue that Fury’s seemingly unscrupulous mixing of high(brow) and low(brow) comprises a “serious” investigation of the dissipation of high culture. In other words, Fury displays the process whereby the dissolution of high culture is replaced by an “aestheticization” of commodities (Jameson, “Globalization” 53).

In the words of Jameson, if the aesthetic was “very precisely a sanctuary and a refuge from business and the state, today no enclaves—aesthetic or other—are left in which the commodity form does not reign supreme” (“Notes” 70). Not only is the field of high culture (the aesthetic and the academic) deeply predicated on consumer capitalism but also “the commodification of politics, or ideas, or even emotions and private life” aims at aestheticization as well. In short, the commodity is now “aesthetically consumed” (“Globalization” 53). Without glorifying or denouncing high art, or exclusively adopting a “serious” or “tabloid” writing style, what Fury shows remarkably well is the readiness with which intellectuals refashion their tastes for the aestheticization of glamorous yet unnecessary commodities. Sara Jane Lear, Solanka’s first ex-wife, serves as a prime example. Representative of the 1970s “serious life,” an “outstanding university actress” who wrote a thesis on James Joyce, Sara was “slightly shameful” about working in advertising because “[s]elling things was low” and “nakedly capitalist (a horrible thought in that era)” (Rushdie 31, 33). After twenty years, Sara’s huge success as an ad executive and ex-wife of a late billionaire in Manhattan discloses the “absolute victory of advertising” (33).

If “everybody, as well as everything, was for sale” (Rushdie 33), as Sara’s materialistic success attests, who could be free from this mercantile world and be critical of it? If “everyone was an American now, or at least Americanized” (88), where was the site outside America from which a detached criticism could be made? Instead of concocting a utopian space left intact from the American empire, Fury redirects the question: what would a critical position within such a market look like? Just as Hardt and Negri’s multitude, the agent of an ethical rebellion against
the empire, takes on its task within the empire, *Fury* accepts the status quo as given (and as pleasurable to a degree), and attempts to de-centre, rather than leave, the American Empire. As Hardt and Negri’s multitude evacuates, rather than demolishes, the locus of imperialist power by channelling it elsewhere, Rushdie’s novel sabotages America’s might not by trying to wipe it out, which would be impossible, but by shifting focus to the disruptive power of fury and other cruxes of human life. That which Solanka calls “messy humanity”—“excess,” “uncertainties,” “contradictions,” and “the inexplicable” of the human—disturbs such omnipotence. Using examples amply found in works of Shakespeare, the Shiva tradition of Hinduism, and Greek mythology, Solanka’s fury/ *Fury* makes a turbulent receptacle for the essences of what it is to be human, which defy the itemization and compartmentalization exacted by consumer culture.

Solanka’s life in Manhattan illustrates such contradiction. His exile to New York in 2000 does not dispense with an $8,000-per-month “duplex and credit card,” and appears to be a quest for stardom and sport in place of flight and peace. Still, Solanka claims that “he would be that contradiction” and pursue “the power of flight” in his own way (Rushdie 82). If there is no fleeing from the American empire, Solanka would flee into the centre of the empire and remain as critical as he can by gluttoning it. As the creator of Little Brain who ironically has less presence than his creature, Solanka lives a contradiction in which he is both a beneficiary (wealth and fame) and victim (fury and frustration) of celebrity culture. In the sense that Solanka’s existence is already implicated in the “brilliant, brittle, gold-hatted, exemplary American life,” a challenge Solanka can pose to America is not to do away with it, but to push it to the extreme and problematize it by constantly revealing the contradictions and excesses uncontainable within it (82). Solanka’s determination to live an “exemplary American life,” therefore, is not to validate the culture of celebrification. Rather, Rushdie’s half-taunting and half-relishing attitude throughout the novel elucidates that “[t]here is no such thing as non-involvement and the only option one has is to be complicitous with celebrification while constantly questioning the nature and implications of that involvement” (Brouillette 154).
Observing that “uncertainty is at the heart of what we are” (Rushdie 115), Solanka highlights an indispensible human desire for excess, in a tone reminiscent of *The Satanic Verses*:

> We are made of shadow as well as light, of heat as well as dust. Naturalism, the philosophy of the visible, cannot capture us, for we exceed. We fear this in ourselves, our boundary-breaking, rule-disproving, shape-shifting, transgressive, trespassing shadow-self, the true ghost in our machine. (128)

Rushdie’s love of messy humanity and his sometimes extravagant yet always fluent defence of it have not become rusty in *Fury*. For Solanka, to suppress the human need for excess, the “Gangetic, Mississippian inexorability” that enthralls him as well as overwhelms him, amounts to, “in the matter of desire, agreeing to be dead” (178, 179).

The rupturing power of the inexplicable human is demonstrated in the lives of the cosmopolites populating *Fury* as well. Manhattan at the turn of the third millennium offers a perfect vessel for all kinds of cosmopolitans. No matter what reasons they have for their enforced or chosen world-travelling and relocating, they fill the city with their vivid “back-story” (Rushdie 51). In addition to main characters such as the green-eyed Serbo-Croatian Mila Milo (née Milosevic), Polish-British Krysztof Waterford-Wajda, and Neela, American of Indian and Lilliput-Blefuscu descent, *Fury* follows twists and turns of other cosmopolitan lives. An old, grumpy plumber, Joseph Schlink, who is “a transplanted German Jew” from the Second World War, “annoys Solanka with his war memories,” but eventually wins a contract for a movie to be called *Jewboat*, starring Billy Crystal (47). Ali Majnu, a cab driver, blasphemes America in Urdu. Another Pole, Bronisława Reinhart, and the English Sara Jane Lear are ex-wives of celebrities and participants in “the Divorce Olympics” who fiercely compete for alimony and fame (213). From Solanka himself, “a born-and-bred metropolitan of the countryside-is-for-cows persuasion,” to “Jamaican troubadour-polemicists … in Bryant Park” (6, 7), *Fury’s* portrait of Manhattan stands for ultimate urbanity, the seething site of freedom and opportunity criss-crossing the boundaries of elite and underclass, the nation and the world.
The effervescent cosmopolitan lives in *Fury* illuminate the inexplicable, intractable, and paradoxical human desires for life and death, marriage and true romance, fame and quietus, and uprooted roots. *Fury*’s exhibition of cosmopolitan characters, however, does not merely add to the democratized variety of urban cosmopolites, which designates a harmonious coexistence of heterogeneous people(s). If the American Empire disseminates a kind of conflict-free diversity transcending class, race, and nationality for its economic and political gain, Rushdie’s novel uncovers that the metropolis, oftentimes a site of mirth and enrichment, makes an equally powerful site of forgetting and burying of individuals. Via Schlink’s movie deal and Krysztof’s suicide in particular, Rushdie’s novel reveals how the (hi)stories of immigrants are often erased, (re)created, or distorted in the service of a commodified metropolitan culture.

Whereas Schlink’s dramatic turn of life is unpredictable, problematic, and hilarious, the life and death of Krysztof, also known as “Dubdub,” exemplifies the tragedy of an elite cosmopolitan. Solanka’s Cambridge friend and former colleague, Dubdub is an “unlikely hybrid, English Kafka,” whose “upper-class grin, his [English] mother’s hockey-captain grin which no shadow of pain, poverty, or doubt had ever darkened,” sits “so incongruously below his paternal inheritance, the beetling, dark eye-brows reminiscent of untranslatable privations endured by his ancestors in the unglamorous town of Łodz” (Rushdie 19). When Dubdub arrives at Princeton University for a chaired position “invented” for him, he becomes an academic celebrity in the new “industry of culture replac[ing] that of ideology” (24). Given his hybridity and popularity, Dubdub is expected to readily adapt himself to “the world’s new secularism, [whose] new religion was fame” (24). But this “globe-trotting … Derridada” is too good-hearted and conscientious to ignore the truth that “the more he became a Personality, the less like a person he felt” (27). In a society where individuals are both consumers and objects of consumption, the difference between the life of a Jewish plumber and an internationally eminent scholar means little as long as a niche market can be found for each.

*Fury* uses treason, a brave rejection of loyalty, in order to expose the pernicious sides of both cosmopolitanism and nationalism. While the
lives of varied cosmopolites in Rushdie’s novel provide sources of gleeful urbanity, they can be easily forgotten or falsely rejuvenated in the cultural Empire of America. Dubdub’s suicide and Sara Jane Lear’s success imply, respectively, an act of treason against and an assimilation to the culture of celebri-fication. In the last section of the novel, it is Neela who commits another act of treason, against nationalism this time, by abandoning her loyalty to the nationalist coup in her native Lilliput-Blefuscu. Just as Rushdie’s treatment of cosmopolitanism in *Fury* is neither entirely deferential nor uniformly satiric, a belief in one’s ethnicity or nostalgia for one’s homeland is described as both dangerous and enviable in this novel. For instance, Solanka understands that Jack Reinhart, his African-American journalist friend, has been a victim of “the brutalities of blacks against blacks” and has stopped “hyphenating himself and has become simply an American” (Rushdie 57). At the same time, Solanka “almost env[ys]” Neela for her attachment to Lilliput-Blefuscu, her “paradoxical desire to be part of what [she] left” (247). What elevates Neela’s betrayal of her people, traditionally a morally stigmatized act, to an ethical treason springs from her courage to act against conventional morality. Neela’s treacherous act of killing herself and Babur, the despotic leader of the coup who craves to be a global political celebrity, betrays how a “good” nationalist cause can be manipulated to justify the “wrongs” of the extreme Indo-Lillian nationalists who mindlessly imitate Solanka’s best-selling digital story of the Puppet Kings’ revolution. In choosing to become a “traitor, betraying the only cause she ever believed in,” Neela achieves an ethical rebellion against nationalism, which has been diminished to a mere means of pursuing the culture of celebri-fication (253).

Toward the end of *Fury*, Solanka’s inquiry on “the heart of what it means to be human” converges with what he calls the “Galileo moment” (Rushdie 188). Borrowed from Galileo’s recantation of the truth after being coerced by the Catholic Church to state that “the earth moves,” the Galileo moment constitutes an ultimate test of the courage to say yes to obvious truth, overcoming the terror induced by the powerful. One of the most significant passages in *Fury*, Neela’s “Galileo moment” epitomizes “the impossible situation” of every human being, be she cosmopolitan or nationalist, living in the American Empire today (249). On
the surface, Neela embodies an ideal cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world who never forgets her roots. A “Cosmopolitan”-sipping Manhattanite, Neela has made New York City “a home away from home,” but her “uprooted roots are pulling hard” (157, 248). On hearing the news of Babur’s starting a coup on the other side of the world, Neela is torn between two equally undesirable choices: remaining a rootless cosmopolite by giving up her roots, or fighting for justice for her people, only to ruin another people. What Neela does not yet know is the fact that both choices are manoeuvred by the culture of celebrity, Solanka’s Puppet Kings in this case.

It is not until Neela returns to her fatherland to join the coup, is enslaved and humiliated by Babur, and is presented with a Galileo moment by Solanka, that she realizes the danger of such grandiose causes as “history,” “justice,” and “my people.” Meanwhile, Solanka’s transglobal journey to Lilliput-Blefuscu to rescue Neela showcases the worldwide effect of his fictitious Puppet Kings, uniting the realms of the literary, the commercial, the political, and the geographical under “the superlative force of a real American hit” (Rushdie 224). Not only does Babur wear the mask of Akasz Kronos, the cyberneticist hero and creator of the Puppet Kings, modelled after Solanka himself in his Internet epic, but Babur also forces all the Indo-Lillian rebels to wear masks from the Puppet Kings. Instead of remaining the author of his story, Solanka has completely lost control over his creation in the process of becoming a global celebrity, and cannot help but witness the grotesque distortion of his well-intended, philosophical-minded Puppet Kings. Looking at the deranged Babur wearing the mask of “his [Solanka’s] own guilty face,” Solanka, like Satan in Paradise Lost, declares that wherever he travels, he discovers “a personal Hell” (246). While Solanka is held captive in a cell, he is visited by Neela hidden behind a mask of Zameen, a female puppet. The following pivotal speech made by Solanka leads to Neela’s “Galileo moment” in the sense that it asks her an evident question, an answer to which necessitates a radical deconstruction of conventional morality:

You are convinced that your people, if I can use so antiquated a term, have been done down by history, that they deserve what Babur has been fighting for…. You thought this was a struggle
for human dignity, a just cause, and you were actually proud of Babur for teaching your passive kinsmen and kinswomen how to fight their own battles. In consequence, you were willing to overlook a certain amount of, what shall we call it, illiberalism. War is tough, and so on. Certain niceties get trampled. All this you told yourself, and all the while there was another voice in your head telling you in a whisper you didn't want to hear that you were turning into history's whore. (Rushdie 248)

When a national revolution is handled by American popular culture and is subject to political commodification, an ethical choice between cosmopolitanism and nationalism is impossible to make. Babur in the Akasz mask demonstrates this point. For the sake of the “justliness” of justice, Babur has “come off at the hinges” and has become “a servant of the Good” which, ironically, transforms him into berserk nationalist ideologue and international political celebrity: two extreme faces of nationalism and cosmopolitanism (246). In order to uncover the violence of the absolute Good propagated by these ideologies, Neela must answer the paradoxical questions that compel a repudiation of traditional morality. Solanka continues to ask, “Neela, here’s your Galileo moment … Can right be wrong? Is the wrong thing right for you?” (249). Neela’s final view of herself as a traitor right before she kills both Babur and herself thus connotes an ethical treason. Rather than renouncing one ideology in order to commit to another, her treason professes an ethical desire to relinquish oppressive political ideologies disguised as moralities altogether. This deconstruction of right/wrong and of national/global binaries through treason signals what I call a radical cosmopolitanism. An ethical principle in a globalized world ruled by the American Empire, radical cosmopolitanism endorses non-allegiance, even treason and betrayal, as an ethical strategy that continually problematizes its imperialist, moral law within the empire. Rushdie’s novel is an apotheosis of this poststructuralist mode of cosmopolitanism.

In Fury’s tragic and baffling last chapter, Solanka appears mad with grief over Neela’s suicide and is bouncing in a bouncy castle in Hampstead Heath, London, as if attempting to reach for the sky. The elusive ending of the “bouncing” Solanka, its abrupt turn from Neela’s grim death on a
Radical Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*

battlefield to Solanka’s zany moment on the playground, has been curiously dismissed by commentators. If cosmopolitans are those who feel “at home in all countries of the world” (Beck 4), Solanka feels homeless everywhere, literally with no “ground beneath his feet” in the bouncy castle at the end. The “sound and fury” that Solanka never stops producing in Rushdie’s *Fury* is a rebellion against the American Empire that compartmentalizes and commodifies, and an assertion of the inscrutable yet liberating dimension of human desires. While Solanka’s treacherous and ethical struggle against the empire sentences him to death—not physical death, but social banishment—his final bouncing exudes Dionysiac exaltation verging on poignant insanity. This is because Solanka’s constant bouncing toward the unreachable sky is not an escape to a transcendental heaven but is a symbol for unfathomable yet tenacious human yearning, which is left untouched regardless of his equally constant falling. In this sense, Rushdie’s treason against the American Empire in *Fury*, for all its futile bouncing—its tragic rise and fall—confirms his “will to cosmopolitanism,” disclaiming any other commodified “isms.”

Notes

* This article project was supported by the New Faculty Research Fund at Kookmin University in 2010.

1 In a manner similar to Kumar’s, Mendelsohn observes that Solanka’s “cynical satire is, if anything, symptomatic of the problems he’s lampooning,” and Boyd Tonkin notes that the novel “mimics our current condition of frantic over-stimulation as much as it explains it.” For hostile reviews of Rushdie’s novel, see Allen, Caldwell, Cowley, Eder, Gates, Hooper, Kakutani, and Steinberg. For relatively generous reviews, read Rosett, Rubin, Tonkin, and Sutherland.

2 In “Postethnicity and Postcommunism,” Banerjee argues that Rushdie’s *Fury* promotes a “new kind of cultural exoticism” disguised as hybridity, thus merely showing postcolonial studies’ return to conservatism (309). Banerjee calls “the brave new world of postcolonial studies … the brave old world of the Western mainstream,” and Rushdie “the Tony Blair of postcolonial studies” (320, 321). For another postcolonial reading, see Stephens.

3 See Keulks and Deszcz for other postmodern readings. Despite his perceptive reading of *Fury*, Keulks concludes that the novel is an “illuminating, instructive failure” (152).

4 Brennan’s writing represents the view of cosmopolitanism as a worldwide Americanization. Brennan coined the term “convenient cosmopolitanism” in
order to condemn “Third-World” intellectuals’ political non-commitment. See his *At Home* and *Salman Rushdie*. For another cosmopolitan reading of *Fury*, see C. Leonard.

5 Some of the recent studies of cosmopolitanism exemplifying this trend include: Mignolo; Breckenridge, Bhabha, Chakrabarty, and Pollock, eds.; Vertovec and Cohen, eds.; Benhabib; and Fine.

6 Brouillette’s insightful words show why it is difficult, even pointless, to discern the “authentic” literary Rushdie from the celebrity Rushdie. A LexisNexis academic database search (of US and major international publications in English, including newspapers, magazines, journals, and newsletters) using the search term “Salman Rushdie” pulls up approximately 1,000 entries. Some recent titles are: “And the Prize for Pomposity, Titanic Conceit and Turgid Novels Goes to … As Salman Rushdie is Tipped to Win the Booker Again” (Wilson); “Now He’s Only Hunted by Cameras” (Cohen); “And Good Riddance, Rushdie (You Have Cost Us GBP 10M and You Can’t Even Say Thank you); “As the *Satanic Verses* Author Spurns ‘Backbiting, Incestuous’ Britain” (Hudson); “Lost in Distraction; Salman Rushdie’s Take on *Scarlett* Was the Talk of His Recent Visit” (Govani); and “Letter: What Message in Making Rushdie a Sir?” (Ahmedi). All of these articles deal with Rushdie’s private life more than focusing on his writing. It is more productive for us to examine the degree to which Rushdie’s entertaining description of celebrity culture in *Fury* impinges on his ability to criticize the same culture. For an essay on Rushdie’s status as literary celebrity, see Ommundsen.

7 Rushdie’s metaphor of the Galileo moment, his emphasis on the need to pursue what he believes to be true fearlessly in front of the terrifying enemy, appears to be based on his own experience of a Galilean recantation (and the recantation of that recantation) in the whirlwind of the *fatwa*. In a short document, “Why I Have Embraced Islam,” Rushdie makes the first recantation by claiming that he accepts Muhammad and that he will “not authorize any new translations of *The Satanic Verses* and will block the publication of the much awaited paperback edition of [it]” (Al-Azm 57). The next year, at a lecture at Columbia University, Rushdie recants for the second time his “surrender” in “Why I Have Embraced Islam,” stating that “I have never disowned my book, nor regretted writing it,” and “I was wrong to have given way on this point” (qtd. in Al-Azm 59). Al-Azm remarks that if “Rushdie’s first recantation was as insincere, coerced and utilitarian as Galileo’s,” his recantation of the recantation exhibits his surviving of “the terror of the ‘fatwa’” as well as his courage in never ceasing to “write satirically, critically and creatively, particularly about the sacred” (64).

8 While Gonzalez, C. Leonard, and Caldwell comment on the childishness of Rushdie’s coda, they fail to recognize the tragic power of *Fury*’s ending which, far from being simple and infantile, conjures up the ultimate challenge to the American Empire. In another comment on *Fury*’s ending, Tandon finds it interesting that Rushdie uses “another imperiled father-son reconciliation” for the
Radical Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*

finale of *Fury* (pg#). Right before Neela leaves for Lilliput-Blefuscu, Solanka tells her a secret about himself: when he was ten years old, his stepfather dressed him up as a girl and touched him until their neighbour, Mr. Venkat, stopped it permanently. Although the traumatizing story of childhood sexual abuse should be conducive to the main plot of the novel, this story comes and goes very quickly, and ends up as one of many fleeting episodes in the novel. This is why I focus more on the metaphor of Solanka’s bouncing than on his barely existent relationship with his father and his three-year-old son Asmann in interpreting the coda.

9 I am not the first in detecting the Nietzschean philosophy in *Fury*. See Sankaran.

Works Cited


Radical Cosmopolitanism in Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*


Authoritarianism, Cosmopolitanism, Allegory
Jini Kim Watson

One of the tasks of critical cosmopolitanism is precisely clearing up the encumbrances of the past. The other is to point toward the future.

Walter Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmopolis”

Without doubt, theories of cosmopolitanism have themselves become more and more cosmopolitan.¹ No longer simply referring to a post-national, rootless world traveller, a place of diverse consumption, or the critique of home, this “fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole” (Robbins, “Introduction” 1) has recently come under rigorous retheorization and has been ascribed a widening range of liberatory and analytic uses. Critiquing both its undercurrent of Eurocentric universalism and assumed aestheticism, Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah have usefully brought the new project of “cosmopolitics” to the fore, in which questions of access, obligation, ethics and global justice are balanced with an awareness that cosmopolitanism is always “located and embodied” and must be “pluralize[d] and particularize[d]” (Robbins, “Introduction” 2–3). Along with these revisions come the newly included cosmopolites—refugees, forced laborers, non-elite migrants—that have spurned a variety of cosmopolitanisms “from below”. More than proliferating terms and extending membership, however, such theorizations allow us to understand that cosmopolitanism is neither a thing nor an attitude, but an ethical and political framework in which to organize meanings and negotiations between peoples, nations, universals and particularities.

In this article, I want to shift to shift attention from the recent work on subaltern cosmopolitanisms² to revisit an ongoing debate around the relevance of cosmopolitanism for postcolonial or Third World nation-states, especially in view of their often perceived abuse of human rights in the form of dictatorships and authoritarianism. As a theory that seeks
to develop a concept of peace and justice across nations in the context of contemporary globalization, cosmopolitanism is arguably the obvious corrective to the excesses of the inward-looking, despotic nation-state. Yi Munyŏl’s 1987 novella, *Our Twisted Hero*, an award-winning allegorical depiction of South Korean dictatorship, brings this debate firmly into focus. Described by reviewers as a story of “oppression, tyranny, authoritarianism, corruption, revenge” and written at a time when Korea “was being strangled by a dictatorship” (Crown 138), it has been translated into English, French, German, Italian and Hebrew. I want to consider how this text works through an idea of cosmopolitanism as a potential counterforce to the illiberal, dictatorial nation-state. At stake here is to parse an idea of cosmopolitanism that, in light of recent work, is not reducible to a synonym of Euro-American multiculturalism, or elite global connectedness. In doing so, I aim to go beyond a reading of the plight of the unfree postcolonial world—what Tim Brennan has described as “the Third World political nightmare” (5) of newly decolonized states—that merely confirms the liberties of the First. Implicit in my argument is a questioning of cosmopolitanism as the *unencumbrance* from the local and the particular. I am interested, rather, in considering the ways particular global forces—the international economic division of labor, the critique of the nation-state, human rights discourses, U.S.-style democratic liberalism—produce distinct and unexpected renderings of cosmopolitanism in Yi’s remarkable novella. Not least, I examine the privileged role that literary allegory plays in both the representation of “oppression, tyranny, authoritarianism” and its apparent opposite, freedom. To begin, I review some questions around cosmopolitan culture from the postcolonial perspective; I then move to a close reading of Yi’s novella and its alternative understanding of the cosmopolitan.

1. The Production of Global Culture

Notwithstanding renewed scholarly attention to Kant’s 1796 essay, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, much of the last two decades of cosmopolitanism scholarship has been absorbed with the post-1990 period as the era when globalization, or “one world” thinking, finally and definitively came into its own. Certainly, this is the recognizable moment of the
decline of the Soviet bloc, the consolidation of multi-national corporations, neoliberal ideology, postnationalist sentiments and the rise of new communication technologies. Yet, if our world “is marked by an experience of an ever-shrinking and interconnected globe”, it is paradoxically “a world whose character is at the same time harder to visualize” (Surin, “On Producing” 210). In other words, the uneven global processes that are the very preconditions for ideas of cosmopolitanism are concealed by the emphasis on fluid, transnational cultural forms. What needs to be excavated is the story of cosmopolitanism as not merely a recent surge of ethical/political longing that complicates (but not necessarily eliminates) national territoriality, but as a force that has long existed in conjunction with, and in response to, a number of difference-producing global forces.

Consider one set of these defining shifts: the consolidation of global capitalism, the multinational corporate entity and the end of any perceived alternative economic regime. It is important to note that this major transformation of capitalism—the post-World War II diffusion of post-Fordism—began in the late 1960s to early 1970s and has had the effect of producing greater differentiation across the world at the same time it has unified economies into a single system. By the 1990s and 2000s such a fact seems all too naturalized into the “global north” and “south”, or the developed world and the developing. Kenneth Surin points out how the moment of post-Fordism creates a new organization of the planet, where levels of production are split along First/Third world geographies. In this global division of labor, the production of material things (clothing, cars, electronics etc) is effectively … relegated to the peripheral and semiperipheral nations. What takes place in the capitalist centers today is something quite different, a kind of production that is akin to a production of production, a higher-order or metaproduction, with markets that deal not so much in goods or merchandise … as in stocks, services and instruments for the telematic orchestration of images and spectacles. The domain in which these orchestrations take place is of course culture. (“On Producing” 205)
What Surin indicates is a globalizing tendency which pulls in two directions. Capitalist processes disregard national boundaries in an unprecedented way allowing for accumulation to happen outside the vistas (and controls) of the majority of individual nation-states; meanwhile, the roles that “peripheral and semiperipheral” nations—the former colonial world—play continue to be limited and subordinate. Since their only option for development remains the production of goods for the global north, peripheral nations will never be in a position to determine the rules of that global regime of accumulation, that is, “the production of production.” As Surin points out, the operations of this economic division of labor find their correlate (or perhaps alibi) in a certain kind of cultural production he terms “global culture”. Of the many critiques of such a concept, Tim Brennan has provided one of the best known.

For Brennan, the positing of a “global culture” contributes to both the idea of a world “exempt from national belonging” (2), and the flattening effect of a “cosmopolitan embrace”—the “articulation of a new world literature designed to capture the global juxtapositions that have begun to force their way even into private experience” (Brennan 4). Thus, literary works by exemplary “cosmopolitan” writers such as Salman Rushdie or Isabelle Allende smooth over the uglier dimensions of globalization and function primarily to cosmopolitanize Euro-American reading publics. In other words, “cosmopolitan culture” is something Third World writers confer on the West. Such fictions may then shore up legitimate, but ultimately one-sided, questions such as: how might America pass from multiculturalism to cosmopolitanism? or how can the EU reconfigure itself to become more tolerant of “otherness”? Meanwhile, as the celebrity Third World cosmopolites confirm the universality of Euro-American cultural and political values, the actual predicament of Third World nations—the very reasons behind the migration or exile of the Rushdies, Naipauls or García Márquezes—goes ignored. Thus, while our current moment is perceived as more cosmopolitan than previous eras, we need equally to recognize that the differential effects of global capital, especially since the 1970s, mean that in many ways, we are as far from “one world” as we have ever been. Despite the transnational appeal of Yi’s story, I see the novella’s “winning entrance … into Western
readers’ imagination” (Steinberg 64) not as evidence of its participation in such a “global” or “cosmopolitan” culture. Instead, I consider its historical embeddedness within a globalizing system of post-Fordism, and ask, as Cheah does, what can the concept of cosmopolitanism mean for those outside the metropolitan centers, “who do not have the option of postnationalism through transnational migrancy” (Cheah, “Given Culture” 318)?

2. National Allegory: Yi Munyŏl
Born in 1948, Yi Munyŏl is one of South Korea’s most celebrated and prolific postwar writers. He is author of several important short story collections and over twenty novels, as well as best-selling works of essays and translations. Like many of his generation, his writing is particularly interested in issues of political ideology that, to this day, divide the Korean peninsula. Such a concern has a personal dimension: when he was a child, Yi’s father defected to the North leaving his family tainted by their association with a communist, and prey to harassment and police surveillance (Suh 727). Yet his incredible corpus includes work on almost every imaginable social reality of postwar South Korea, from industrial unions (Kuro Arirang [1987]) to divided families (An Appointment with my Brother [1994]) and essays on Korean feminism; Suh writes that he is “a master of all fictional forms” (728) including short stories, novels, drama and satire. Perhaps none of his works has captured so much international attention nor been so widely translated as his short, pithy schoolyard tale Our Twisted Hero (Uridul ū ilgūrojin yŏngung). Winner of the prestigious Yi Sang Award in Korea and immediately translated into English, the novella has been compared to William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (Crown 138) and been received as a timeless depiction of power and corruption.

On the surface, Hero is the deceptively simple story of a primary school transfer student, Han Pyongt’ae, and his dealings with the class bully, Om Sokdae. From his very first day at the new school, Pyongt’ae discovers something odd about his new class: all the boys, and even the teacher, are under the sway of Sokdae, a student of uncommon power, size and cunning. For refusing to submit to Sokdae’s classroom author-
ity, the protagonist finds himself alienated and tormented, although “[p] ersecution and discrimination invariably only came when Sokdae stood some distance away” (26). Much of the story narrates how, punished by Sokdae’s extensive network of class monitors, beaten up and excluded from after-school outings, Pyongt’ae is eventually forced to submit to the regime. At an obvious level, it is the story of acquiescence to power and an allegory of South Korea under its numerous military leaders, especially its most notorious and long-term dictator, General Park Chung Hee, in power from 1961 until his assassination in 1979.

While commentators respond to its universal themes of power and corruption, it is set, significantly and specifically, in 1959–60, the year leading up to the student-led revolution against an earlier and less known autocrat: South Korea’s first president, the U.S.-installed Syngman Rhee (president from 1948–1960). The hopes of this revolutionary movement were crushed just a year later in 1961 by General Park—a former Japanese Army official—and his coup d’etat, setting the stage for the following decades of dictatorship and brutal industrialization. Park’s two-decade rule was characterized by virulent anti-communism, the repression of labor and most civil rights, while universities, churches, the media and any suspected communist sympathizer came under government scrutiny and often KCIA surveillance. At the same time—in a state-private enterprise agreement typical of developmental states—he brought the private sector under control by arresting “illicit profiteers” who were released on agreement to invest in state-chosen industries and, following the Japanese model of export-led development, began the first wave of heavy industrialization based on cement, synthetic fiber, electricity, fertilizer, iron and oil refinery industries (Kim 82). He won the approval of U.S. presidents Kennedy and Johnson, cutting a deal with the latter to send 300,000 Korean troops to fight in the Vietnam War in return for infrastructural and military aid (Kim 104). Only a few decades after gaining independence from Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), South Korea’s dramatic leap in industry and GDP made it one of the most “successful” of Third World nations and exemplar of the so-called Asian miracle economies. Its postwar career is often celebrated as the prototype of Third World industrialization, that—as described
Authoritarianism, Cosmopolitanism, Allegory

above—played an essential if subaltern role in the global transition to post-Fordist capitalism. What usually goes unremarked are the means by which this remarkable advance was achieved.

Our Twisted Hero, however, is actually written in 1987, the year of South Korea’s long-awaited political liberalization and the conclusion of almost thirty years of military rule. It is from this moment that the adult narrator looks back on his childhood, allowing Yi to revisit, take stock of, and analyse the conditions that lead to the failures of the 1960 revolution from the vantage point of another political moment. The extent to which the novella is an allegorical act of reimagining the moment prior to the Park era is evident in the first paragraph, which describes the indelible mark the traumatic school year made on the narrator:

It’s been nearly thirty years already, but whenever I look back on that lonely, difficult fight, which continued from the spring of that year through the fall, I become as desolate and gloomy as I was at the time. Somehow in our lives we seem to get into fights like this all the time, and perhaps I get this feeling because to this day I’ve never really extricated myself from that one. (1)

The story is quickly given a concrete place and time: an “undistinguished school in a small town” and “March of that year, when the Liberal Party government was making its last stand” (1), the latter referring to the tail end of Syngman Rhee’s administration and anticipating the mass protests that would bring down his increasingly repressive rule. The narrative thus hints at the correct political and historical context with which to interpret the story, at the same time it positions it as mere background. It is this single year, pregnant with enormous hope yet retrospectively a failure, that frames Our Twisted Hero. The fight that the narrator “never really extricated” himself from is the one the Korean nation never really resolved either: how did the successful “4.19” Revolution which peacefully ousted the Rhee regime result in Park’s 1961 military coup, and almost three more decades of authoritarian governments? From the outset, it seems, Pyongt’ae’s tale demands to be read as an allegory of the political life of the nation.
In Angus Fletcher's influential 2006 essay “Allegory Without Ideas”, allegory is defined as “a method of double meanings that organizes utterance … according to its expression of analogical parallels between different networks of iconic likeness” (10). In other words,

Allegorical narratives, say a biblical parable or an Aesopian fable such as *Animal Farm*, lead us to imagine a set of meanings located on the other side of [a] hermeneutic wall. In political and cultural terms, these meanings lying on the other side of the wall comprise parts of the whole of an ideology—its commentary and interpretation. (10)

Allegory thus involves the simultaneous presentation of a narrative as well as its “commentary and interpretation”. Yet, for Fletcher, what is most striking about allegory—and what accounts for its enduring popularity as a mode of expression—is that “it permits the iconic rendering of power relations” (9). Fletcher traces the allegorical mode from medieval to modern use, arguing that for Christian allegorical narratives, the hermeneutical systems, while complex, were in the final instance fixed and essentialized: “the standard medieval interpretive system yields an allegory of ideas … [as] an allegory of essences” (15). Divine authority is posited as the unchanging cause behind power. In the modern era, allegory remains concerned with the articulation of power relations, but is unhinged from first causes; in Fletcher’s terminology, it becomes an “allegory without ideas.” In a story such as Yi’s, we must therefore account for both the schoolyard narrative and the “set of meanings located on the other side of [the] hermeneutical wall” as productions and reflections of the social realities of the day. If there are no longer any divine causes, what kind of power relations are inscribed by this simultaneous act of narrative and interpretation? What purpose does the allegorical mode have in Yi’s text, and what kind of prime mover does it posit?8

At the outset, Yi’s allegory presents the bully-as-dictator’s power as a function of the colonial, the rural, and the unmodern. Pyongt’ae moves to the “undistinguished school in a small town” from Seoul where he had attended a “prestigious” elementary school and where his father had been a high-ranking civil servant (1–2). The new school is marked by
its colonial history and a disappointing provincial atmosphere: “To me, this old Japanese-style building, with its plastered exterior and its few ramshackle tar-painted board classrooms, seemed indescribably shabby” (2). Dissatisfied with the smallness of the school and the unkempt appearance of his new teacher, Pyongt’ae is further dismayed to find the “backwards” practice of segregated boys’ and girls’ classes. Expecting “his cosmopolitan education will impress everyone” (Steinberg 64), he finds his new classmates are uninterested in his former achievements at the city school, where he got “the top award in a number of contests at the Seoul level” (Yi 4). Instead of trying to ascertain his academic and class standing, the other boys are only interested in naively asking “whether I had been on a tram, had seen South Gate [Namdaemun], and other questions of this sort” (5).

Indeed, the distance between his set of values and the small-town view of his classmates sets him apart as a comparatively worldly protagonist, allowing us to posit an fairly standard notion of cosmopolitanism—urbanity, modernity and sophistication—as the text’s initial counterforce to tyranny. Pyongt’ae differentiates himself from the others precisely in having allegiances to something greater than the petty fiefdom he encounters in the rural classroom. He is shocked by the “flagrantly inappropriate behavior” (15) of Sokdae who orders the other children about, has the pick of their school lunches and even has the teacher under his sway. Not only is the move to the small town perceived as a move “backwards”, the school’s social system under Sokdae’s regime is presented as the antithesis to Pyongt’ae’s urban-cultivated values of aestheticism (he excels in art) and liberal ideas of freedom. Pyongt’ae greets this new environment with anger and constant comparison with his old school in Seoul; this system “founded on irrationality and violence” (16) goes against “the principles of reason and freedom by which I had been reared all my life” (15). The conceit of the retrospective narrative allows for an adult’s vocabulary of liberalism and rights to describe that most unfree of situations: childhood, and the unchecked power of bullies who rule it. He complains, to no avail, to his father how back in Seoul, “things were decided reasonably by election and that no restraints were put on our freedom” (17), blind to the fact that part of the “freedom” he enjoyed
there was due to his class privilege. For the adult Pyongt’ae ventriloquising his child-self, the ideal political organization is defined by reason, electoral process and the sanctity of individual rights. Allegorically, we may read the tale simply as South Korea’s unfulfilled desire for independent nationhood after decades of Japanese colonialism, followed by the humiliating slicing of the peninsula by postwar superpowers. Such liberal values seem only natural for a cosmopolitan subject from Seoul, the undisputed locus of Korean modernity and politics.

3. Global Designs and The End (or Beginning) of the Nation-State

Yi’s evocative tale of tyranny and the resistance to it does not allow us to forget it is set against a very specific colonial and postcolonial history, one that alludes to the complex geopolitical roles of Japan, North Korea, and the U.S. It is necessary, therefore, to historicize what at first seems like Pyongt’ae’s all too natural cosmopolitan ideals of freedom and liberal rights. As recent scholarship on cosmopolitanism reveals, the attempt to recover any “originary”, or pure, cosmopolitan impulse only results in earlier historical constructions of freedoms and unfreedoms. As Cheah points out, cosmopolitan concepts such as Kant’s and those of the Declaration of Human Rights are not an *a priori* fact owing to innate human dignity, but contingent and contaminated responses to the *inhuman* conditions that make up our world. The first task is to determine the specific conditions of any kind of universalizing force—the foremost being global capitalism—that constitute the historical matrix for the “ethico-political work that nationalism and cosmopolitanism can do” (Cheah “Introduction” 31).

Walter Mignolo’s work on critical cosmopolitanisms similarly views cosmopolitanism in a dialectical fashion, and usefully rethinks both the assumed temporality and locality of the concept. In his wide-ranging analysis, he outlines several fundamental historical stages of cosmopolitan discourses, or what he calls those “set[s] of projects toward planetary conviviality” (157). Each arises in response to a stage of imperialist geopolitical ordering—those “global designs” which “manage the world” (157). Pushing back the inauguration of modern cosmopolitan thinking from Kant’s peaceful confederation of (European) nations to the
sixteenth-century Salamanca School of the Spanish Empire (164–166), Mignolo’s main three stages of global designs and their corresponding cosmopolitanisms are as follows: first, Spanish/Portuguese imperialism and the Salamanca school of Christian philosophy; second, eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nationalism, with Kant and the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen; and finally, Cold War U.S. imperialism and the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. It is crucial to note that Mignolo’s three historical incarnations of cosmopolitanisms are responses from within the geopolitical organization of their respective global designs; that is, Christian philosophy, Kantian ethics or human rights do not arise ex nihilo, but as specific reactions to certain organizational visions of the world. They are thus constitutively linked to what Mignolo succinctly calls “coloniality”—“the hidden face of modernity” (158)—or the exploitative arrangement of power along exclusionary racial or religious lines. We can think of these cosmopolitan discourses as the conceptual means by which others, or units of others, are potentially processed as belonging to a single planetary system. While such discourses have liberatory aspects (the sixteenth-century ascription of souls to Amerindians, for example), they remain limited by their very epistemologies (only Christian souls count as human). In this sense, cosmopolitanism is best understood as a set of contingent and embedded attempts to negotiate within the universalizing discourses of power itself.

Let us look more closely at Mignolo’s third stage of cosmopolitanism discourse, that of postwar U.S. imperialism, the Cold War and the UN Declaration of Human Rights—the broader context in which the national allegory of Our Twisted Hero plays out. How might we rethink this moment through the lens of the postcolonial nation-state’s turbulent career? Let us recall, of course, that the spread of nationalism as a force against imperialism was the general path taken by the colonial world, resulting in two major waves of decolonization: the first in Latin America during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and the second in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean from roughly the 1950s-1970s and later. Yet this latter movement, which saw the establishment of some ninety new nations (Brennan 1), coincided with the beginning of a shift away from national sovereignty towards internationally enshrined
human rights, with the nominally global powers of the UN replacing the European emphasis of the League of Nations. For a good number of cosmopolitan narratives, the crucial theorist behind this moment is Hannah Arendt and her rethinking of the nation-state in the aftermath of World War II.

For Arendt, cosmopolitanism is the liberation from national sovereignty—that political form which had disastrously linked state rights to ethnic belonging—and its unbridled powers (Young 2). In Robert Young’s gloss, Arendtian cosmopolitanism is “a new international perspective and order that could establish legal and ethical standards for a world in which the sovereign state, the guarantor of the rights of the citizen, is seen to have failed” (Young 2). Following the UN declaration of 1948, it is no longer states and their international treaties that constitute the world order, but the discourse of human rights that put pressure on states to be answerable to individual rights. In this conceptual history, cosmopolitanism is the necessary ethical response to the inherent tyranny of the modern nation-state, excessively demonstrated by European fascism and the postwar problem of stateless minorities. While Arendt had little to say on anti-colonial revolutions, her analysis of the nation-state form and the dangers of its unchecked territorial power has become a commonplace;¹⁰ witness the almost daily interventions or interventionist policies of the UN regarding sovereign nation-states deemed to be violating human rights. Yet Arendt’s cosmopolitan critique of the nation-state has been somewhat double-edged for the postcolonial world, not least because most of the UN interventions occur in these regions. The very moment the nation’s inherent flaws are declared is also the moment that, with the crumbling of modern empires, the majority of the globe is adopting this political form for the first time.¹¹ Mignolo describes the paradoxical temporality of postcolonial nationhood whereby “[d]ecolonized countries were striving for a nation-state, at the same time that the ideologues of the new world order no longer believed in them” (Mignolo 176).

It is therefore too simple to assume the “political life of the Korean nation”, with its struggle for freedom against the backwards, authoritarian power of Park Chung Hee, is the stable allegorical object
of Yi’s story. Rather, I suggest we examine the *layered* allegorical means whereby both a local cosmopolitanism (Pyong’tae/Korea’s desire for freedom) and a broader one (where Korea’s sovereignty comes with strings attached) enter the text differentially as challenges to the excesses of territorial rule. In other words, if we look more closely, we see that neither the power wielded by Sokdae (or Park Chung Hee), nor the liberatory values that challenge it can be hermeneutically mapped onto a clear operation of power. Instead, we must recognize that such cosmopolitanisms are always contingent, historical, and compromised, resulting from the dissemination over a century or more of competing ideals that do not make sense *without* the phenomena of modern colonialism, decolonisation or Cold War antagonisms. For example, the spread of Woodrow Wilson’s ideas on “national self-determination” partly inspired Korea’s March 1st movement of 1919, the first major nationalist protest against Japanese rule. As Mignolo has argued, this does not mean that ideals such as nationalism should be repudiated, but that they mask a range of other possible forms of justice and political community, as well as the colonial and neocolonial power relations of which they are necessarily a product. It also means that Hero’s allegory of national freedom versus unfreedom cannot be quite so straightforward.

After six long months of the solitary attempt to resist the regime, Pyongt’ae finally gives in to the brutality of Sokdae’s kingdom. But his capitulation is not just about avoiding social ostracization and beatings. One chilly afternoon after an exam day, Sokdae organizes a group of boys to bring supplies—candy, soft drink, sweet potatoes for roasting—to a riverbank clearing near a pine grove. “To grown ups it was a bleak place, with just a few factory buildings left over from Japanese times that had been half demolished in an air raid, but for boys it was *fine* place to play” (83). Under Sokdae’s direction, “we proceeded to turn the demolished factory building into the greatest playground in the world” (88), where they spend the afternoon singing, laughing, eating and playing. For Pyongt’ae, it is as if the entire, perfect day were just for him: “[Sokdae] treated me as if I ranked differently than the others, and he directed the entertainment of the day almost as if it were a banquet for me” (84). We learn that Sokdae’s peaceful kingdom also excels at
the organization of pleasure. By the time Pyongt’ae has spent several months under the Sokdae system, he hopes for nothing more than its permanence: “I hoped and believed that his order, his kingdom, and the special benefits I enjoyed, would last forever” (85). Moreover, this regime proves to be more efficient than the democratic one Pyongt’ae initially desires; under Sokdae’s allocation of student resources (he gives “fight rankings” and “study rankings”), the class consistently wins the school’s academic and tidiness awards. Corrupt participation is thus fleshed out as an entirely rational choice to take.

The brief happiness and peace Pyongt’ae enjoys as subject of Sokdae’s benevolent monarchy is short-lived, and it is from here that the novella gets really interesting. A new teacher to the school, embodying the principles of liberal political reform, discovers the bully’s racket and, after making the students denounce Sokdae and his abuses, initiates democratic class elections. To instil an American-style flavor to the reforms, he hands out copies of U.S. President Kennedy’s Profiles in Courage to the students. The class’s “unexpected revolution” precipitates an all too accurate depiction of a major problem of post-dictatorship democratic reforms, the problem of ex-collaborators: “The best boys had either helped Sokdae steal the teacher’s trust and favor by taking exams for him, or they had been Sokdae’s accomplices” (106). Yi goes on to describe the very real difficulties of the transition to electoral “democracy” in the way some students “constantly changed their minds”, while others “quietly dreamed of little Sokdaes” (108), as well as the blatant tedium of the process for which the new teacher offers no apology. It is clear that of the two systems, it is the tyrannical and corrupt one that actually offers more potential for pleasure and collective efficiency. Council meetings and ballot voting—following a lofty, U.S.-inspired ideal of democracy—are accurately represented for their substantial shortcomings: they are boring and tedious and tend to get bogged down by any “paltry offense in the suggestion box” (110). Pyongt’ae’s previous absolute faith in rights and democracy cannot now but appear hollow and idealistic.

Yet much more troubling is the violence that such reforms involve. After discovering Sokdae’s homework and lunchtime rackets, the
new teacher publicly and brutally thrashes the bully, followed—quite shockingly—by an equally vicious beating of the boys who let “what was rightfully yours” (95) be taken away. Having escaped the “tyranny” of Sokdae, the class is literally beaten into submission by an idealized liberal democratic system. The novella effectively allegorizes the Western cosmopolitan discourse that Cheah has argued hypocritically “claims to be the pure voice of reason representing genuine universality and to serve as an external check on particular interests and material forces” (*Inhuman Conditions* 161), and yet which is entirely consistent with Third World subordination. Mignolo concurs in observing that while “human rights served as an instrument to promote liberal democracy against communism” (176), they helped prescribe a narrow set of acceptable cosmopolitan values, and paradoxically supported the spread of dictatorships and neoliberalist regimes in the Third World. Yi’s novella thus pointedly raises the question: is a local tyrant better than an international one?

4. Undecidable Allegories

We might read the successive crises of *Hero* as follows: first, as depicting the loss of cosmopolitan values, the fall into authoritarianism and corruption; then, conversely, the violence and dearth of enjoyment in the U.S.-style democratic processes that the new teacher enforces. On the one side appears not enough cosmopolitanism; on the other, the darker side of its global design is revealed. Yet, I argue that there is a third crisis revealed precisely through the allegorical mechanism described above, whereby the hermeneutical object of the allegory—the classroom standing in for the dictator’s regime—cannot be limited or circumscribed as such and therefore reformed. Rather, what we see is the very breakdown of allegory due to the insufficiency of narrow cosmopolitan discourses—understood as civic and individual rights, the ballot box, and electoral democracy—to counter the actual power relations underlying contemporary social reality.

Regarding the hermeneutical insufficiency of allegory, Fletcher makes two interesting points. First, he reminds us that allegory is “the authoritarian mode of literature and art and discourse [in] its claims to be able
to project permanent truths” (Fletcher 21, italics added); that is, it is the literary form that most anticipates and directs our interpretive process. Yet, at the same time, the attempt to “control symbols of power” (27) also reveals the “deep internal conflict, or evasion, at the heart of an ambivalent allegorical procedure that seems to contradict itself, by its very operations” (Fletcher 28). As we see in Hero, the desire to project the “truth” of power relations and reveal its prime movers shifts the narrative uneasily from one allegorical object to another: at first it seems to reside in a personage (Sokdae or Park), then in U.S.-style reforms (the teacher or Kennedy) and finally, as we shall see, in the economic life of the nation.

In the perplexing coda to the story, the narrator gives an abbreviated account of his life after school. After graduating from a top university, he works for one of the large conglomerates, or chaebols—the massive, multi-industry companies backed by Park Chung Hee’s regime and crucial to the nation’s economic take-off. Underestimating their centrality to national economic life, Pyong’tae quits after a short time, not wanting “to waste my youth and talent working for a group where there was no freedom on the job, where the management was full of hypocrites, and where the promotion process was unjust” (113–4, italics added). Faced with these unfreedoms, Pyong’tae neither rebels nor submits: he simply dismisses the companies as economic follies. Noticing the improbable success of some of his friends, he is busy chasing after any chance to “squeeze into a corner of their rich table” (115). After opting out for a more meager but independent life in sales, he discovers some years later that “the large conglomerates, which I had felt to be castles made of sand, were actually prospering” (114). What had seemed, in short, the chaebols’ authoritarian and unsound practices—their lack of freedom, hypocrisy and injustice, implicitly echoing Sokdae’s rule—turn out to be the very principles on which the country’s development is predicated. Finally, despite eventually making a humble living as a private institute (hagwón) lecturer, Pyongt’ae can determine no logic behind his peers’ successes or failures, and feels “as if I had been thrown into a cruel kingdom that ran things as it wished” (116). What is striking is that this “cruel kingdom” now no longer refers to Sokdae’s regime, nor
the new teacher’s violent reforms, nor even the chaebol businesses. In the
coda, corruption, lack of freedom, and the arbitrary rule of hypocrites
turn out to better describe the normative conditions of the postcolonial
nation under globalized post-Fordism.

We could say that it is the confusion over just where Sokdae’s “cruel
kingdom” begins and ends that is both most troubling for the narrator
and most interesting for the allegory. If the wider social and economic
realities of the country actually operate along such corrupt principles,
what good is the allegorical appeal to a cosmopolitan, liberal political
sphere? In short, the tale reveals that the principles of reason, fairness,
individual rights, free speech and justice—values enshrined in human
rights discourse and represented in clichéd, American form by the
teacher’s reforms—cannot be the ones that actually organize a postco-
lonial society’s pursuit of modernization and wealth. Laudable on their
own terms, they do nothing to address the nation’s subordinate posi-
tion within global coloniality, where the global south perpetually plays
catch-up and is unable to control “the production of production”, or
the possibilities for its own development. Where at first the rule of
Sokdae represented the state of exception, what we realize in the coda is
its very unexceptionality. The problem is not the contrast between dic-
tatorial and democratic rule—between Park Chung Hee and President
Kennedy, the lack of rights or a cosmopolitan recognition of them—but
rather the contrast between politics as an formally abstract and separate
sphere, and the global, political-economic system that dictates actual
possibilities for postcolonial development.

At the very end of the story, the narrator chances upon a final en-
counter with the adult Sokdae. Now a small-time crook, the latter is
arrested on a train, and the narrator realizes that after all, “he was just
one among the poor, ineffectual lot of us” (119). The final words of
the narrator confound the attempt to come to any conclusions about
Sokdae’s reappearance: “In the end, I shed a few tears, but whether they
were for me or for him, whether from relief for the world, or from a
new pessimism, I still really don’t know” (120). The indeterminacy of
the ending similarly confounds the reader’s attempt to pin down the
proper allegorical reading: is the “relief” for the post-1987 political re-
forms? Or does the narrator’s “new pessimism” indicate that things will not really change? At any rate, we come to recognize that the point of Yi’s schoolyard tale is not to allegorize the country’s oppressive political life with its suspect elections and military leaders, a situation to be countered by political liberalization and the cosmopolitan application of human rights. In contrast, it is to allegorize the way corruption and injustice have imperceptibly structured the public and economic life of the nation more generally. In this sense, it is impossible to cordon off “national political life” as the arena pertaining to allegory’s “iconic rendering of power relations”. I argue, instead, that Hero presents a more ambitious “cosmopolitical” allegory: by describing the material and ideological paradoxes of postcolonial development, we see how the inhuman demands made by Cold War comprador capitalism cannot be squared with the metropolitan core’s shrill insistence on liberal political rights.

A cosmopolitanism which deals only with the West’s failed states begs the question with regard to the Third World’s numerous authoritarian regimes. An urgent critical task is therefore to recognize that postcolonial states operate within the same global political-economic framework as the West, one that touts human rights and cosmopolitan values for all, yet which doesn’t acknowledge the history of colonial difference or the way “cosmopolitan values” unfairly favor the former imperial center. A critical, cosmopolitical approach must include revisiting the unequal beginnings of nation-states and re-examining the conditions in which they variously established themselves. We may now make the claim that for postcolonial nations, cosmopolitanism does not merely “challenge” or “wither away” national sovereignty, but is one of the very conditions of its coming into being.

By means of its undecidable allegory, Yi Munyŏl’s novella illustrates the complexity of struggles and desires that result from such conditions. Moreover, it leads inexorably to the question, what other models and values of freedom and justice might be available? Such a questioning of cosmopolitanism has two important results: first, a shift from the concern with metropolitan articulations of inclusion, since all planetary subjects have already participated—or been forced to participate—in
one global design or another; and second, that the critical task of the
day is not an enumeration of proliferating cultural perspectives as they
are unfettered from territoriality, but of an alternative cosmopolitan
discourse that will confront the inequalities inherent to the “manage-
rial global designs of ideologues and executives” (Mignolo 179). The
text thus calls not for a more cosmopolitan, universal or global culture,
but a reimagining of the conditions in which political reforms would not
come with neocolonial violence, and where exploitative international
economic relations would not mean national “success”.

Despite Yi’s clear choice of genre, the novella is unable, finally, to
name the object it is allegorizing; it becomes difficult to identify the po-
titical from the economic, the rational from the irrational, the just from
the unjust, the national from the global. Far from reading Yi Munyŏl as
another cosmopolitan author writing about the all too familiar political
misfortunes of the non-West, we are compelled to think through these
events as occurring within our own global political-economic system.
The novella’s cosmopolitical allegory thus interrogates not cultural be-
longing and identity, but the global systems of production and accumu-
lation that determine their possibility. In this reading, we are obliged to
cosmopolitanize the differential experiences of political economy, rather
than only those of cultural difference and identity. By refusing to offer
an easy allegorical reading of the “other”, Yi’s simple tale invites us to
think of other forms of “planetary conviviality”.

Notes
1 I am grateful to Joe Keith, Emily Johansen, Naomi Schiller and Bryce de Reynier
for their enormously helpful comments and suggestions on this article.
2 Some of these include “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Homi Bhabha); “discrep-
ant cosmopolitanism” (James Clifford); “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (Benita
Parry); and “subaltern cosmopolitanism” (Robert Young; Boaventura do Sousa
Santos).
3 For the seminal account of the active differentiation between metropolitan
and peripheral nations, see Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye. See also Frank
on underdevelopment. On the growing differentiation between a semi-
industrialized and non-industrialized Third World, see Amin. Finally, for a more
contemporary and capacious analysis of peripheralization under neoliberalism,
see Surin’s Freedom Not Yet.
4 The 2008–9 financial crisis showed, however, that the peripheral countries will certainly bear the brunt of the system’s failures.

5 In the case of the U.S., I am thinking, for example, of Appiah’s work. For Europe see recent work by Beck and Benhabib. See also Gikandi regarding the problem of a “pan-national European” cosmopolitanism in Paul Gilroy’s recent work.

6 Park Chung Hee set up the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (now National Intelligence Service) at the beginning of his first term in 1961. In 1979, Park was assassinated by his former right-hand man and KCIA head, Kim Jae-kyu, leading to the installation of another authoritarian president, General Chun Doo-whan, widespread political unrest and the bloody Kwangju massacre of 1980.

7 In Surin’s account of global culture, allegory emerges as a privileged representational means partly due to the fact that in post-Fordist accumulation, “even the notion of ‘exchange’ has become perversely allegorized” (“On Producing” 206).

8 We should note that allegory has no privileged status in Korean literary history equivalent to the Christian allegorical tradition of the West. However, modern Korean prose fiction has borrowed and adapted all sorts of Western literary forms from realism to modernism, and allegorical interpretation has long been an accepted literary tool.

9 The project of interrogating the affective dimensions of this process is not in essence different from the one interrogating national belonging, described by Anderson. As Robbins writes, “the global scale is not ethically and politically distinct from other, smaller scales, as the hegemony of the nation-state form has led it to appear” (Feeling Global 5). Like nationalism, cosmopolitanisms may vary greatly from popular, religious, secular, welfare, to official and authoritarian.

10 In Arendt’s now classic book The Origins of Totalitarianism, she outlines two broad historical roots to totalitarianism: anti-Semitism and imperialism. Both deal with the history of racism, but interestingly, it is through imperialism that the old logic of racism and the ideology of common origin becomes tied to the modern nation-state and its bureaucratic forms “as a principle of foreign domination” (Arendt 185). It is only in the modern nation-state that, disastrously, “the state was partly transformed from an instrument of the law into an instrument of the nation” (23).

11 Malcomson wryly notes a very little quoted line of Kant’s which describes cosmopolitanism as involving “a regular process of improvement in the political constitutions of our continent (which will probably legislate eventually for all other continents)” (Kant qtd. in Malcomson 237). This imitative logic, moreover, the process that Anderson has described. See Chapter 7 “The Last Wave” on postcolonial nationalisms.

12 Some may argue that South Korea’s relative rise in GDP and wealth has raised its position from Third World to “middling power” (it is now touted as one of the world’s top 20 economies). Yet such success, as I have indicated, is predicated on its unique Cold War position and the exploitation of its subaltern position
in the international division of labor. Consider, too, that its continued viability now relies on investment in ever-cheaper labor economies (China, Thailand, Vietnam) which relies on and perpetuates the same formula or exploiting subaltern nations.

13 I am following Bruce Robbins’ idea of responsibility to difference, and not merely recognition of difference. Public lecture on Cosmopolitanism. New York University, February 4, 2010.

**Works Cited**


Young, Robert J.C. “The Cosmopolitanism Ideal and National Sovereignty.” Forthcoming from New York UP.
In and Out of the Spectacle: The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants*

Belinda Kong

Olympic Sights

Before any athletic records got broken, rumours of the Beijing Olympics making history were already rife. Soon the numbers poured in, and with them, ever escalating claims about the event’s magnitude. First, reports of nearly 70 million Americans tuning in established the opening ceremony as the “biggest television event since the Super Bowl” and the “most viewed ever” opening for a non-U.S. Olympics (Bauder). Next, news from elsewhere appeared, with estimates of the opening’s global audience quickly jumping from a billion (Goldsmith; Swaine) to over two billion (“Beijing Olympics”) to four billion (Yardley; “Most spectacular”). Whatever the actual numbers, August 8, 2008 turned out to be auspicious for records enthusiasts as much as Chinese folk believers. In the weeks that followed, media sources everywhere competed in scaling the heights on behalf of the Beijing Games, pronouncing it the “most-viewed event in United States television history” (Stelter), the “most viewed Olympics ever” (“Most Viewed”), and even the “most watched live event in human history”—given the key participation of hundreds of millions of viewers within mainland China itself. The opening ceremony was proclaimed as the world’s first “genuine one billion” television program, besting ratings for the moon landings, Princess Diana’s funeral, and President Obama’s inauguration (Harris). In all these accounts, the prevailing tenor was that of jubilation, with a strong undercurrent of nostalgia for as much as anticipation of species unity, a planet united in a common experience.

That such yearnings and hopes for universality should manifest themselves via the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the world’s most populous nation, is not wholly unexpected. Beyond the numbers,
though, the fact that China remains the world’s largest communist power should compel us to read these sentiments in a political light also, as signs, perhaps, of a liberal desire to see capital supersede communism and become finally, truly global, or else a compensatory imperialist fantasy arising from the West’s nervous recognition that China is not only capitalizing but rapidly overtaking huge swaths of the world’s markets. In this milieu, the PRC government itself has been busy promoting an image of the country as a “harmonious society” for years, both internally and internationally. The concept of harmony, *he*, signals that China is at peace with itself and at one with the world, capable of reconciling the contradictions of socialism and capitalism, and no longer ideologically mired in Maoist imperatives of class struggle. The concept had been used initially by Jiang Zemin and later became official Communist Party policy under Hu Jintao (Barmé 78), and the 2008 Olympics presented a timely opportunity to project this image far and wide—not least in order to repair the country’s battered international reputation after a string of high-profile diplomatic disasters in the mid-2000s such as its involvement with the Sudanese government over the Darfur genocide (Kamm 224–25). So, throughout the 2008 Games, the notion of “harmony” repeatedly reared its head, emerging implicitly in the promotional motto of “One World, One Dream” and explicitly in the theme of the torch relay, “Harmonious Journey.” During the opening ceremony, the word itself took centre stage in the scroll performance of movable type printing, as thousands of dancers moved in unison to exhibit, in spectacularly magnified form, the Chinese character *he* to admiring global audiences. The message was clear: China in the new millennium posed no threat to the world. Nor was the regime naïve in conveying this message, for it had enough savvy to display the word in three Chinese script styles, thus evoking the liberal multicultural ideal of unity in difference. Nonetheless, what transpired around the Beijing Olympics was not so much the realization of a cosmopolitan dream of one humanity as the world’s eagerness to meet the communist state’s self-portrait halfway. This was, above all, an event in global spectatorship where political difference had been agreeably left off-stage by all sides.
Undercutting this image of universal harmony, of course, were the numerous stories that materialized, both before and during the Games, about the human costs behind the glitter, the sights unseen that manufactured the spectacle. First the demolition: to make way for the Olympic sites, entire neighbourhoods were razed and over a million residents relocated in Beijing alone (Hom 68). Although Chinese law required development companies to compensate residents for the loss of their homes and businesses, the amounts were often set absurdly low and sometimes paid out to local authorities rather than evictees (van Lohuizen). Residents had little recourse to redress, as even the sector known as the Petitioners’ Village, where thousands from around the country gathered to air grievances about local officials and appeal to the central authorities for help, was considered an “eyesore” and swiftly torn down; petitioners were expelled along with the homeless in a massive city clean-up operation (Kristof 20). Then came the reconstruction: to build the infrastructure for the Games across an area of 1.7 billion square feet, an “invisible army” of almost two million migrant workers was marshaled (Fong 172). Labouring under hazardous conditions and living in poor overcrowded barracks, earning as little as fifty cents an hour and frequently harassed with unpaid wages, these migrants did the grunt work of erecting the glamorous façade of the Olympics, from the famous Bird’s Nest stadium to hosts of other sporting venues and five-star hotels, yet most of them will probably never have the chance to step inside one of their own handiworks (Fong 172–79; Han and Crothall 182–87). Indeed, soon after construction was completed, they were shuffled out of the capital and replaced by a more photogenic group: over a million volunteers, carefully vetted and largely selected from university students, who met strict physical and political criteria set by the central government (Brady 16–17). For instance, about three hundred young women were chosen to be award presenters based on their background (respectable university students), height (between 5’6” and 5’10”), age (18 to 25), and figure. As one administrator put it, “Since medal presenting is hard work, they not only need beautiful faces, but also they need to be strong enough” (qtd. in Fan). Beijing was literally given a facelift through population overhaul. But as many critics note,
beneath this veneer of beautification were the casualties, from evicted residents and migrant workers to the “rural millions who have sacrificed their well-being to pay for a half century of industrialization.” For its detractors, the Beijing Olympics was “essentially an aspiration for the elites … built on a pyramid of sacrifices” (Bao 250–51), a “propaganda campaign” of “mass distraction … designed to mobilize the population around a common goal, and distract them from more troubling issues” of the country’s social and political reality (Brady 1).

That the national spectacle can be deployed as a totalitarian tactic for mobilizing the masses is a familiar theme from the twentieth century, not least for the PRC. During the 2008 Olympics, this phenomenon attained an international scope, as domestic and foreign spectators alike marveled at the magnificence of capitalist China and momentarily went deaf on the myriad voices of complaint and dissent. So the story goes. And lest we become too blinded by appearances, a coalition of Western journalists, human rights advocates, academics, as well as Chinese political activists and analysts are prompt to remind us of the dark side of progress, to expose once again the PRC’s authoritarian maneuvers behind its capitalist dazzle. These two antithetical representations of China—as the incorporatable cultural frontier of globalization, or else the intransigent political other of democracy—mark the limit points of global perceptions of the PRC in our time.

Diasporizing the Spectacle

In this context, the Beijing Olympics falls neatly into an already entrenched political fault line between the communist state on the one hand and pro-democracy camps both within and outside China on the other. In the cultural sphere, many a Chinese writer in the West has established his or her literary identity in the past two decades precisely by entering into this political trench and siding solidly with the liberal critique of the PRC. A popular piece in their aesthetic arsenal is the Cultural Revolution memoir, the most well-known examples of which are Nien Cheng’s Life and Death in Shanghai, Jung Chung’s Wild Swans, and Anchee Min’s Red Azalea. More recently, fictions of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre have emerged as a uniquely formida-
The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants*

The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants*

ble genre, most notably Gao Xingjian’s *Escape*, Hong Ying’s *Summer of Betrayal*, Ha Jin’s *The Crazed*, and Ma Jian’s *Beijing Coma*. These writers go by an array of names, each with distinct connotations, to be sure: diasporic, exilic, expatriate, émigré, transnational, cosmopolitan, global Asian. Regardless of labels, though, they share a common trajectory, all having been born and raised in China and all now writing primarily or solely in the West, and many writing in the languages of the West. As I have argued in specific reference to the United States, the influx of a post-Tiananmen generation of PRC writers into the U.S. has significantly transformed the terrains of Asian-American and, by extension, American literature. The majority of these writers’ works deal chiefly or exclusively with Chinese historical subject matters, so that the body of literature they produce is typified by a conspicuous absence of the U.S. as imagined geography. Coupled with this textual disappearance of America is the increasing visibility of China, now depicted less as a homeland rich in cultural traditions than as a country wrecked by totalitarian state power (Kong 145–47).

Arriving in the U.S. in 1996 and publishing her first short story in 2003, Yiyun Li is a relative latecomer to this literary scene but fits squarely within its lineage. Li, however, is no mere replica of her predecessors. In recent years, abundant claims have been made about the Chinese diaspora’s function *vis-à-vis* Chineseness, whether in terms of the diaspora’s “bicultural” (Ling) or “transcultural” (Quah) perspectives, its deconstructive potential for cultural identity and language use (Ang), or its decentering of the nation (Ong) or of geopolitical authority in Asia (Tu). These claims orbit Li in a generic or categorical manner, insofar as they apply to her historical and social situation, and hence the material conditions of her writing, without necessarily impinging on the content or vantage point of her work. Like Ha Jin, she came to the U.S. without an inkling of one day becoming a novelist here, much less in English, stumbling upon creative writing only belatedly. Yet this vocational deferral has perhaps allowed her to take good stock of the range of criticisms usually leveled at diaspora writers and to thereby skirt one of the most persistent charges: that of self-orientalism or self-exoticization.
Scholars have variously linked Chinese diasporic literature, especially by women, to a “cultural resurgence of orientalism” (Grice 104), whether via “dark age narratives” of the Mao era (Zhong et al. xxi) or “self-victimization” narratives that “capitaliz[e] on the authenticity of the suffering ‘I’” (Chen 30). Cultural Revolution memoirs in particular have come under intense fire, partly because of their immense commercial success with Western readers. In this circumstance, Li is lucid about her authorial stance: “I think [self-orientalism] happens, and I’m aware of it. But … I don’t write for that reason. I’m not going to satisfy people’s curiosity about exotic China, or exotic Asians” (qtd. in Edemariam). Thus far, Li has strategically and deftly avoided most of the standard backdrops of the diasporic mise en scène—the mass starvation of the Great Famine, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, the military slaughter around Tiananmen Square—focusing instead on lesser known episodes and rarely told locales of communist history. Nonetheless, she is always insistent on the political meanings that filter down to saturate the lives of small actors. In this regard, her first novel is exemplary, not least in the way it dissects the micro-mechanics of the totalitarian spectacle—just one year after the Beijing Olympics.

_The Vagrants_ is set in neither an urban center nor a dirt village, the customary polar landscapes of diasporic tales, but a fictional provincial city of eighty thousand unglamorously called Muddy River. The time is the late 1970s, several years after the Cultural Revolution’s end but a decade before the Tiananmen protest movement, arguably the two most recounted historical events in diasporic literature. What Li makes prominent for her Anglophone readers here, in fact, is a moment that has been relegated to the blanks of world memory of China, at once an afterlife to the Mao era and a forerunner to Tiananmen: the 1978–79 Democracy Wall Movement that was the immediate precursor to 1989. Significantly, Beijing as much as the key actors in this national drama surface within Li’s pages only as rumours and asides, news from a remote elsewhere, even as their proceedings bear inexorably down on her provincial characters and unify them as subjects to the same central power. In this sense, Li remains unmistakably a writer of the nation, continuing a well-worn tradition in modern Chinese literature that has
been famously dubbed an “obsession with China” (Hsia 533–54). At the same time, she joins the swelling ranks of diaspora writers who trenchantly turn this tradition back against the current ruling regime.

Muddy River further localizes Li’s critique. A new city only twenty years old, it was a “development planned to industrialize the rural area,” so its inhabitants are all “recent immigrants from villages near and far” (9–10). This city of immigrants differs from the metropolis and the village in its quality of contingency, of uncohesion and provisionalness, for its residents do not self-identify as a special breed of urbanites like Beijingers or Shanghainese, nor do they feel a deep-rooted allegiance to the place as an ancestral or tribal home. To live in Muddy River is to lack a local identity that tugs at one’s core loyalty, an identity strong enough to rival the hailing of the nation. Muddy River, then, designates a space highly susceptible to the ideological production of the national subject. This feature is also what makes possible Li’s description of the town as devoid of singularity, as utterly representative on the grid of national power:

... the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979 were auspicious for Muddy River as well as for the nation.... News of national policies to develop technology and the economy was delivered by rooftop loudspeakers in cities and the countryside alike, and if a man was to travel from one town to the next, he would find himself, like the blind beggar mapping this part of the province near Muddy River with his old fiddle and his aged legs, awakened at sunrise and then lulled to sleep at sundown by the same news read by different announcers; spring after ten long years of winter, these beautiful voices sang in chorus, forecasting a new Communist era full of love and progress. (10)

Underlying this ironic invocation of “a new Communist era full of love and progress” is a certain allusion to the PRC’s projection of itself vis-à-vis the 2008 Olympics. Li subtly suggests here that the contemporary rhetoric of communist newness, of love and progress, is neither new nor epochally defining, that the Deng Xiaoping era of liberalization thirty years ago not merely preceded but enabled China’s success as a global
capitalist power today. *The Vagrants* redirects our attention from this present-day macro success to its political prehistory at the micro level, both geographically and subjectively.

The novel then plays out the contest of power between the national and the local in this moment of PRC history. As activists in Beijing mounted their calls for democracy and freedom, at first at Deng’s urging as part of his bid for gaining supremacy within the Party, then menacingly mushrooming into an anti-communist protest movement, the central government attempted to re-exert its control not just in the national capital but also in the provinces. Muddy River reflects the turbulence in Beijing as experienced on the smaller stages of national life. Accordingly, the novel is divided into three parts: first a state execution, as the micro theater of central power; then an organized protest, as the people’s countertheater against state authority; and finally a crackdown, signaling the decisive collapse of democratic resistance. This pattern roughly prefigures 1989’s Tiananmen, which Li surely has in mind. Here as in the later Square, the spectacle is summoned not unilaterally as a totalitarian technique but bilaterally as a potent means of popular subversion and rebellion. The novel therefore gets at the heart of the contemporary image war over China by spotlighting these alternative political spectacles to the Beijing Olympics. Narratively, they unfold as affairs internal to the nation, but materially, they are now displaced into an English-language text for non-domestic readers. This split in the aesthetic representation of the totalitarian spectacle is constitutive of much Chinese diasporic literature of our time.

Yet what concerns me here is not the substance or accuracy of these spectacles but Li’s portrayal of the espying that occurs backstage. The narrative component that most forcefully drives her novel forward is not the spectacle in itself but those furtive glances stolen by social outcasts at hidden sites behind the public scaffolds. If Li assiduously guards against the orientalist gaze in her writing, she is much more interested in another kind of looking, a visual mode distinct from state- or group-orchestrated collective spectatorship via its singular, surreptitious, peripheral, and sometimes purely accidental nature. We might call it, to play on her title, vagrant witnessing.
Vagrant Witnesses
The novel opens with heralds of a denunciation ceremony. The target will be Gu Shan, a twenty-eight-year-old death row convict and an ex-Red Guard who herself had ruthlessly persecuted counterrevolutionaries, among them her parents, at public gatherings during the Cultural Revolution. Shan’s present crime, however, has nothing to do with the defiance of filiality or morality. On the contrary, she has been branded an “unrepentant counterrevolutionary” for renouncing communism and becoming a “harsh critic of her generation’s revolutionary zeal” (3), in other words, for repenting what she was under Mao. For this she has been sentenced, first to ten years in jail, and then, after she has served out this punishment, to death for the prison journals in which she poured out her critiques of the Party. Li’s point with this premise is clear: the cycling of communist history, of which Shan’s fate is only one tiny symptom, renders any pronouncement of national progress hollow.

Crucially, we never hear from Shan herself, at least not in an unmediated or free indirect discursive way that stands apart from other characters’ eyes and ears. Like the spectacle of herself, Shan is solely appearance, spoken for but never speaking. At the same time, she is splintered across many lines of vision—a portrait of the political dissenter as modernist trope, an object imperfectly known through disparate perceiving subjects. Li, we might say, here presses a modernist technique into the service of fragmenting communist claims to harmony. And in the tradition of Joyce’s Dublin, Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, and most proximately, Ha Jin’s Dismount Fort, Muddy River sets the scene for her ensemble social drama. Residents who know each other only scantily come to crisscross each others’ lives continually via their mutual sightings of Shan’s body. This is above all a story constructed through interlacing visual paths and obliquely overlapping horizons.

Tellingly, the denunciation ceremony is focalized through the perspective of Tong, a six-year-old boy newly arrived from the village who finds himself bullied by the townspeople and who hence aspires to become a model Communist Party member and self-martyring hero. Of Li’s cast, Tong is the youngest, the most earnest, and the most predisposed to belief in propaganda; in this sense, he is an ideologue in the making, and
the closest counterpart to Shan in her youth. At the denunciation, these two generations of Party zealots converge belatedly:

Hushed talk rippled through the stadium when the counter-revolutionary was dragged onto the stage by two policemen dressed in well-ironed snow-white uniforms. Her arms were bound behind her back, and her weight was supported by the two men’s hands, her feet barely touching the ground. For the first time since the beginning of the ceremony, the audience heaved a collective sigh. The woman’s head drooped as if she were asleep. One of the two policemen pulled her head up by her hair, and Tong could see that her neck was wrapped in thick surgical tape, stained dark by blood. Her eyes, half-open, seemed to be looking at the children in the front rows without registering anything, and when the policeman let go of her hair, her head drooped again as if she were falling back into sleep.

The audience was called to its feet, and the shouting of slogans began. Tong shouted along with his classmates, but he felt cheated. The woman was not what he had expected: Her head was not shaved bald, as his parents had guessed it would be, nor did she look like the devil described to him by a classmate. From where he stood, he could see the top of her head, a bald patch in the middle, and her body, small in the prisoner’s uniform that draped over her like a gray flour sack, did not make her look like a dangerous criminal.

The rendezvous between Shan and Tong is an occasion of non-recognition and disappointment, for neither truly sees the other. As an official spectacle devised by the state to provoke nationalist fervour and channel mass energy, the denunciation fails miserably even for the most willing citizen. The psychic dynamics of totalitarian spectatorship, Li implies, is not as straightforward or unified as some might think, nor are communist spectators as gullible and unthinking as the Olympic show would suggest. That the whole denunciation episode lasts only two paragraphs alerts us to its marginal importance in Li’s larger nar-
The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants*

... What matters for Li rests not in the outward demonstration of people’s obedience but in their interior lives, before, after, and sometimes behind the spectacle.

If Tong’s partly disobedient vision provides a glimpse into the brutality that has been wracked on Shan’s body, Li confronts us with fuller revelations via two less respectable and dutiful characters who constitute the novel’s unlikely romantic couple, Nini and Bashi. The former is a feature of Li’s karmic realism. Born with a crippled left leg, the twelve-year-old Nini owes her deformity directly to Shan, who in her Red Guard days had kicked Nini’s eight-months-pregnant mother in the belly. Growing up ignored by her parents as much as the townspeople, Nini often imagines herself, with an irony unbeknownst to her at first, to be the true daughter of the kind-hearted Teacher Gu and Mrs. Gu, Shan’s parents. This daydream eventually backfires when the Gus emotionally abandon her during the time around Shan’s execution. Still, Nini’s existential invisibility grants her some advantages:

Knowledge of human beings came to Nini from eavesdropping on tales—her parents, in their best mood, walked around her as if she were a piece of furniture, and other people seemed to be able to ignore her existence. This meant Nini could learn things that other children were not allowed to hear.... The neighbors, after a day’s work and before dinner, gathered in twos and threes in the alley and exchanged gossip, Nini’s existence nearby never making them change topics hurriedly, as another child walking past would do. She heard stories of all kinds ... such tales bought Nini pleasures that other children obtained from toys or games with companions, and even though she knew enough to maintain a nonchalant expression, the momentary freedom and glee offered by eavesdropping were her closest experiences of a childhood that was unavailable to her, a loss of which she was not aware. (19–20)

At Shan’s denunciation ceremony, Nini the perpetual eavesdropper turns into the novel’s first vagrant witness. The night before, Nini’s parents had ordered her to take her younger sisters to the denunciation so
that the whole family could partake in Shan’s punishment. The next
day, Nini arrives at the stadium, siblings in tow, but is denied entry
by a security guard who mockingly tells her that she must belong to a
proper work unit for attendance. Thus banned from the state-organized
spectacle, she stumbles into a nearby alleyway and from behind a fence
accidentally beholds the scene of Shan’s post-denunciation “surgery.” An
ambulance pulls into the alley, and several lab-coated masked figures
descend along with a few policemen:

Nini looked again. Someone was dragged into the alley. For a
brief moment, Nini thought she saw the black hair of a woman,
but before she could take another look, several men lifted the
person onto the gurney, which was at once covered by a piece
of white cloth. The body struggled under the sheet, but a few
more hands pinned it down … she saw a red spot on the white
sheet covering the body, at first about the size of a plate, then
spreading into an irregular shape.

A few minutes later, the body was lifted off the gurney, its
legs kicking; yet strangely, no noise came from the struggling
body. Nini felt an odd heaviness in her chest, as if she was
cought in one of those nightmares where, no matter how hard
you tried, you could not make a sound. The policemen shuffled
the body inside the police car. The men and women in
the white lab coats climbed back into the ambulance, and a
moment later, both vehicles turned onto the main street and,
with long and urgent siren wails, disappeared. (92)

This sinister spectacle, hidden away from the public eye, unfolds for
the crippled girl alone. In this instant, Nini occupies the role of the
symbolic vagrant, banished from the localized site of the nation-state’s
self-display and therefore well-placed to witness a forbidden scene just
outside power’s center stage. This witness, however, remains uncompre-
hending, for she fails to identify the surgical body as Shan’s. As with
Tong, the occasion is characterized by sight without recognition. The
moment’s meaning is deferred, and transferred, to the even more im-
probable hero of the novel, the nineteen-year-old pedophile Bashi.1
Even more than Nini, Bashi is a social pariah in Muddy River. An orphan and a virgin, he stalks women and girls around town with fantasies of exploring their naked bodies, though never with any success, since he is universally shunned as a halfwit. With such anatomical intentions does he offer his assistance, as well as a sizable fee, to Kwen, an old bachelor who has been hired by Shan's father to collect and bury her corpse. In effect, Bashi replaces Nini as the novel's vagrant witness from this point on, seeing to completion the fate of Shan's body post-execution. At the burial site, he eagerly examines the cadaver but is shocked by what he sees: “The woman's body was lying facedown on the crystallized snow, her arms wrenched and bound behind her back in an intricate way…. When Kwen ripped the clothes off the body, they looked at the exposed middle part of the woman, the bloody and gaping flesh opening like a mouth with an eerie smile” (104–05). The worldly Kwen explains to Bashi that Shan's organs have been removed, most likely for a transplant, but also possibly as exercise for doctors who “need to practice so that their skills remain sharp” (106). After the two men part ways, Bashi returns to the corpse later in the evening, suspecting that Kwen has somehow defiled Shan's body. This time, he is presented with an even more nauseating sight: “He was not mistaken: The woman's breasts were cut off, and her upper body, with the initial wound from the transplant operation and the massive cuts Kwen had made, was a mess of exposed flesh, dark red and gray and white. The same mess extended down to between her legs” (123). Postmortem, Shan suffers even greater violations than in life, with the discredited town idiot as her only belated witness.

The novel's first section ends with a panorama into the remembered visions of those agents of the state, legal and medical, who had participated in the day's disciplinary procedures. A prison guard wakes up from a nightmare, recalling how she had helped to immobilize Shan while a doctor severed her vocal cords “so that she could not shout counterrevolutionary slogans at the last minute.” An old orderly for the police station tosses in his bed as he is reminded of the “buckets of blood he had washed off the police jeep that had transferred the prisoner.” A “horrible thing,” he tells his wife, “to clean up so much blood. What did they do to her?” A surgeon who had operated on Shan is kept
awake not by residual terror but calculations of future rewards. “She had to die anyway,” he rationalizes, “so it didn’t matter, in the end, that they had changed the protocol because the patient did not believe in receiving something from a corpse and insisted that the prisoner be kept alive when the kidneys were removed.” Meanwhile, the “patient” and organ recipient is recovering in an army hospital miles away, surrounded by well-wishers. This operation, though not the most challenging the surgeon has performed, will be the one to make him the chair of his hospital’s surgery department and his wife its head nurse; it will also earn his twin daughters a recommendation from the local government for an elite high school in the provincial capital. But the collaborative agent of the state is not simply a self-interested pragmatist but also the prototypical family man and Confucian father, and his final thought, in typical patriarchal fashion, revolves around protecting his innocent wife and daughters from the knowledge of power’s moral costs: “The man thought about his wife and his daughters—they were fast asleep in their innocent dreams, unplagued by death and blood; the burden was on his shoulders, the man of the household, and he found it hard not to ponder the day when he could no longer shelter them, the two daughters especially, from the ugliness of a world that they were in love with now, rosebudlike girls that they were” (127–28). This world, Li intimates, lies behind the rosy spectacle of harmonious China broadcast in 2008 Beijing. And it is biopolitical through and through.

**Biopolitical Cosmopolitanism**

The issue of the PRC’s state-sanctioned program of organ harvesting, 90% of which reportedly depends on death row prisoners, has become an international hotbed of contention in recent years. An early diaspora critic of this practice is Harry Wu, a political prisoner for nineteen years in China before leaving for the U.S. in 1985. As Wu tirelessly argues in his writing and testimonies, the PRC organ trade represents the “ultimate human-rights violation” (156). Not only does it allow the communist regime to profit by systematically harvesting prisoners’ organs and selling them at premium prices to foreign buyers, but the profits incentivize the multiplication of capital offenses so that political dis-
sidents as well as undesirable social elements can be legitimately purged in ever greater numbers. The transplant program is at once a form of political tyranny and “a booming business” (149), as capitalist ends meet totalitarian means. For Wu, what compounds the horror of the situation is the complicity of medical personnel, as “police and doctors work closely together, supply and demand intertwining, as it were, with drastic results for prisoners who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the right organ and the right blood type” (152). In some cases, the unwilling donors have been known to be alive during the operation.

This is the story of Gu Shan. Yiyun Li surely has Wu’s well-known campaign in mind when she advances this viciously dark portrait of the PRC and the underside of its national progress in *The Vagrants*. Such a portrait evokes Michel Foucault’s theory of biopower as much as Giorgio Agamben’s of biopolitics, on which modern sovereignty manifests itself not through threats of death but mechanisms of control over the biological life of subjects. As Foucault argues in his by now familiar formulation, if sovereign power has traditionally been defined by the “right to decide life and death,” and if the sovereign of the ancient world “exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing … [s]ince the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power.” For the modern sovereign, the weight of rightful decision has shifted from death to life, from the power to kill to the power to preserve, and not only to preserve but to “administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (135–37). For Foucault, a society’s “threshold of modernity” is indexed exactly by its entry into a state of biopower:

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal
subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life…. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question. (142–43)

Li’s *The Vagrants* and its representation of communist state power—enacted long-distance directly onto the body of one provincial criminal—resonates forcefully with Foucault’s paradigm of modern sovereign biopower. From a biopolitical perspective, the significance of Gu Shan’s fate lies in not the fact of her death or the party-state’s capacity to execute her but the ways in which her life is sustained, prolonged, and finally harvested so that the life of another could be extended, renewed. The very technologies of her punishment become deployed in the interests of biological life’s maintenance. This applies to the individual as much as the nation, for the state’s implementation of biopower on the micro level *vis-à-vis* Shan and her beneficiary converges perfectly with its macro control of the life and health of an entire population. With terrifying precision, then, does Li depict the communist regime’s regulation and redistribution of its subjects’ biological life as the epitome of modern sovereign biopower. The flash point of this system is the organ trade, its starkest emblem the death row prisoner’s body.

Whereas the governmental use of Shan’s biological life exemplifies Foucault’s model of biopower, the threshold status of her body, suspended between life and death for much of the novel’s first section, further invokes Agamben’s notion of *homo sacer*, a being “situated at
The intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law” (73). For Agamben, *homo sacer* designates a figure whose life is supremely exposed, for he is at once excluded from the protective jurisdiction of secular law and exempt from the sanctifying taboo of religious law, and hence can be killed by anyone with complete impunity without committing either murder or sacrilege. As a death row prisoner, Shan embodies *homo sacer* par excellence. Since her life is already condemned to execution and belongs imminently to the state, the repeated carving up of her still-living body are regarded as unpunishable, a mere procedural overture to that which has been decreed. Even in death, her corpse is made to perform one of the corporal functions most associated with life, namely, sex—in actuality by Kwen, in imagination by Bashi. Moreover, the medical treatment of her body as one already available for the organ operation recalls Agamben’s discussion of a haunting category of *homo sacer*—the “neomorts,” those “bodies … which would have the legal status of corpses but would maintain some of the characteristics of life for the sake of possible future transplants” (164). Just as the development of life-support and transplant technologies endowed modern scientists and surgeons with the authority to specify the technical boundaries between life and death, so is this sovereign biopower now conferred on the medical team entrusted with Shan’s body. For Li, the party-state displays its totalitarian power most clearly in these moments when it delimits the biopolitical border between life and death. Agamben elaborates on this biopolitical capacity as the very heart of modern politics: “the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zōē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.” Agamben calls this zone of indistinction “the state of exception” (9). He may be said to carry Foucault’s thesis to its extreme conclusion by positing the capture of biological life as not merely one mode of state power but the essence of politics as such; that is, for him, modern sovereign power is at its core biopower. Along Agamben’s model, then, Shan may be said to embody
the consummate *homo sacer* of communist biopower, her life the absolute instantiation of bare life.

If Foucault cautiously confines his analysis to the West, Agamben is at times much bolder in stretching the scope of his theory to encompass the whole world, proposing it as “the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet” (176). This impulse to globalize or cosmopolitanize biopower, however, elides the political distinction between democracy and totalitarianism—and this distinction, I would maintain, matters crucially. The PRC’s one-party state, after all, is far from representing every world government either in structure or in practice. As many activists including Harry Wu have argued, and as Li herself would likely agree, the communist regime’s record of human rights violations goes hand in hand with its lack of democratic institutions. At its most problematic, Agamben’s poststructuralist articulation of the “zone of irreducible indistinction” evinces a certain unexamined dependence on totalitarianism as at once the archetypal form of state power and the inevitable departure point of theory, all the while erasing the political context of its own utterance, the very political conditions that make it possible there and not elsewhere.

At the same time, in terms of the PRC’s organ trade, the additional factor of global capital renders uneasy any attempt to exoticize this cannibalistic biopower as a strictly “oriental” one—or to dismiss the critique of it as purely orientalist. As one scholar notes, the economy of human organs is global in scope, and “[i]n general, the flow of organs follows the modern routes of capital: from South to North, from Third to First World, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male” (Scheper-Hughes 193). China won its bid for the 2008 Olympics at a time when state executions were far from abating. Although international pressure and the possibility of an Olympic boycott likely contributed to the passing of a regulation by the communist government in late 2007 restricting organ transplants from executed prisoners to family members, whether this law is actually enforced remains to be seen (Kamm 232). What does crystallize as a bleak theme around the Beijing Olympics is that biological life has now become a political bargaining chip between China and the world. In this global
transaction between biopower and capital, the Olympics is traded for human rights, athletes for prisoners, sports for executions.

Attention to biopower can usefully ground theoretical models of cosmopolitanism through an analysis of our common species life, the myriad ways in which, in human beings’ most precarious circumstances, every body regardless of race and nation can get caught up in the life-controlling machinery of a state. Still, any effort to theorize a biopolitical cosmopolitanism must also heed the political conditions of its own utterance as well as the real differences of biopolitical governance across the earth. The spread of global capital complicates but does not eradicate these differences. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the PRC, capitalism can readily accommodate itself to a totalitarian state’s ever more intensified modes of exploitation of domestic subjects’ bodies, even as those from democratic countries come to reap benefits from this global network of exchange with ever cleaner lines of vision. In our millennium, as the U.S. and China face off as the world’s two most powerful polities and economies, transnational biopower may well emerge as the basis of a new analysis of globalization, intersecting with imperialism and capitalism to reconfigure our understanding of this encounter. Li is one of the Chinese diaspora writers today who will direct our gaze to this confrontation.

Guy Debord, in his seminal writing on the spectacle, proposed pessimistically in 1967 that the rise of the spectacle entails the “proletarianization of the world”: as the culmination of an economic system of alienated production, the spectacle, he contends, has turned every human being into a unit of separation, in a world where no “real activity” is left except that which is “forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle” (21–22). In such a world, agency and autonomy lose their meaning, for “the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him.” Likewise, notions of home, of ownership and origins, become empty, since the “spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere” (23). In this connection, the title of Yiyun Li’s novel resonantly conjures a similar image of the exilic spectator, and her textual ending of a resumption of homeless wandering hints at internal vagrancy’s spreading within
Belinda Kong

the communist nation. Nevertheless, Li is not without hope. Unlike Debord, her spectacle is not “immune from human activity” or “inaccessible to any projected review or correction” (17). Even if no forum for an equal dialogue with state power is forthcoming soon on her narrative horizon, the moments of vagrant witnessing hold out the possibility of a future where failure is not inevitable.

Note
1 In interview, Li comments: “Sweet, terrible Bashi. You know, I never thought of him as a pedophile until I was almost through with the book, and one of my readers mentioned it. I was horrified!” At the same time, Li notes that the concept of the hero is a highly freighted one for her, since she grew up with stories of martyrs who became heroes only by sacrificing themselves and sometimes their children for the revolution: “You see, you don’t question heroism until you are older. So for me, this novel is a way of questioning heroism” (“Chinese Gothic”).

Works Cited
The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li’s *The Vagrants*


Harris, Nick. “1,000,000,000: Beijing sets world TV record.” *Sunday Times* [UK] 10 May 2009: 11. Print.


Characters repeatedly ask other characters what they would risk (for love, for safety, for others) in Catherine Bush’s 2000 novel *The Rules of Engagement*; the avoidance of risk, and the search for its opposite, caution, act as the primary catalyzing forces for action in the novel. Arcadia Hearne, the novel’s protagonist, abandons her family and Canada for the (seeming) safety of London in the face of personal violence when Evan, her boyfriend, and Neil, the man with whom she has had an affair, fight a duel over her. Basra Alale, a Somali refugee whom Arcadia encounters in London, must leave Somalia via Kenyan refugee camps and London to arrive in Toronto in the face of the lingering violence of the Somali civil war and the broader legacies of Somali clan traditions. Amir Barmour, with whom Arcadia becomes romantically involved in London, must leave Iran on foot, arriving in England via Frankfurt to escape the ideological violence of the Iranian mullahs. The global movement of all three characters centres on questions of risk and responsibility as, in all three cases, they are forced to leave others behind in order to evade risk. Yet, instead of a narrative that progresses towards safety and away from risk, *The Rules of Engagement* posits risk-taking as inevitable, suggesting that one must engage it rather than avoid it. Nonetheless, the novel does not suggest that all risks are commensurate; instead, Bush outlines a model of cosmopolitical engagement that centers on the transformation of personal risks into global cosmopolitical responsibility. I argue in this paper that *The Rules of Engagement* theorizes a model of cosmopolitanism that brings together competing theoretical discourses on the topic by emphasizing the connection between/inseparability of elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subjects in a system defined (per Ulrich Beck) by global risk. For Bush, this recognition of risk foregrounds the necessary centrality
of responsibility to a global cosmopolitics, acknowledging the affective potential of personal experience (and, by extension, the aesthetic).

Hannah Arendt argues that while “our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals,” “the ‘alien’ [remains] a frightening symbol of the fact of difference as such, of individuality as such, and indicates those realms in which man cannot change and cannot act and in which, therefore, he has a distinct tendency to destroy” (301). This link between an artificial (yet reassuring) equality and a terrifying individuality highlights the ideological ground of a critically reflexive or ethical cosmopolitanism. Such a cosmopolitanism is ultimately compelled to address interconnection rather than just the self, refiguring the relationship between the individual citizen and the global *polis*. *Rules of Engagement* offers one possible way of speaking to this problem: the question of responsibility—and a particularly cosmopolitan version—as a way of mediating between the narcissistic self and the global common. Rather than privileging one version over the other, or outlining the possibility of the existence of subaltern cosmopolitanism, *Rules of Engagement* instead brings these two versions together, showing the way they operate in concert.

The narrative and character twinning that Bush establishes between Arcadia and Basra mirrors the connection between the (so-called) elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subjects. Through global systems of capital and cultural exchange, the elite and subaltern are never so far apart as these two words would suggest; instead, they are intimately linked and mutually constituting. In other words, it might be helpful to think of the experiences of the elite and subaltern cosmopolite as expressing a difference in scale rather than a fundamental difference in kind. But what does this mean? What does this connection entail? I argue that this connection reveals the need to re-prioritize notions of responsibility to theorizations of cosmopolitical citizenship, rather than the typical emphasis on a kind of identity politics whereby the cosmopolitan individual is at the implicit centre of any kind of cosmopolitan theory. Instead of delineating what is good or bad about elite and subaltern
Risky Cosmopolitanism

cosmopolitan subjectivities, what such a theoretical approach would require is thinking about the points of intersection, recognizing the (perhaps) impossibility of deciding whether or not we should aspire to global identities and, instead, working to craft more emancipatory versions. This project is at the heart of Rules of Engagement.

Twinning the Cosmopolitan

Broadly sketched, two of the central ways of thinking about cosmopolitanism are through the lens of the individual—liberal models expounded by Martha Nussbaum (2002), K. Anthony Appiah (2006) and Jeremy Waldron (2006), among others—and the collective—postcolonial models theorized by Homi Bhabha (1996), Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (1998), and Timothy Brennan (1997). The liberal model tends to focus on the cosmopolitan subject as personally autonomous, with an emphasis on the ethical responsibilities of such positions. The postcolonial model (sometimes referred to as the vernacular model), however, tends to focus on larger, collective categories of people who are invisible in liberal models—refugees, subaltern migrants, etc.—and it emphasizes the ongoing political ramifications of colonial and neo-colonial inequalities. While both models usefully interrogate what cosmopolitanism means (or might mean) today, they typically rely on a binary opposition between elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subject. This binary distinction, however, suggests an inherent separation between these two forms of cosmopolitanism; further, it implies the impossibility of cosmopoliticized individuals.

Rules of Engagement usefully enters into the gap between these two models, suggesting the interconnections between elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subjects—and the political necessity of transforming individualized subjects into global citizens. Through the twinned characters of Arcadia and Basra, Bush suggests the falseness of insisting on absolute difference between elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subjects; instead, she establishes an imaginative continuum of more and less privileged access to cosmopolitan subjectivities.

Though appearing only briefly in person in the novel, Basra Alale, the Somalian refugee whom Arcadia brings forged documents, occupies a
significant role throughout the novel as twinned figure with Arcadia. One of the most obvious ways in which Bush suggests the twinning of these two characters is through their names. Both Basra and Arcadia are names that allude to edenic spaces; Basra is one of the suggested geographical locations of the Biblical Garden of Eden, and Arcadia is the pastoral wilderness home of Pan in Greek mythology, immortalized in Virgil’s *Eclogues* and Sidney’s *Arcadia*. Basra and Arcadia evoke, then, pre-modern sites of innocence and simplicity; both are implicitly paradisal, though not in the sense of any particular afterlife—these are are heavenly places, but not heaven. The pastoral suggests “a withdrawal to a place apart that is close to the elemental rhythms of nature, where [one] gains a new perspective on the complexities, frustrations, and conflicts of the social world” (Abrams 241). As Glen Love suggests, “the pastoral can be a serious and complex criticism of life, involved not merely with country scenes and natural life but with a significant commentary on the explicit or implicit contrast between such settings and the lives of an urban and sophisticated audience” (65). While *Rules of Engagement* is not a pastoral novel by any means, Bush deploys these allusions to an Edenic pastoral in much the way that Love suggests more typically pastoral works do; namely, these character names evoke the pastoral only to suggest the risk that pervades so much of modern life.

This distinction between the pastoral and the dangerous pervades the novel. One of the first descriptions of Arcadia’s London apartment makes this distinction clear:

> there was comfort in this room, my white cocoon. I’d built a haven within these four walls. There was safety in the flicker of flame against the pale green ceramic tiles that line the fireplace... In the maps that cover the walls—maps dotted with pins and pencil lines to demarcate the world’s restlessly new and shifting borders. Even in the titles lining the bookshelves, titles like *Slaughterhouse* and *How to Make War* and *The Origins of War*. (13)

This juxtaposition between “cocoon” and “haven,” and “slaughterhouse” and “war” suggests the simultaneity of safety and an inescapable danger.
A similar comparison occurs further on when Arcadia works in the British War Museum and notes that, outside, “bright lawns blazed beneath a glittery noontime sun—still green on the surface, although if you stepped onto the grass, the ground beneath was hard as tack... All that pastoral beauty. Sheep would not have looked out of place” (18).

This juxtaposition between hard and soft, cocoon and slaughterhouse, only becomes more explicit when Arcadia meets Basra. On meeting her, Arcadia remembers stories she has heard from war correspondents about the brutal violence done to civilians in Basra during and in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. The implied violence of Arcadia’s scholarly books and the hardness of the ground are shown here to be mere intimations of the more profound violence that the refugee undergoes. This second juxtaposition between Basra and Arcadia suggests that a reductive equivalence is drawn between the two, “occlud[ing] the significant differences between these narratives” (Authers 796). While this is certainly a plausible reading, I want to suggest that we might also read this suggestion of violences in London (however minor or banal) as a reminder of the constant, significant violences that occur elsewhere—often caused (directly or indirectly) by the global systems that touch down in London (and elsewhere). These reminders highlight “the hot-spots to which [Arcadia] and London are connected but from which, she believes, they are protected” (Ball 82). While Arcadia is unsure of Basra’s exact immigration status, her friend’s story of Basra is about the violence done to Iraqi refugees and this story is flanked by Arcadia’s memories of other, similarly violent immigration stories. Basra is Somali, rather than Iraqi; her history is connected to similar violence—violence that Arcadia (and the readers of this novel, implicitly) have tried to forget. This forgetting is tied to, as Sherene Razack argues, the “mythologies [that] help the nation to forget its bloody past and present” (9).

These parallel names indicate one of the ways these two characters are tied together by the novel; a tie that suggests the violence that makes the pastoral an impossibility in contemporary times. Both Arcadia and Basra have experienced violence of different sorts and magnitudes, making it impossible for either to imagine the Edenic pastoral that their names evoke. While the catalyzing violence that leads to Basra’s and
Arcadia’s immigration is not of the same scale, tellingly, both understand their migration and the necessity of it as stemming from violence. And in both cases, it is neither an abstract violence nor something wholly unconnected to their own actions. Both women are framed as agents who, just the same, cannot escape old violences, whether tribal or romantic. Basra “was a university student in Mogadishu, she sang with this group—they were all students… but she was the only girl, and I think she wrote the songs—about the trouble with clans” (25). Basra is framed here not solely as a helpless victim but as a political agent in a space where political activism, particularly by women, is disallowed. She is framed then as an active, resisting subject rather than the passive object of oppression. This vision of agency points back to the novel’s fundamental concern with the tensions between danger, safety, risk and responsibility. Violence is repeatedly shown to be endemic to contemporary society—mirroring Hardt and Negri’s claims in Multitude of a contemporary state of perpetual war (3–95)—yet neither Basra nor Arcadia are presented as wholly victims to this violence. On encountering Basra again, in Toronto, Arcadia notes that “what had struck me, on first meeting, as simple willowiness now seemed, in retrospect, to have been a kind of bony strain, which was missing. She did not look relaxed, exactly, but some taut core of fear had migrated” (273).

This vision of a relaxed Basra evokes popular multicultural platitudes about Toronto, and Canada more broadly, as a place free of the racial and ethnic violence of the rest of the world. Yet this fantasy is complicated by Arcadia’s earlier encounter with a Somali man who knows Basra, who warns Arcadia that “you will cause trouble for her. Here. If you do this” (206), as well as by her realization that “Clan loyalties were perhaps as strong here as over there. Perhaps Basra’s songs protesting the stranglehold of clan allegiances were known here. Perhaps I should not, in fact, be asking after her” (189). Violence is never far from the surface—even in the seemingly cosmo-multicultural haven of Toronto. This suggestion of violence in even the most ostensibly safe places echoes through the duel between Evan and Neil that causes Arcadia to flee Canada for London. The duel takes place in the ravines of Toronto—a site that evokes the pastoral nature of both Arcadia’s and Basra’s names.
yet also introduces a note of wildness to the proceedings, as though what unfolds between Evan and Neil is the result of atavistic passions: further suggesting the inescapability of the violence that pervades *The Rules of Engagement*.

This connection to longer diachronic histories of violence is also spread out, synchronically, through the immediate families of both Arcadia and Basra and the impact violence and risk has on, particularly, their respective sisters. For if their names and immigration histories parallel one another, for the most past, Arcadia’s and Basra’s different privileges and limits become more transparent in the stories of their sisters. Indeed, tellingly, both sisters act primarily upon Arcadia as a kind of instigating force: Lux, her sister, leads her to encounter Basra for the first time, while Basra’s request for her to smuggle documents to a Kenyan refugee camp for her sister (who remains unnamed) is what prompts Arcadia to abandon an individualized caution for a globalized risk. Further, Lux’s and Basra’s sister’s experiences with the global refugee system highlight the different stakes for Arcadia and Lux in comparison to Basra and her sister. Lux’s experiences smuggling recording equipment to musicians in developing nations is framed by her, initially, as free from risk: “It’s not that suspicious. I mean, what’s odd about me traveling with a palmcorder? I’ve never been stopped” (24). Yet when she is stopped by Mozambiquan border guards, she begins to doubt her ability to manage risk: “I was completely freaked out. Always before, I’d known there was a chance something could happen but it didn’t. I was lucky, but what I felt was that I was good at this, I had some kind of knack. I was inviolate. Inviolate? And then I lost that, I lost it completely” (231). For Lux, these encounters with global violence are a kind of game—her ability to “win” is based on her “luck,” “knack” and freedom from suspicion (all things which might, in these instances, have everything to do with her global position as a middle-class white woman, traveling as a music journalist).

The reality of Basra’s sister’s situation, on the other hand, reveals that what seems like a game—a dangerous one, but a game nonetheless—to Lux is not so simple for others. For Basra’s sister, still in a Kenyan refugee camp, “now, it is dangerous. There and at home [Somalia]. There is no
one to protect her” (275). This gap in protection is where Arcadia, the cosmopolitan subject who learns to accept risk, is able to intervene, suggesting that the cosmopolitan risks necessary in the novel for true global responsibility, rather than just self-preservation, is one that emerges out of personal engagement with others; “violence is personal, Arcadia’s experience of the duel tells her, and, through an understanding of its conceptual inconsistencies and ‘internal contradiction[s],’ politics come to be understood as similarly personal” (Authers 786). Arcadia is initially reticent to perform what Basra asks—smuggle a forged passport to her sister in the refugee camp—but, once she learns to mourn the actions of Evan and Neil, she is able to take on her cosmopolitan responsibilities to global others. Here, the novel reaches a barrier, unconsciously repeating some of the same privileges that Lux takes for granted: the ability of the white Westerner to broach any border. While this is the very tactic used by activist groups such as Christian Peacemaker Teams and International Solidarity Movement, Arcadia’s action are mostly confined to a *bildungsroman* narrative whereby she, the upper-middle-class white woman, is politicized through her relationships with the (mostly silent) Somali woman and Iranian man. Nonetheless, by pairing Arcadia with Basra in these ways throughout the novel, Bush opens up a complicated space, revealing the ways the cosmopolitan risks both Arcadia and Basra undertake are pervasive well outside of their individual spheres. What *Rules of Engagement* suggests, however implicitly, is the way that the safety (the ability to refuse risk) of Arcadia’s life is intimately connected to the risk (the inability to rely on safety) of Basra’s life. While the novel seems to merely replicate longstanding privileges, it creates a compelling cosmopolitan matrix that refuses the seeming straightforwardness of these categories.

**Risky Cosmopolitanism**

So while Arcadia and Basra are twinned, their experiences are hardly commensurate. As Benjamin Authers suggests “if Arcadia’s displacement from Toronto to London is intended to reflect the global flow of refugees, for example, then it does so by eliding how her ability to flee one country and become part of another with relative ease is inseparable
from her status as a Canadian citizen, and as a white woman” (796). Yet, as Ulrich Beck's notion of world risk society suggests, the risk (again of fundamentally different magnitude in each case) that is central to their mobility marks their simultaneous enmeshment in a system (what Beck terms “advanced modernity” but which also corresponds with Hardt’s and Negri’s “empire”) that keeps danger and risk central as a way of promoting acquiescence to the status quo. A cosmopolitanism, therefore, that does not posit risk and responsibility as being key is one that requires an elision of global systems of power.

How, then, do we understand risk? Ulrich Beck argues that “in advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks” (Risk Society 19; emphasis in original). In other words, risks are created by and central to advanced modernity; they are inescapable. To avoid being enmeshed in risk is an impossibility requiring either the rejection of modernity or deep denial. Neither is, for the most part, a viable option: “risks of modernization sooner or later also strike those who produce or profit from them. They contain a boomerang effect, which breaks up the pattern of class and national society. Ecological disaster and atomic fallout ignore the borders of nations. Even the rich and powerful are not safe from them” (Risk Society 23; emphasis in original). While Beck emphasizes the unequal effects of risks (some are more substantially and frequently affected by risk than others), his suggestion of the inevitable boomerang effect of risk means that the experience of risk is not easily contained by national or subject boundaries. Indeed, “in an age in which belief and confidence in class, nation and progress has become in varying degrees questionable, the global perception of global risk is perhaps the last—ambivalent—source of new commonalities and interconnected action” (“Cosmopolitical Realism” 145).

Risk, then, according to Beck, acts as a catalyst to cosmopolitics. Rather than seeing cosmopolitanism as emerging out of the exposure to new and different experiences—a version that Beck explicitly rejects as banal (“Cosmopolitical Realism” 134)—cosmopolitics emerge out of the shared experience of the global risks of advanced modernity. This modality of the cosmopolitical sees it as “mainly…a compulsory
choice or a side effect of unconscious decisions” (“Cosmopolitical Realism” 134). While liberal cosmopolitan critics such as K. Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum frame cosmopolitan identities as produced by autonomous social subjects—frequently eliding the globally unequal access to personal autonomy—Beck here frames cosmopolitanism not only as an approach to the world (not an identity per se) but as one that is often unconscious and compulsory—suggesting an (at least, occasional) ambivalence towards it. Further, Beck’s argument of the creation of risks by modernity and the creation of a shared cosmopolitical perspective by these risks intimates the mutual implication of elite and subaltern cosmopolitan subjects; both are enmeshed in modernity—in different ways and to different ends—and, therefore, cannot be easily separated or theoretically isolated. Beck’s notion of a cosmopolitical perspective parallels Hardt and Negri’s notion of the multitude which

is not unified but remains plural and multiple... is composed of a set of singularities—and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different... The multitude, however, although it remains multiple, is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent... The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common. (99–100)

The multitude, like Beck’s model of cosmopolitical risk and the subsequent creation of, what he terms, “subpolitics”—“politics outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of nation-states” (“World Risk Society” 18)—demands new ways of theorizing cosmopolitanism. Namely, it demands a shift from the emphasis on identity politics that has heretofore dominated cosmopolitan theory of many different stripes to thinking of cosmopolitanism as a subpolitical model of global interconnection. In other words, to move beyond characterizing “elite” and “subaltern” cosmopolitan subjects (and the possibilities or lack thereof either group might pose) and imagining their
interaction in a global system and the forms of cosmopolitical responsibility this requires.

This necessary imagining is the site at which the contemporary cosmopolitan novel might be the most useful. This perhaps seems obvious: what do novels do most but imagine? I am suggesting, however, that this imagining done by cosmopolitan novels fills a crucial gap in cosmopolitan theory as it is presently performed. The genre limits of theoretical and philosophical work mean that they often can only go so far is discussing what cosmopolitan responsibility might look like. Fiction—fortunately or not—is held to different generic expectations; the cosmopolitan novel can imagine a new world. Further, novels form part of the larger cultural discourse that informs how we as readers understand and organize the world—what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling” and what Edward Said calls “structures of attitude and reference.” Susan Stanford Friedman notes that, echoing Fredric Jameson, “narrative is a window into, mirror, constructor, and symptom of culture… cultural narratives encode and encrypt in story form the norms, values, and ideologies of the social order” (8). Indeed, Bush herself notes that “fiction for me has to be a way of engaging with the world around me, with both public and private worlds—rather than an escape from this. I feel this urge towards engagement both as a compulsion and a kind of responsibility” (96). This sense of compulsion and responsibility is connected to literature’s theoretical role, but it also marks out its possible popular impact. Narrative shapes (or assists in shaping) the conditions of possibility that make cosmopolitanism a widely viable sensibility to adopt.4

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note, however, “in each era… the model of resistance that proves to most effective turns out to have the same form as the dominant models of economic and social production” (68). With this in mind, as well as Beck’s insistence on the centrality of risk to advanced modernity, how do novels imagine new forms of resistance to dominant models that produce consumers rather than citizens, fear rather than action? While there are, inevitably, a near infinite number of ways that novels might address these questions, Rules of Engagement provisionally answers them by embracing risk as a way of addressing one’s responsibility to global others. Melissa Orlie suggests
that “we live responsibly and freely when we put our identities in question and refuse merely and passively to reinscribe … the effective rule of the social, the predictable ordering of the self as subject” and, thus, “to live responsibly and freely… requires that we disrupt and unsettle social rule because when we do not, we reinforce and expand the ‘necessities’ that not only harm others, but also constrict the power of our own action” (339). What Bush argues, then, in Rules of Engagement is that, to ignore or resist the risks of modern life, is to reinscribe social rule—particularly a form of social rule that enforces the invisibility of its human externalities.

Thus, while Arcadia ostensibly faces legal risks in transporting passports, the true risk is the continued invisibility of Basra and others like her. Early in the novel, Arcadia states that “I’m a theorist. I hardly need to race about the globe. Besides, I value safety. And here in London I’ve found a sort of safety” (27). Though, as John Ball notes, “London can provide temporary escape, anonymity, and seclusion, but eventually its cosmopolitanism will not only enable access to the wider world but enforce engagement with it” (84). While Arcadia’s statement establishes an unnecessarily rigid (and false) distinction between theory and practice, it can also be read as the justification of a relatively self-serving refusal to act, to take risks. Nonetheless, this statement contains a surface rationality: Who would reasonably choose risk over safety? The very common sense of the statement reveals its investment in hegemonic ideologies about the responsibility of middle-class Westerners to the rest of the world; compare it, for instance, to Appiah’s injunction that cosmopolitan responsibility means “if you are the person in the best position to prevent something really awful, and if it won’t cost you much to do so, do it” (161). Appiah’s maxim suggests a vision of responsibility that, as Bruce Robbins notes, is “rather minimal” (“New and Newer” 58) and that mostly acts to exonerate upper middle class Westerners of any guilt they might feel about their own privilege.

Risk, Responsibility and the Self
While Rules of Engagement foregrounds the necessity of a risky responsibility, it simultaneously suggests that the ability to take this kind of
Risky Cosmopolitanism

responsibility is not the same for everyone. Indeed, what the novel posits is the way that responsibility to oneself and others is a fluid thing; sometimes the self must take priority over others and vice versa. For, while Arcadia’s self-preserving choices are posed as equally selfish and necessary, Basra’s and Amir’s (the Iranian man with whom Arcadia becomes romantically involved) decision to escape politically tenuous situations without their families is viewed much less ambivalently and more positively. Such ambivalence suggests a nuanced view of global risks. Rather than arguing that responsibility means either always prioritizing others or self-protection (both straw-man positions), Bush allows for the complicated relationship between the self and others in a global risk society.

Further, in the narratives surrounding both Basra and Amir, Bush connects the individual risks they take repeatedly to the risks created by neoliberal modernity: “as a rule, the choice to become or remain a ‘foreigner’ is not freely made but is the consequence of poverty and hardship, of flight from persecution or an attempted escape from starvation“ (“Cosmopolitan Realism” 134). Yet as Beck suggests, “what we now see [in late modernity] are unlimited risks and uncertainties that are much harder to identify (like transnational terrorism, climatic disasters, contested water resources, migration flows, AIDS, genetically modified foods, BSE, and computer viruses able to cripple civil and military communications)” (“Cosmopolitan Realism” 146–47). The early risks Amir takes are not entirely of his own making (this parallels Basra’s situation which I discussed above). He, as a student in Iran, applies for a visa to study in England—an application that seemed to signal “that he wanted to flee into the embrace of the West, when really, what I wanted was merely to travel, to be cosmopolitan, which is not the same as wanting to be Westernized, even though people so often act as if it is” (113; emphasis in original). His response suggests a kind of youthful naivete about what constitutes risk. After being denied both a student and exit visa, Amir is incarcerated for six months. On his release, he escapes Iran:

Amir was the one who followed the leads, the whispered voices, met burly men in coffeehouses who talked into their coffee and threatened terrible retribution on all his family if he gave any
of their secrets away. He managed to scrabble together enough money for a midpriced escape, which was substantial, but the cheapest sort apparently meant days of walking and was so dangerous you might as well give up anyway. For the price he paid he was told he’d get an escape that involved only a few hours on foot. (114)

Amir, while helped by others, must here place responsibility for the self over that of others (family, friends, etc.); responsibility for others is deferred. And, as his participation in the acquiring and alteration of passports for refugees suggests, this is a responsibility the novel shows him taking up.

The risks Amir takes in leaving Iran are substantial but are, for the most part, not entirely chosen freely: he leaves, not because he has a strong desire to leave but because the political situation makes it untenable for him to remain. Again, as he states, he does not desire to become Westernized but, instead, to become cosmopolitan. Amir’s choice to become a “foreigner,” then, is not really a choice at all but the consequence of political persecution. While his situation is specific—Iran under the mullahs—it does not emerge in a global vacuum.

However, while Bush suggests the importance of self-preservation/responsibility to the self with Amir and Basra, she also points, through Arcadia’s career path, to the way the rhetoric of self-preservation can be used to elide one’s responsibility to others. The novel repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that Arcadia is neither a war correspondent nor a scholar who partakes in fieldwork. This distinction between correspondent/active scholar and the work Arcadia does is repeatedly framed in terms of risk, safety and gender: female war correspondents are “permitted to be fascinated by war while trailing the allure of those who thrive in dangerous situations. They’re women who race through sniper fire gathering stories about human suffering, who manage to win the confidence of hot-blooded, sex-starved young men brandishing AK-47s” (15–16). Arcadia here portrays—however self-servingly—risk as the work of glamorous ingenues who use, even exploit, their sexuality in service of a scoop. Indeed, the war correspondents—male and
female—who populate Rules of Engagement do not seem far removed from a romanticized version of World War Two-era war correspondents. And while war correspondents are framed as active participants in the work of making visible invisible conflicts, the intimation is that they undertake risk for the sake of risk; Arcadia’s fears about her own investment in ensuring Basra’s safety resonates with the text’s attitude towards war correspondents and others like them: “I wondered if this was simply selfishness masking itself as altruism, a kind of mania in which I ultimately had my own interests at heart” (187). The conflation of risk and selfishness here points to the necessity to not presume about the endpoint of risk behavior; that accepting risk is not necessarily a cosmopolitan act; “Bush’s novel posits that histories of engagement, whether between individuals or nation-states, need to be more completely, and complexly, acknowledged” (Authors 793).

Yet while the war correspondents of the novel are presented as solipsistically risky, Arcadia’s refusal to take risks is hardly valorized. The description of the office she works out of reveals the ironically isolated nature of the work she does—despite its global connections:

These rooms are our shell, the carapace that hides the telecommunication lines and fiber-optic cable and complex binary codes that store our information and connect us to each other, to colleagues, and to conflicts around the globe. We cross borders with ease this way, even though the computers are chained to bolts in the floor and the red eye of an alarm system blinks high on one wall. (15)

The juxtaposition between the mobility of information and the immobility of infrastructure (anchored to the floor and protected against theft) is paradoxical; risk is studied but studiously avoided. Further, as Arcadia later reveals, the study of risk can be a way of simply deferring responsibility: “given that you can’t act everywhere, do everything, just as you can’t intervene in all conflicts, you have to determine your zones of responsibility. That’s what we grapple with in intervention studies. You have to choose where you’re going to take your risks, set limits. As you travel from zones of safety into zones of danger. That’s what makes
risk meaningful” (190). Is responsibility then about taking the most studied, most prepared course of action? Or is it in the acting itself? Bush, therefore, raises questions about what cosmopolitan risks entail and under what circumstances they might be taken. Notably, however, even in Arcadia’s list of the reasons to avoid taking risks prematurely, the question of responsibility is central—suggesting that risks must be taken, especially by those who can.

Nonetheless, *Rules of Engagement* ultimately emphasizes the importances of taking cosmopolitan risks—risks that acknowledge or emerge out of global interconnection. This gets beyond the acceptance of difference that characterizes much of the discourse surrounding cosmopolitanism. If, as Robbins suggests, “the term cosmopolitanism is ordinarily taken to [refer to] aesthetic spectatorship rather than political engagement” (*Feeling Global* 17; emphasis in original) then emphasizing cosmopolitan risk-taking might be one way to reframe cosmopolitanism in terms of political engagement. Yet, *Rules of Engagement*—and, perhaps, cosmopolitan novels more broadly—suggest the impossibility of separating the aesthetic from the political—particularly the affective impact of the aesthetic. And this impact implies (as Lauren Berlant suggests) “a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator’s experience of feeling compassion and its subsequent relation to material practice” (1). As Hardt argues, affects “illuminate… both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers” (ix).\(^5\) Arcadia’s interactions with Basra—and her remembered interactions with Evan and Neil, the two young men who fight a duel over her—are deeply personal and affective. Yet this affective response is what prompts her more-active political engagement. While she tries to contain her experiences with Evan and Neil in the past, and her connection with Basra as strictly academic, Arcadia is unable to act. Once she appropriately mourns Evan and Neil and acknowledges her personal relationship to Basra’s situation, then she is able to take the risks required of a responsible cosmopolitical subject.

Indeed, part of the question of responsibility in *Rules of Engagement* is resisting the enticements of global voyeurship—something that too
much emphasis on careful deliberations and research can become (at least in this novel; this is certainly an arguable assertion). Bush depicts the rhetoric of cautious platitudes that reveals the common-sensical aspect of it, challenging the neutrality of safety: Arcadia asserts that “sometimes I’d like to believe... that being informed, that knowledge is an end in itself, that one is justified simply in knowing what’s going on in the world... When we’re all these global voyeurs, really, watching endless television clips of atrocities—how are we to make sure we don’t all collapse into utter passivity” (110)? The connection Bush establishes between information and voyeurism raises questions about the potential limits to liberal programs of cosmopolitanization that emphasize the exposure to different cultures as key to cosmopolitan subjecthood: is exposure/experience enough? Particularly for already privileged Western subjects like Arcadia? The novel, therefore, raises important questions about what cosmopolitanism can—and should—look like. While Arcadia is the protagonist of the novel, she also points to some of the willful blindness of elite cosmopolitan subjects (many of whom make up the audience of a novel like Rules of Engagement). However, rather than reject cosmopolitanism as an inherently corrupted category, the novel points to ways of bringing critical theoretical models into practice—arguing for the importance of thinking through a risky cosmopolitics.

Notes
1 This is a preoccupation common to Bush’s three novels. For a discussion of risk in her first novel, Minus Time, see MacKinnon 2006.
2 Her name and Arcadia’s are similarly culturally unique; names given by similarly imaginative fathers.
3 One of the tactics of these groups is using Western volunteers as witnesses to violence that might often remain globally invisible without their presence. Rachel Corrie was one of the more prominent members of such groups.
4 While my focus here is on novels, this is a role that could (potentially) be performed by any kind of cultural product.
5 Yet, as Berlant further argues, “the modern social logic of compassion can as easily provide an alibi for an ethical or political betrayal as it can initiate a circuit of practical relief” (11).
Works Cited


Love, Sex, Desire & the (Post)Colonial

Senate House, University of London

28–29 October 2011

For the most part, postcolonial studies, quite understandably, has privileged the political. Historical and economic processes, forms of identification (race and, to lesser extent, gender) and categories of difference have been refracted through this particular lens. The affective, however, has received scant critical attention. Love, sex and desire are usually allegorized, often standing in as sites of political conflict. This mode of analysis was initiated by the critic who has most carefully attended to the dynamics of desire within colonial contact zones, Frantz Fanon. By contesting the universality of the psychoanalytic paradigm, his analysis of forms of colonial alienation is invariably circumscribed by the political. Alienation, desire, neuroses and psychosis are nothing other than indices of socio-political processes. Many postcolonial critics have followed his lead (e.g. Anne McClintock, Homi Bhabha, Robert Young, etc.).

However, there is an alternative tradition, such as represented in queer and feminist studies as well as recent work on ‘affective communities’ and performativity. Notably, Chicana, Asian, and Black feminists, queer theorists, and creative writers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Trin T. Minh-ha, Hanif Kureishi, Mahesh Dattani, Audre Lorde, Reinaldo Arenas and Thomas Glave, have called attention to the power of the erotic, queer desire, and love. Specifically, these postcolonial authors and critics engage with forms of the affective that incorporate, exceed, threaten or destabilize the political. Special issues of WSQ on “The Global and the Intimate” (2006) and GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies on “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally” (1999) transgress a narrowly political perspective. Queer Diasporas (2000) explores the mobility of sexuality. Leela Gandhi’s Affective Communities (2006), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (2002), and Sara Ahmed’s work on affect explore new directions for love, sexuality and desire. This conference builds on such approaches and goes beyond the dominant analytical approach in postcolonial studies, which continues to place emphasis on love, sex and desire as a subset of the political.

This conference is co-hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London and the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing at Brunel University as well as the Brunel Interdisciplinary Network on Gender and Sexuality, West London.

For more details, visit the Institute of English Studies, University of London at http://ies.sas.ac.uk.
The Voices of Others: Dave Eggers and New Directions for Testimony Narrative and Cosmopolitan Literary Collaboration
Brian Yost

Dave Eggers is probably best known for his ironic playfulness and his preoccupation with middle-class US adolescence, so his sincere treatment of genocide in Sudan in his novel, *What is the What* (2006), the product of his collaboration with Valentino Achak Deng, at first seems a somewhat surprising departure. The novel, although it marks a shift in Eggers’s style of narration, retains his faith in the enduring significance of childhood. More significant is Eggers’s intervention into the construction and function of literature and the relationship of literature to nationalist identities through the text’s juxtaposition of exile across Africa and exile within the US. Of course, literature has always played an important role in the production of nationalisms, among other forms of communal and individual identity. Nor are narratives testifying to or documenting human suffering something new. Even the collaborative process Eggers employs has precedence in the *testimonial*—documents created by Western academics and Central American political activists record the injustice underlying revolutions in Central America. What makes *What is the What* innovative is the playful flexibility Eggers applies to the boundaries of genre and authorship and the space his experimentation with novel, biography, and testimony creates for cosmopolitan collaboration between writers, readers, and speakers of wildly different racial, social, and political status.¹

*What is the What*, although marketed as a novel and titled an autobiography, more closely resembles a testimony narrative. Testimony narratives are collaborative acts involving a speaker who has witnessed injustice and violence and an academic or other professional writer in order to raise awareness in US or European readers.² Their mediated presentation of injustice demand further action on the part of a reading
audience otherwise far removed from conflict by boundaries of nationality, race, class, and gender by merit of the events described and the global inequality implied by the need for its speaker to seek mediation. Most critics theorize the genre as limited to Central American political struggles to the exclusion of narratives produced in other parts of the world. However, because political struggles are global and ongoing, and because collaborative narratives continue to emerge from them, the testimonial genre has the potential to fulfill a critical need in the development of a cosmopolitan society, with its explicit appeals for supranational human rights advocacy and transnational, micropolitical humanitarian action. Reconfiguring the testimony genre, and literature more broadly, as an ethically motivated cosmopolitan engagement with difference attributes to literature a materially productive function and expands its relevance beyond the constraints of any specific territorial or national boundary. Eggers’s use of testimonial narrative is a powerful example of this potential for literature to engage in cosmopolitan activism.

To argue this point, I describe the generic qualities of and objections to testimonial narratives. I examine the grounds for charges against the testimony genre via an analysis of Elizabeth Burgos-Debray’s construction of I Rigoberta Menchú. Burgos-Debray uses her text to argue that her text understands Menchú and that this understanding enables Western readers to empathize with the suffering of all indigenous people. I then contrast Burgos-Debray’s methodology with Eggers’s. In What is the What, Eggers actively forces the recognition that he and Deng worked collaboratively and places Deng in control of any economic or political power the text’s success might garner. Eggers’s novel, because it carefully avoids the tendencies of US representations of foreign nationals to stray into paternalistic descriptions more invested in promoting feelings of superiority and to position the US as a model source for aid to a troubled world to be copied by others, offers a positive model for the testimony narrative as a form of cosmopolitan humanitarian collaboration.

I. Testimonial Narrative as Cosmopolitan Text
Testimonies generally document the life of a single individual in first-person, but differ significantly from other forms of life writing in the
role their central figures play. Whereas biographies assume the significance of the individual and individual accomplishments and have the aim of replicating the values and behaviors of their subjects in readers, testimonies efface the ego of their central narrative consciousness as they proceed to material conditions with implications beyond the boundaries of any single self or community. “Autobiographies,” Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney suggest, “are writings by selves which are impressed by their own unique significance” (9). The same can perhaps be said of fictional forms of life writing. What matters to writers and readers of biography is the development of an exceptional individual, not the description of an exceptional situation worthy of the reader’s attention. Biography establishes an initial relationship of moral difference to the reader by treating the unique accomplishments of an individual subject as the products of superior individual behaviors. The biography suggests its subject as a model for ideal development while simultaneously fostering an Andersonian imagined bond between the subject, a community, and the reader. Through successful reform, or imaginative identification, the biography’s threat of difference and exclusion shifts to an embrace of readers who come to recognize or impose coincidence with the subject. This bond is suited to nationalist projects because it directs readers’ imagined affinities between themselves and the subject toward inward reconfiguration of self-identity without necessarily encouraging intervention or even participation in the political or economic operation of either their assumed community or its others. Testimony reading proceeds along different lines. A reader may perceive admirable qualities in the speaker of a testimony, but the primary consequence of reading is not identification. Instead, reading forces the recognition of unsightly conditions otherwise hidden from view beyond their immediate milieu. The practice of testimony reading recalls Bhabha’s notion of unhomeliness, with its publication of uncomfortable difference. The unhomely reveals a boundary between insiders and outsiders but also that the ideas contained on both sides of this boundary exist in a state of constant commute (Bhabha 13, 5). This state of interchange is compounded in the case of testimony narratives since, as Kate Douglass suggests, readers become a second-person witness to the text’s traumatic events and “in this act
of reading, the second person sanctions and empowers the testimony” (149). The recognition of the disparity and injustice the enforcement of such a boundary requires suggests a reevaluation of the values determining boundaries of communities and the flow of resources across them and transfers attention from the buttressing of national identity toward cosmopolitan, collaborative projects of limited duration and scope.

Unlike legal testimony, which derives authority from an assumed exact correspondence with a single testifying individual’s experience, testimonial narratives gain meaning and authority to the extent that they create a flexible portrait of an entire community or culture. Robert Carr observes that testimonies “take[e] on value as capital in the fund for agendas of national reconceptualization” not exclusively because narrated individuals claim representative status, although they often do, but because academics “assume an easy metonymic relationship between the subject of testimonial and the ethnic group from which she or he comes” (157). When texts constructed allegorically are published, Carr argues, they “celebrate the reader’s ignorance as the group is conversely constituted as infinite duplicates of the ‘original’ subject presented in the pages of the testimonial” (157). Metonymic readings become a limitation to testimony narratives when the presence of the supposedly objective writer becomes too successfully effaced from the narrative text or conflated with the first-person voice of the narrator, an effect Kimberley Nance describes as fusion. If, as Douglass suggests, testimony narratives rely upon a second-person reader to validate the experiences they record through the act of reading and subsequently, of empathizing, the merit of such experiences lies in their ability to provoke the proper reaction in a remote audience. While the production of empathy for suffering individuals is an admirable goal, such means of attaining this response are not entirely satisfactory for the purposes of testimonial narrative, which is concerned with action rather than validation or identification. As Sharon Crowley points out, readers forming opinions of a traumatic text “interpret [their] emotional response,” or the empathy Douglass cites, “imagined or actual—as experience, thus conflating [their] beliefs with ‘reality’” (84). Equating the perspectives of writer and narrator allows the writer as he or she hears a testimony and later “the reader to move from address to a shared sub-
ject position,” to find their situation is like that of the narrator, and to evade the need to intervene in a cause or alter personal beliefs (Nance, “Disarming Testimony” 573). The conventions of testimony narrative assume a narrator sacrifices the integrity of his or her personal experience in order to more fully relate communal concerns and to describe an exceptional situation, not an individual, worthy of the reader’s attention and action. Testimony narratives’ use of a metonymic representative of collective identity discourages voyeuristic readings and misplaced identification with their narrators, both effects that if left unaddressed would enable the reader to escape an ethical commitment to act (Braebeck 255).

As an agent of the community, the narrator of a cosmopolitically oriented testimony, like Deng in What is the What, appeals to the reader to intervene in a specific political cause without requiring the identification or emulation that biography encourages. The demand for active relationships among disparate peoples distinguishes the genre from other literary forms depicting or speaking for others. Applying cosmopolitan practice to the testimony narrative reimagines the relationship between members of differing national communities such that the national other is not so much a point of contrast one uses to form the boundaries of his or her own identity, but a collaborative partner in the ongoing narrative process of identity construction. Cosmopolitan testimony makes its readers aware of injustice and burdens them, as members of a markedly different and frequently more privileged community, to act in collaboration with the narrator in a political project, creating a momentary cosmopolitan perspective that supersedes and exceeds national affiliations.

II. I Rigoberta Menchú and Misappropriation of Voice

Without doubt, the most well known testimony narrative is I Rigoberta Menchú (1983), created in collaboration between Menchú, the Maya-Quiche activist and anthropologist, Elizabeth Burgos-Debray. Although already well known, when Stanford included the text in its required Western Civilization courses, I Rigoberta Menchú became the canonized exemplar of the testimony narrative. Indeed, it is difficult to find a discussion of testimony that does not address Menchú. While Menchú’s and Burgos-Debray’s narrative does fit the generic qualities of testimony
narrative, the circumstances of its production, particularly the relationship Burgos-Debray constructs between herself and Menchú, and herself and readers in her introduction, undermines the cosmopolitan spirit of collaboration. Instead the result is a sense of competition for the authority to address a Western audience. Following the book’s publication, the relationship between the two deteriorated to the point that Menchú denounced her collaborator entirely. If public infighting were not enough, the book became the subject of an infamous debate in the late 1990s when anthropologist David Stoll accused Menchú of fabricating elements of her testimony.\(^7\)

While the political challenges to the veracity of Menchu’s account are dubious, Burgos-Debray’s role in the text’s production is more worthy of critique. In her introduction, Burgos-Debray notes that when she transcribed her interviews with Menchú, “nothing was left out, not a word” (xix). However, she confesses slightly later that she “had to insert linking passages if the manuscript was to read like a monologue” and that this has been done silently (xx). These supplementary materials are entirely the product of her imagination and their extent remains otherwise undisclosed. Despite her admission that even after working with Menchú, she has “never studied Maya-Quiche culture” or “done field-work in Guatemala,” Burgos-Debray contends that her elaborations in no way alter the substance of Menchú’s narrative and that her lack of familiarity with the country in no way limits her ability to formulate such passages or to speak for the desires and demands of all Guatemalan Mayans (xix).

Like many testimony narrators, Menchú begins by explaining that her story is “not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people” and that it is important for readers to realize “that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). The universalism of this statement is the source of much of the controversy surrounding Menchú. Within the context of the testimonio, however, her claim takes on a different valence than the factual equivalence testimony ordinarily implies. She is her people’s representative and her experience evokes, but does not encompass or exhaust, the reality of many others.\(^8\) Burgos-Debray affirms Menchú’s claim, but treats her
narrative as a juridical document corresponding exactly to her individual experience. Where Menchú champions the cause of poor indigenous Guatemalans, Burgos-Debray, in her introduction, claims that “the voice of Rigoberta Menchú,” a textual entity she had a hand in creating, and rather than Menchú, herself, “allows the defeated to speak,” and that “she speaks for all the Indians of the American continent” (xi). Burgos-Debray describes herself as acting as no more than a passive receptacle of experience during the interview process, “Rigobeta’s listener” and “her instrument, her double” but her active interpretation of Menchú effaces the existence of an entire hemisphere full of ethnic groups (xx). She implies here, that she is entirely unbiased, neutral, and just as good as a substitute to the reader for actual contact with Menchú, who in turn, is a substitute for contact with the people she claims to represent and further still for the people Burgos-Debray claims Menchú represents.

In the years following the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos-Debray’s desire to claim ownership of the text’s and Menchú’s success has become more evident. Despite plans to transfer royalties to Menchú, Burgos-Debray, initially citing financial technicalities and later their falling-out, has apparently kept all income from the book’s various editions (Burgos 59). When Menchú rewrote her story with a new team of collaborators after winning the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, Burgos-Debray responded by disparaging Menchú’s ability to narrate her experience. Of the second book, she indignantly writes, “[Rigoberta] has limited herself to producing a mirror image, taking the first book as a model with the sole object of supplanting it … [it] is a pallid reflection that does not withstand comparison” to her original text (60). Contradicting earlier affectations of selfless, self-effacing listening, Burgos-Debray here expresses her desire to be Menchú’s mouthpiece, providing, but also limiting, access between Menchú and Western audiences.

Burgos-Debray clearly played a role in the production of Menchú’s narrative and has self-serving interests in her connection to the text’s material success. The violence Burgos-Debray commits against Menchú in her effort to transform her into a narrated identity is by no means unique. Within politically powerful societies, there is the tendency to conflate an inability to accurately narrate one’s own traumatic experiences with the
authenticity of victimhood, hence necessitating intervention on the part of activist academics. Slavoj Žižek usefully describes this tendency arising from the unexamined assumption that “the very factual deficiencies of the traumatised subject’s report on her experience bear witness to the truthfulness of her report, since they signal that the reported content ‘contaminated’ the manner of reporting it” (4). His account of the narration of violence reveals the consequence that our process of recognition deliberately prevents unsightly victims from contributing to the narration of any national identity. David Jefferess makes a similar claim about framing humanitarian benevolence in terms of global citizenship. Global citizenship, he argues, requires “an Other who needs to be known, understood, and ultimately uplifted or saved” (31). The benevolent actor’s insistence upon disparity as a component for global action “mask[s] the material relationships that produce some as privileged, and hence capable of being active global citizens, and some as in need of support” (31). Burgos-Debray’s treatment of Menchú allows her to serve as an emblem for ethnic vengeance or justification for the intellectual domination of dehumanized others, but does not concede to her the ability to adequately narrate her condition, history, or to reconstruct a stable, cohesive identity. As the inability to articulate and live an independent identity in a culturally oppressive state was the source of Menchú’s frustration, Burgos-Debray’s perhaps inadvertent mistreatment of Menchú simply mirrors the conditions she sought to speak out against.

Inderpal Grewal indicts human rights discourse, particularly European and US narratives, for exploiting the image of suffering, and for arousing the desire to intervene abroad in order to further establish the dominance of their own nationalisms within inter- or transnational space (158). She writes, “the very concept of the ‘international’ as a neutral or supranational space has maintained the link between the geopolitics of a universal human rights negotiated unequally between powerful states … and the biopolitics of a cosmopolitan, humanitarian self concerned with the welfare of untold populations of poor, disenfranchised women” (161). Grewal goes on to argue that “dominant representations of human rights discourse in refuge asylum constructed Europe and North America as the primary destination of refugees and thus as primary ‘havens’ that
‘protect’ those escaping human rights violations” (168). Human rights literature therefore limits rights by enforcing the “American role as the world’s policeman” (171). Burgos-Debray’s rhetorical justification of her act of speaking for Menchú conforms neatly to Grewal’s description of humanitarian discourse. Although Burgos-Debray may have initially had good intentions, her representation of Menchú manages to exemplify nearly every pitfall of the testimony genre.

While writers must exercise discretion and sensitivity as they present the voices of their subaltern witnesses, it is still far better to speak out on their behalf than to leave injustices against subaltern groups unacknowledged. As Linda Alcoff puts it, an unquestioned prohibition against speaking for others “assumes that an individual can retreat into her discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly within that location that do not range over others” (108). Assuming such insularity further enables one to assume “that I am unconnected to others in my authentic self or that I can achieve an autonomy from others” with the “sole effect of allowing me to avoid responsibility and accountability for my effects on others” (Alcoff 108). Likewise, Beck insists on a cosmopolitan commitment to dialogue with difference, arguing that an imposed “incommensurability … between cultures” releases “one from the labour of dialogue, leading with a degree of inevitability to imperialism and the clash of civilizations” (143). Testimony narratives, when constructed judiciously and compassionately, because they force readerly recognition or concession of the speaker’s equality and the formation of an active political-economic collaboration, creates a discursive practice with which one may speak for another in a more acceptable way. The task of inspiring politically and economically privileged readers to move beyond passive empathy for the oppressed to activism remains an important one. Indeed, despite Burgos-Debray’s failings as a collaborator, Menchú’s testimony has done a great deal to raise awareness in the US of political conditions in Guatemala.

III. *What is the What* and Transnational Collaboration
Dave Eggers’s *What is the What* offers a potential counter to Burgos-Debray’s failure and creates a more balanced relationship between writer,
narrator, and readers. Like most testimony writers, Eggers's stated goal is to “[empower] those most closely affected by contemporary social injustice” specifically by using “oral history” to “depict human rights crises in the United States and around the world” (Eggers 2009; 348). However, Eggers’s book differs from typical testimony narratives by moving beyond simply reporting injustice to a reading audience in the hope that awareness will lead to ideological change to directly funding aid organizations. All profits from the first edition of What is the What, for which Eggers assumed all financial risk by publishing it with his press, McSweeny’s, and all future author’s proceeds, fund development initiatives in Sudan through a nonprofit organization that Deng oversees independently (Eggers, Zeitoun 539; The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation website). Further, Eggers and Deng contest the notion that the US is socially and politically superior to Sudan by continually returning to images of Deng’s ongoing persecution within the US.

Since Eggers’s What is the What follows the life of a single individual, Valentino Achak Deng, and does so in order to engage readers in a larger cause, it is vulnerable to metonymic readings. However, Eggers employs a collaborative methodology that actively discourages the simplistic sort of allegorization that Carr describes and that Burgos-Debray’s claims encourage. Unlike most testimonials, and despite its subtitle, “The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng,” What is the What is marketed as a novel, not nonfiction. The word, autobiography, in Eggers’s lexicon signals the impossibility of objective or accurate description of the consciousness of self or other. He approaches his own memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius (2000) with similar reservations. As he explains on that book’s copyright page, it is a work of fiction “in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people” but immediately undermines this assertion by claiming ironically that he “had no imagination whatsoever for those sorts of things and could not conceive of making up a story or characters” anyhow. In the book’s preface, he suggests that instead of contemplating the philosophical complexities of nonfiction, readers ought to simply “Pretend it’s fiction” or insert their own names in place of his, that his life “can be about you! You and your pals!” (xxi, xxii). Although lighthearted,
Eggers evokes the tendency of readers to reconstruct imaginatively real people from a text’s characters, regardless of the objectivity or gravity with which they are presented. As readers, we are able to empathize with others, or representations of others, his authorial stance suggests, because we are able to extract from their specific, local, and unique experiences values and beliefs we imagine to be more universal. Of course, in typically ironic fashion, the universal Eggers sees readers discovering is often no more than a convenient stand-in for “like myself.” Just as Eggers’s readers can substitute themselves in his life story, they may imagine Deng standing in for all Sudanese refugees. However, as the tone of Eggers’s “Preface” and the title of his memoir make clear, to make such an assumption is to commit an act of absurd egocentricism.

Rather than attempting to pass off the narrative of What is the What as an authoritative document encapsulating Sudanese struggle, Eggers challenges the ability of narratives mediated by outsiders, or any single representation by anyone, to achieve facticity. In the “Preface,” which is the only portion of the book not written by Eggers, Deng points out that, although labeled a work of fiction, “it should be noted that all of the major events of the book are true … and the world I have known is not different from the one depicted within these pages” (xiv). Unlike Menchú, whose narrative follows Burgos-Debray’s statement of authorization and who privileges her experience as universal, Deng, when asked if he believes What is the What is “representative of the experience of the Sudanese refugees in the United States,” responded firmly that “this is my story and not the story of the thousands of Lost Boys in America. There are many experiences in the story that we all shared … [but] my life is different in many ways. This is a story of my life, not everyone’s life. We are all different people” (“Interview”). If readers choose to view Deng as an emblem for all Sudanese refugees, such treatment is the product of assumptions they bring to the text.

In the book’s supplementary “Reader’s Guide,” Eggers further challenges readings of his interpretation of Deng’s oral testimony as an authoritative or comprehensive example of Sudanese experience. To help fill in the gaps in Deng’s childhood memories, Eggers, like Burgos-Debray, made use of other materials. While preparing for the book, though,
Eggers travelled to Deng’s hometown, Marial Bai, interviewed other Sudanese refugees and aid workers in Ethiopia, Kenya, and the US, and researched official documents from the British colonial period as well as more recent governments (Larsen). He explains that in order to give Deng’s account detail and dialogue, he blended it with his “imagining, and reports, maybe a human-rights report or another Lost Boy’s account” (Larsen 13). Further, rather than attributing the experiences of others to Deng, Eggers depicts him interacting with others who add their voices to his first-person recollection of their lives. The result of these dialogues is a polyvocal, intertextual narrative. For example, shortly after reaching an Ethiopian refugee camp, the Deng of the novel learns about Sudanese history in the camp's school. A youth leader explains official British colonial policy to Deng and his friends. The passage, which the “Reader’s Guide” identifies as lifted directly from “a secret Khartoum Dispatch from 1945,” appears in the text formatted as a block quotation and in italics in order to set it apart from other dialogue (Larsen 11; Eggers, What 193). While the narrative uses Deng's voice, it is not a transcription of his conversations with Eggers, nor is it strictly a reproduction of his discrete experience. It is a narrative of many people's experiences stylized according to his speaking voice. Rather than solely reconstructing Deng’s exploits, Eggers shows him interacting with diverse communities and with diverse people who are the justification for his narrative. Although Deng is the book’s central figure, he is not its sole contributor. In this way, the Deng of What is the What remains metonymic but in a way different from the production of static, duplicate individuals.

The use of Deng’s experience in tandem with the variety of sources Eggers lists, because it occurs openly and strategically, prevents readers from arriving at the conclusion that the text reveals the “truth” of life in Sudan. On the contrary, Deng explains that he feels he is only “an example of atrocities many successive governments of Sudan committed” and later points out that “I haven’t suffered as much as these people who have faced the atrocities for the last sixteen years” (Eggers, What xiv; Larsen 15). Eggers reminds readers “how complete life is [in Sudan] and how it’s not so different in terms of what the people there want, and the pleasures of life that they enjoy” (Larsen 15). Eggers’s and Deng’s
open recognition of the collage work going into the construction of the narrative reveals the degree of mediation between Deng’s lived experience, which was only a small part of events occurring in the nation, and the recorded testimony and makes him limited as a substitute for the reader’s contact with the actual place and its population. So, while the Deng of *What is the What* is undeniably fictional, because he admits that his own voice and experience are inadequate on their own to narrate the national atrocity and Eggers is transparent about his even greater inability to know fully what he represents, the text forces readers to recognize the presence of many other voices waiting to be heard. It does so because Deng “wanted to reach out to others to help them understand Sudan’s place in our global community” (xiv). However, unlike Jefferess’s critique of global citizenship, which imagines the privileged acting as citizens by giving to the poor, Deng depicts a mode of collaboration in which “since you and I exist, together we can make a difference” (xv). Jefferess warns against simplistic enthusiasm for humanitarian intervention. Campaigns “focusing on what the global citizen must do to or for the Other,” he suggests, “rather than conceiving a global ethics in terms of understanding our relationship with others,” generate an ethical obligation premised upon “the symptoms of global inequality and not the causes” (34). This one-way relationship, of a transfer of goods and services in exchange for permission to continue to turn away from suffering and inequality, is precisely the sort of relationship Deng and Eggers combat. In addition to Deng’s insistence upon a reciprocal relationship, one in which he improves the lives of his readers as much as they have the potential to do so in Sudan, Eggers’s interrogation of the history of conflict in Sudan reveals the scope of the situation in broader terms. Eggers finds that contemporary social conditions are the result of a Western desire to intervene, namely in colonial mismanagement of the British Sudanese colony, which forced the national unification of autonomous tribal groups (Eggers, *What* 192–5). Eggers’s conclusion is nearly identical to Jefferess’s—even Westerners with good intentions would do well to think carefully before acting.

On a narrative level, Eggers refutes entirely the notion that the US is the utopian refuge and haven for exiles that Grewal worries humanitar-
ian discourse has created. In the novel, Eggers frames Deng’s narrative of his flight from Sudan to Kenya and Ethiopia as a memory he recalls from his new home in the US. Deng opens the novel by opening his door to “a tall, sturdily built African-American woman” who asks to use his phone after experiencing car trouble. Deng lets her in his home, only to discover she and a friend are robbing him at gunpoint. After beating and tying him up, the gunman, who personifies simplistic metonymic assumptions, tells him that because “You’re from Africa, right … that means we’re brothers” (5). Deng is “unwilling to agree,” and tries to think of a “time when I last felt this betrayed, when I last felt in the presence of evil so careless” (5). The robbery took place during the writing of *What is the What* and Eggers recalls “the complaint card that the police had given him” was just “a business card with a phone number on it. That was the extent of their worry about a gun to the head of an immigrant from Sudan. They would not, it was clear, be investigating the crime” (Eggers, “Just Boys Walking”). The analogue to violent crime in the US that Deng finds is, of course, his childhood of trials in Sudan, though he feels his sufferings in the US are more outrageous and inexplicable, since here people have more than everything they could possibly need while in Sudan there was at least a material explanation for crime. In contrast to expectations of “a land without war … a land without misery,” and dreams of “peace and college and safety,” Deng and his fellow refugees have found themselves in a state of limbo—neither citizens, nor aliens exactly. They are not a part of US society and cannot return home. Living as exiles, they “have found ways to spend the time,” though not in any particularly rewarding way. Deng has “held too many menial jobs,” most recently working as a greeter at a health club, and “after five years” of study in a junior college, “still do[es] not have the necessary credits to apply to a four-year college” (8). Throughout the narrative, Deng periodically returns to the brutality inflicted upon him by his assailants and to everyday indignities experienced in interaction with the normally oblivious public. Eggers’s frame story of brutality in the present and in the US continually reminds readers that while Deng’s past in Sudan may have been horrific, the US is also the site of ongoing violence, exploitation, and racism and is equally in need of social reform.13
From the project’s inception, Eggers and Deng “agreed that all the author’s proceeds from the book would be [Deng's] and would be used to improve the lives of Sudanese in Sudan and elsewhere” (Eggers, What xiv). To this end, prior to publication, Eggers and Deng formed a non-profit organization, The Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, whose mission is “to provide educational opportunities for those affected by the conflict in Sudan” (539). The majority of the Foundation’s work has been carried out in Marial Bai where Deng has built several schools, a community center, and a teacher training program. It is always possible to make the argument that, because Eggers mediates our interaction with Deng, the book, and Eggers, have transformed Deng’s voice, or prevented him from speaking fully. Eggers’s willing return of the book’s proceeds and Deng’s leadership role with his Foundation, more than anything else, however, resists charges that testimonial narratives and resulting transnational activism only enforce paternalistic and imbalanced power relations. On the contrary, the two manage to reach a balanced partnership. Deng’s testimony does not falsely herald him as a great revolutionary leader, nor the agent of sweeping change. He is not simply the object of Western readers’ sympathy, nor a plain indictment of corruption in the US. Instead, consideration of Deng’s existence requires that readers acknowledge his existence alongside their own and reconfigure ideas of community according to a cosmopolitan perspective.

**Cosmopolitan Humanitarian Collaboration**

The reading of testimonial literature I have described has as its goal the production of cosmopolitan, rather than national or multicultural, bonds of solidarity and community between narrators and readers. By implicating a global readership in local activist projects, the testimony narrative collapses the imagined boundaries dividing individuals across national territorial lines. In contrast to national literatures, which enjoy the dubious luxury of pretended insularity, cosmopolitan literatures involve encounters between peoples of differing national origins. Deliberately nationalist literatures generally bolster a sense of common identity in order to unify a group of people against others, to create a feeling that these individuals belong together for some purposeful reason. Cosmopolitan
literatures employ contingent commonalities to unify temporarily heterogeneous individuals on the basis of involved activism. Whereas the imagined bonds of national community come from our interaction with static, textual bodies, cosmopolitan communities are often the result of spontaneous face-to-face interaction with the shifting cast of people in the surrounding environment. Deng makes his readers partners in his struggle against the oppressive conditions he has experienced. They do not come to resemble Sudanese. To read a narrative like Deng’s, or even Menchú’s, is to accept responsibility for the collective action the text envisages. Despite the reality that they often focus on superficial qualities, which may or may not actually be shared among members of a community, national literatures are a powerful unifying force, sometimes even capable of contradicting more personal encounters with difference within and beyond the boundaries of a community. With cosmopolitan texts, however, it is often the case that authors create a sense of discomfort and disjointedness by revealing the arbitrariness of national identities and by forging bonds between people across national borders rather than within them. Political theorist Michael Hanchard describes the formation of transnational political alliances (his terminology) as a process of coagulation. Coagulate political bonds, he explains, “produce coalitions that within their immediate environment … increase the likelihood of positive political outcomes for the actors involved” and whose “implications and consequences … are limited to the immediate circumstances of the political environment therein” (Hanchard 33–34). In a coagulate community, individuals identify in one another temporary commonalities that enable them to address some pressing concern. Cosmopolitan communities are not the product of shared cultural appearances, as this is something easily manipulated and distorted, but instead come together on the basis of active participants’ shared ethical commitment toward one another.  

The bonds of politically engaged transnational communities, Hanchard’s coagulation model suggests, operate as temporary points of identification between individuals in a greater and ongoing process of negotiating identity that is distinctly cosmopolitan. This is the sort of bond Deng creates when he imagines the presence of his readership and which readers renew by engaging with his narrative.
A cosmopolitan politics expands the boundaries of a community beyond the nation with the result that it is no longer defined in terms of characteristics distinct to nationality. Literary cosmopolitanism requires a similar transformation between author and reader. Under a national model like Benedict Anderson's famous “imagined communities,” in which literature arrives in the present unified as a coherent body by merit of a mythological and long-ago determined teleological project, the authors of works contributing to the collective national identity are at a remove from the consuming public whom they in part define. In a cosmopolitan community, the author, or in the case of testimony narrative, the narrator and writer, is burdened with the task of recruiting the allegiance of an audience assumed to be heterogeneous through a much more active act of reaching out across the text. In an essay explaining the continuing relevance of fiction, Michael Chabon succinctly describes the relationship between authors and readers as predicated upon the desire for entertainment. Literary entertainment for Chabon does not principally imply the fulfillment of desire, but refers to “[t]he original sense of the word,” which is “a lovely one of mutual support through intertwining, like a pair of trees grown together, interwoven, each sustaining and bearing up the other … a kind of midair transfer of strength, contact across a void, like the tangling of cable and steel between two lonely bridgeheads” (15). The condition of interdependence is heightened in testimonial narratives as writers must depend upon their narrators to produce the content of the narrative and narrators likewise must trust writers to textualize faithfully and market their oral accounts. The testimony, as a cosmopolitan artifact, bridges gaps of received culture and lived experience in order to form active connections between otherwise distant and disconnected people. The empathetic bonds formed through communication across transnational spaces require readers to respond with a reorganization of beliefs and actions.

Testimony’s assumption of a cosmopolitan audience demands great respect on the part of readers and writers alike for the difference of experience that occurs across national boundaries. Unlike national literatures, however, cosmopolitan literatures do not make of such differences an impassable divide between people. Just as Chabon describes
readers and writers in a relationship of imaginative support, Deng finds “almost unbelievable strength” in the knowledge that “you [the reader] are there” (535). His act of narration collapses the space between him and his readers and makes him unable to “pretend that you do not exist” just as much as it is “impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (535). Testimony narratives, which insist on the implication of privileged readers in the poverty and suffering they detail, are a good example of these partnerships. Cosmopolitan literature, by emphasizing the span of human connectedness across formal geopolitical boundaries and by continually exposing one national readership to the literary consciousnesses or voices of other nationalities, implies a constant ethical concern for all people with whom we come into contact. It enables us to realize a humane imagination of others. Cosmopolitan literature demands that privileged Western readers entertain voices like Deng’s rather than simply turning to literature for edification or the more ordinary, onanistic sense of entertainment.

Notes
1 Brennan prefers the term internationalism to cosmopolitanism because certain kinds of cosmopolitanisms envision “a ‘world state’ not explicitly built in the name of any existing power, but factually serving its interests in decently mediated disguise” (83). Internationalism, by comparison, “seeks to establish global relations of respect and cooperation, based on acceptance of difference in polity as well as culture” (77). His framing of the term has the advantage of explicit alignment with subaltern populations and concerns of social reform. I have chosen to retain “cosmopolitanism,” however, because, as Beck points out, “international” retains an implication of communities segmented along arbitrary national lines. For Beck, a cosmopolitan perspective transcends the “‘either inside or outside’ that underlies the distinction between national and international,” tending towards a recognition of being “‘both inside and outside’” (143). Cosmopolitanism allows for an increased fluidity and spontaneity of action that is not easily described as constrained in frameworks of national or international exchanges. Nationalism, internationalism, and transnationalism depend upon the stability of the concept of nation and on the centrality of that concept to the identities and purposes of those involved in collaboration. Cosmopolitanism lends itself more readily to acts of resistance and compassion because it does not force an artificial and inflexible difference between people on the basis of nationality, while also refraining from forcing the erasure of difference within communities aligned on the basis of common practice or aims.
2 Testimony narratives, because they are theorized within a Central American context typically employ the Spanish term, *testimonio*. As I am arguing for a broader application of the genre, I will instead refer to such texts as testimonies.

3 Beverley goes so far as to argue that the form’s moment of relevance has passed because Latin America is no longer in a state of revolution (“Real Thing” 281). His argument may hold true if testimony narratives are theorized geographically or according to party politics.

4 Braebeck suggests a biography’s emphasis on individual achievement invites the reader to “impose his/her identity on top of the hero,” or to fantasize about being in the place of, or replacing, the text’s hero (255). For a more extensive discussion of biography and autobiography, see Egan.

5 For a discussion of the definitions and distinctions between modes of legal testimony, see Kusch, 336–8.

6 Carr places the burden of responsibility for the testimony’s reception principally upon its writer, whose ethos encourages readers to approach a narrator metonymically or allegorically. Beverley, however, associates this sort of writerly agency with ethnography and oral history, whereas he finds testimony narratives depend heavily on “the intentionality of the narrator” (“Margin” 14). Neither critic accords authority for a text’s meaning to its readers, however.

7 Stoll suggests that Menchú was not as involved with indigenous groups as her narrative suggests. Radical Conservative writer Dinesh D’Souza amplified Stoll’s claims that details of Menchú’s biography were elaborated to argue that her entire experience and the history of ethnic violence it chronicles were highly exaggerated fabrications. Regarding the comprehensive picture of life Stoll’s notes capture, Stephen damningly comments, they cover “his one year in Nebaj, almost eight years after Menchú fled” (229). For a more comprehensive treatment of the Stoll controversy, see *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. This volume collects many of the most significant responses to Stoll’s critique, ranging from editorials in Guatemala’s national paper, *La Prensa Libre*, to both defenses and rebuttals from academics in the US.

8 Beverley could just as well describe these represented individuals as otherwise subaltern. The narrating subjects of a *testimonio* would otherwise be considered subaltern because, as Spivak argues, the subaltern subject occupies a position of being unable to reach an audience with narrative. The subaltern is not exactly incapable of speaking to, or addressing, a Western audience, he or she, or a population *in toto*, is just perceived as not worth paying attention to (Spivak 273). The *testimonio* narrator, because legitimized by a Western academic collaborator, becomes no longer subaltern, but remains uniquely able to speak of subaltern conditions, striving towards both aspects of representation (*darstellung*, and *vertreten*) that Spivak discusses, to a Western audience. The practice of testimony narrative, its transformation of oral story into text and its mediation between readers and witnesses by a Western academic, is not what Spivak finds irksome.
about privileged individuals’ interventions on behalf of those less so when she writes of the problem of subalternity. Instead, it is “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (292).

9 Tierney puts the issue in more literary, less pragmatic terms thusly, “[the] point of testimonio … is against the creation of a modernist nostalgia of the romanticized identity. But its purpose is also antithetical to a postmodern notion that identity is so fragmented that one can speak for no one other than one’s self and that knowing is impossible outside of one’s own experience” (107).

10 Eaglestone questions the possibility of any non-native writer to create “African trauma narratives” out of any motive other than “the eruption of a guilty conscience” (75). More universally, Spivak finds that collaboration between subaltern people and Western writers presents so many opportunities for distortion that the subaltern subject can never truly speak openly. Beverley addresses these concerns and suggests that testimonial literature, when practiced conscientiously, unlike other forms of international representation, “can serve as both an allegorical figure for, and a concrete means of, the union of a radicalized (Marxist) intelligentsia with the subaltern” (“Second Thoughts” 4). “Moreover,” he argues, “it is a relationship in which neither of the participants has to cancel its identity as such” because “[testimonies] have become … a discursive space where the possibilities of such an alliance can be negotiated on both sides without too much angst about otherness or ‘othering’” (4).

11 This mission statement is taken from the “Voice of Witness” series that Eggers inaugurated in order to extend the work he began with What is the What, and which he edits along with Lola Vollen through the School of Journalism at University of California (Berkeley). Zeitoun (2009), is also a collaborative testimony narrative. Zeitoun describes the unjust treatment of a Syrian-American Muslim following Hurricane Katrina and critiques US exceptionalism more directly by explicitly treating the US as a site of moral and ethical decay in contrast with Syria, a nation we consider underdeveloped and hostile.

12 See Smith and Watson for an engaging discussion of Eggers’s distrust of biographical and autobiographical representation.

13 Eaglestone describes What is the What as a “western-facing text,” and an example of a white liberal “guilty conscience,” but reluctantly concedes that Eggers has framed the story in a way that prevents excessive glamorization of the US (76, 75, 80).

14 In almost direct contradiction to national literatures, which create meaning and identity through the exclusion and dismissal of others, Levinas argues that our individual identities become meaningful only through our willingness to face others as human. He explains, “the past of the other and, in a sense, the history of humanity in which I have never participated, in which I have never been present, is my past” because, “from the start, the encounter with the Other” principally involves “my responsibility for him, that is the responsibility for my
neighbor, which is, no doubt, the harsh name for what we call love of one’s neighbor,” or “the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other” (115, 103).

Works Cited


What Is World Literature?
David Damrosch in Conversation with Wang Ning

David Damrosch was interviewed by Wang Ning at the Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature, held in Shanghai, August 2010. The conversation brings together two eminent scholars of comparative literature from the East and West. Wang Ning began by asking the status of world literature in an age of proliferating new media and popular culture.

I think you must have made some new Chinese friends and got acquainted with new readers and critics and university students during your visit to Shanghai. Since you are now well-known in China for your remarkable books, What Is World Literature? and How to Read World Literature?, both of which will be published soon in Chinese, Chinese readers will regard you as a pioneering figure in promoting world literature in such an age of globalization. Would you please comment on the significance of world literature in an age of globalization, when literature is often reported to be “dead” and literary study is severely challenged by the rise of popular culture and consumer culture in postmodern societies?

It seems to me that our global world has more need of literature than ever, and of world literature in particular, where so many people’s horizons now are international and global in so much movement of people across borders, and academic institutions are so much more opened out to students around the world. This is certainly true in China; we are seeing a massive movement of Chinese students to many other parts of the world. I do think that literature provides a privileged mode of access to thinking about the problems of the globe and the inner life of a culture. Literary works never directly reflect the reality around them, but they refract it, they recreate it as an alternative world always closely connected in some way to our own, and give us a real way to think about the inner tensions and possibilities of the world. Concerning the
related question of popular culture, world literature faces competitive challenges into three directions.

First, there is always a tension between elite works of artistic literature and more broadly popular literature. William Wordsworth in the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800 says that the works of Shakespeare were being overwhelmed by “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse.” So he already expressed this concern two hundred years ago. Certainly today we have tremendous threat to elite culture from popular literature and a question of reading standards and reading interests. But I think that is just one change. A second change is simply that people are shifting away from reading literature at all in an internet age, and they are now just doing cellphone activities, computer games and so on. But even so, I think this is a very hopeful time for writers themselves, for circulation of literature, for several reasons. Third, I think literature now is fully entering again a multi-media space which is where literature traditionally lived all along. Most literature was not written to be read by isolated individuals. Literature was always part of the social world, whether it would be Tang Dynasty poets gathering together to drink and write poems, or giving poems as parting gifts or greeting gifts, so that poetry was a medium of social exchange almost as much as a source of private aesthetic pleasure. I think that we are probably coming out of the brief, rather artificial period in which the private study of high art was seen as somehow sacrificing everyday life via the social contact. Any great transformation will favour some writers, disfavour others, and probably some important writers will recede and the importance of some others will benefit by these changes. Even though Wordsworth was worried about Shakespeare no longer being read, he was wrong. Shakespeare turned out not to be eclipsed by the rise of the popular novel of Wordsworth’s day. Shakespeare is ever more read and translated, more performed all over the world. And I think that if Shakespeare were alive today he would be writing scripts for television series and he would be getting produced and his series would be subtitled or dubbed around the world, with a much greater audience today than ever before.
Yes, I also have such a feeling. I think that in the contemporary era, especially in the age of globalization, people always think that literature is dead, and literature is no longer as important as it used to be, so many people who used to love literature have now shifted their attention to popular culture, internet culture, or TV, the football match and so on. But still, the more colourful material life might be, the more people want to draw rich nourishment from spiritual and cultural life. So in this way I think literature will certainly provide us with some good nourishment with which we can cultivate a new humanistic spirit and also raise our moral standard. That is one thing. The other thing is that since we are reading world literature we must read the best works which are circulated not only in one individual country but also in almost all the other parts of the world. In this way we are also selecting and appreciating different works in a critical way. We can certainly benefit from these literary works than from those which are superficially interesting, but actually not worth reading. I wonder whether you also think so.

I do. I have a question for you, which is that I have heard it said at times in the last decade or so, Chinese writers have become so tempted by the possibility of profit in writing popular fiction that most Chinese novels now are not serious literary productions but merely popular literature. Do you think this is a fair understanding or are you finding some really excellent writers in China today?

I think at the moment there are three types of writers in contemporary China. The first type includes those who are just writing about popular themes and gaining profits from writing. I think they make up about two-thirds of all the writers in China today. Many of them do not try to work hard to write excellent canonical works, but rather, they want to make money out of writing. So that is why they try to get some sensational events from daily life or simply want to parody or rewrite canonical works. They pay particular attention to those classical literary works that are already popular among the broad reading public. As a result, they could, on the one hand, deconstruct the established canon and on the other hand, attract the attention of ordinary readers.

A second type refers to those serious writers, who are not so many in number but who are still working hard to write remarkable works, such as
Wang Meng, Han Shaogong, Yu Hua, Mo Yan, Wang Anyi, Xu Xiaobin, Su Tong, Yan Lianke, Jia Pingwa, Ge Fei, Mai Jia and others. They are not as popular as they used to be, but they are really working hard and are read extensively. They try to publish the best of their works so in this way they are still appreciated by a certain number of readers who love literature, and also, they are studied by literary critics and university students and teachers, who take literary studies as a major. I am told that some of the above-mentioned writers have been nominated as candidates of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

A third type of writers are those who write not only for art’s sake but also for the market. That is, they try to write great works, but in addition they want to live a good and decent life. As you know, some Chinese writers do have regular jobs in either government institutions or universities. But some are just freelance writers. They have to live on their writing, so, while they write some serious literary works, they also write TV plays or even write scripts for film or TV serials. In this way, they can make money to support themselves so that they could devote more time to serious literary writing. All these three types of writers represent the status quo of contemporary Chinese literary writing. I think that this phenomenon is also similar in the West, is it not?

The situation is relatively the same in the United States, where the bestseller list is dominated by detective fiction, spy novels and historical romances. I was looking at the bestseller lists in America in the 1950s and there were many more high quality art novels than we find today; among them were Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, J.D. Salinger, and Norman Mailer. These works are considered as real classics, and were tremendously popular, they were bestsellers and they were already received as important works of fiction. And there is not on the current list one writer of that literary quality.

But when I talked to a friend who is studying this phenomenon, she pointed out that actually most of the difference is just that more people are reading than ever, more common people are reading. They have always liked detective stories, so many more detective stories have been sold. It’s not that there are fewer copies necessarily of literary works being sold. So it may be similar to the situation in China; as you have
mentioned works of high quality are not as popular, but in the United States, it is an expansion of very broad basic readership, which means the bestsellers are now more popular works. But I think that probably, we will see a sorting out of artistic fiction to perform its true role, which, as you say, is to give spiritual values and a place for spiritual reflection, intellectual reflection, understanding the world. In the Victorian era most people who read Charles Dickens’ novels were reading them the way they would read the detective stories, the way they would watch television series today; because they simply did not have television, they were forced to read Dickens. It is not a bad thing if what people really want is to watch television series, now they can do it. People can now read Dickens for the things Dickens can give them that television series do not; because he was a great artist who used popular medium, he made it more than it needed to be, that is the reason why we still read him today, rather than the thousand popular writers who have been forgotten.

Yes, it’s almost true of the contemporary Chinese situation. Some of the classical works of literature are popularized by means of television or film. And some of the marginalized modern classics, such as the so-called “Red Classics” are also made very popular since they are screened or televised. As well, some translated foreign literature such as novels written by J. D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov and Philip Roth are still popular among ordinary readers, especially *Catcher in the Rye*, which has had a print run of about 200,000 copies with different Chinese translations. When Salinger was reported dead, different newspapers and TV stations tried to interview me and asked me to write a new review of the translated version of *Catcher in the Rye*, because they also want to popularize the book so that they could sell more copies. I would say translated literary works occupy a very significant place in our reading list.

Interesting! So the death of the author actually gives new impetus to sales of his works….

Yes, and compared with those translated American novels, some of the Chinese literary works are not so popular, especially those modern writers,
with exception of Lu Xun who has always been popular, even now. I think we could perhaps come to our second issue: the implications of world literature and its evolution in the past hundred years. Do you think that works read by people of different nations and different countries could be regarded as world literature? Or, as you have already pointed out, literature must be fictional, valuable and beautiful something that implies value judgment. Could you elaborate on these points a bit further?

Yes. The term “world literature” goes back to the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and in the 1820s he developed the term of Weltliteratur or “world literature”, which he saw as a modern and new phenomenon, very much a result of the literary market becoming international, with a heightened circulation of texts, and also the kind of reaction abroad of different writers. So a writer becomes a world writer by being read abroad and Goethe himself as a world writer found it very exciting and illuminating to read his own work in different translations. He liked to read reviews of his work and particularly in France or England. And he wanted his works to be reviewed in prestigious journals abroad; he was very interested in prestige and in a way he was a first and early beneficiary of the circulation of modern world literature in the nineteenth century because in his later years he was starting to fall out of favour in Germany where he was thought of as conservative, just old fashioned. At that point his works become so world famous abroad that actually after his death he became popular again in Germany, thanks to his being popular in other nations. I think world literature is very much a matter of literature that circulates around the world outside of its initial home, usually in translation. A determining feature of world literature, therefore, is that it does well in translation. There are some excellent works that do not translate well. And that means that they almost never catch on abroad. So there is sometimes an irony that a work may translate almost better than it reads in the original or may gain a new sort of interest in the new language, in the new culture, and may actually do better abroad than at home. We had a conference speaker today who mentioned the case of Hans Christian Andersen, who is a popular author of world literature and yet not so highly regarded in Denmark.
What Is World Literature?

as he is in many other countries around the world, including China. In a way it is a good thing for the author to gain a new market in a new audience and for the work to take on a new form of life.

You suggest then that world literature implies not just broad circulation, but also good translations and evaluations. I share these ideas. On the other hand, I also try to develop some of your original ideas. To my understanding of world literature, if we want to judge whether a literary work should be regarded as world literature, we must have some objective criteria, which are of both universality and relativity.

In this sense, the first criteria to judge whether a work should be viewed as world literature should be whether it has gone beyond the boundary of nations or countries and languages. That is, it must go through translation. The second is that it must be included in some anthologies, especially some authoritative anthologies of world literature. Many people prefer to spend their limited time reading anthologies in which literary works are carefully selected by literary scholars. In this way, anthologies also imply the standard of both canonicity and readability. The third is to expand the reach of these writings among ordinary readers so that they become the inheritance of different generations of writers. If a work of literature appears in textbooks or major references by university students and teachers, it will also be read and appreciated by large numbers of educated readers. The fourth is that the author must be critically responded to or even debated about by scholars or critics of other countries or cultural contexts, because even if a work causes controversy, it means that the work has certain critical value; people will not spend time discussing a worthless work. On the other hand, I think, to anthologize world literature, we should also include literatures of different countries, especially those that have been relatively ignored. Douwe Fokkema’s history of literature, for example, only devotes 130 pages to Chinese literature, while twelve times as large space is devoted to French literature. To take another example, one book called Weltliteratur by a German theorist does not even touch any literature of non-western countries. So literatures are not equally considered. In this way we could find that to anthologize world literature also implies power relations and ideological tendencies. Do you agree with me on this point or not?
I do agree. I have been spending a lot of time doing anthologies, first a large Anthology of British Literature and then more recently the Longman Anthology of World Literature in six volumes, and I have been thinking very hard about that. I think we do have some difference between us and our views, because you emphasize reception and certain authoritative presence in the dialogue. I think that very much describes the sort of works we can call masterpieces of world literature. But there are, in my view, also other ways that works that can be thought of as world literature. In my book What Is World Literature? I describe three basic modes: that a work of literature can be classic, or it can be a masterpiece, or it can be a window on the world. The old classical view, which was really disappearing or fading away in Goethe’s time, was an old form of world literature, in which the classic really is something ancient, authoritative, so it would be the Confucian classics, it would be Virgil and Homer—those are the real works of world literature. Then comes the modern masterpiece which can be recognized in its own time even before it has been established as a classic. That is almost a more extreme version, a more thorough version of the authoritative quality. The masterpiece was Goethe’s primary idea of world literature, which is an artistically excellent work that is circulating and being recognized by readers in its own time even if there is no great cultural heritage and no large critical discourse on it. Goethe could publish a masterpiece, a book reviews can recognize it, it can be translated into six languages, and it could become a work of world literature in the very year of its publication. That is very much the function of the modern literary marketplace. You could say that Voltaire’s Candide was translated into ten languages already in the first year or two of its publication, and so it become a work of world literature even before it had been in an anthology or a critical discourse had developed about it. Both because it circulated and because it was recognized for its quality in Goethe’s sense of the masterpiece, it was a masterpiece that became very rapidly world literature.

The idea of literary works as windows on the world is very significant today. Readers can approach world literature just to get a sense of what is going on in the world, what another culture is like. To me a work can function as world literature on a very individual basis for a reader
Who read it and who is opened up to part of the world. And this work may be something I chance upon; it may be little known and it has not yet been made a canonical work. As an anthologist, I am playing both sides of this division because the major works that get the most space in the anthology almost entirely are works that fit all of your criteria, that they have been well known for a long time, they are often translated, and there is a lot of critical discourse about them, they are reviewed as artistic masterpieces. So works such as Dante’s *Inferno* or *The Story of the Stone* tend to get most space in my anthology. But then I also want to put in works I am enthusiastic about. I want them to be read, even if no one knows about them. So I put in Aztec poetry that has never been anthologized before, and I tell my readers: “This is world literature; you should read it.” In a certain sense you can say I want it to become so popular that it changes to fit your criterion eventually: I want the Aztec poems to inspire critical discourse, and more to be translated, but I am already saying: “This is now world literature and I am going to make that claim and I think it is valuable to read.”

What I think is important for us as scholars and teachers of world literature is to expand our readers’ horizons and boundaries; we need to do this as translators too. You and I are both involved in translating and publishing and getting works translated, and retranslating works that are not well-translated because the effort of translation is critical to perceiving something of literary excellence of the work. It is important also to assign works on our syllabus and also to get our readers and our colleagues to read more widely, because I think we both find that many of our colleagues settle for a rather comfortable well-known small canon. These may all be very great works, but our colleagues may not always be so curious to read beyond what their own teachers taught them. And so I think this is a very exciting moment of world literature now to give us new contexts, new ways to look at works that may have been sidelined within their own national tradition but become more interesting now when you connect them across boundaries with other works.

*Do you lay more emphasis on the readability of works?*

Yes indeed.
I lay emphasis on both readability and canonicity. In this way I think we almost have the same idea on world literature.

It is only the differences in emphasis within common terms.

Indeed. We could find that in this way an anthologist will help a literary work to become world literature. It is similar to the case of the Nobel Prize committee, which awards the Nobel Prize for Literature, so as to make a writer more well-known and canonical. Although they try to argue canonicity is not their object, yet their awarding the prize to a certain writer arouses curiosity among readers, literary critics and scholars. Thus it is very significant to anthologize world literature not only for the broad reading public but also for canonizing literature.

I think that we make this canonical judgment because (in a sense) we make every course syllabus a miniature canon, so the teachers select groups of works, works important for you to read from this period, this issue, whatever it is; and as the semester is limited, we cannot include many more works, so the syllabus already provides a micro-canon, a temporary canon, which may change the next time we do the course. Every anthologist should be aware that we are making canonical claims for these works being worth reading.

Does quality always comes first as a criterion to be anthologized?

I would say quality is absolutely critical, but it is also not the only thing, that is, a work can be of high quality in different ways. I grew up in the kind of great books understanding, encountering literature in the form of the “Penguin Classics,” the British book series that I started reading as teenager. There were a lot of Penguin Classics: Dante and Cervantes, the great tragedies and so on, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. These are great works in terms of quality. But perhaps for me, for world literature to be worth having, it has to be a compelling work, but its compelling qualities can be a variety of things, though it definitely has to give readers an important aesthetic experience.

Let us approach another issue. People now often associate comparative literature with world literature. In China, in 1988 the Ministry of Education
What Is World Literature?

decided to combine the discipline of “comparative literature” with that of “world literature,” so the new discipline is called “comparative literature and world literature.” At first, some of the comparativists argued against that. They said that in the Western countries, comparative literature has long been an independent discipline, then why should world literature be incorporated into this discipline in China? But nowadays we find that along with the advent of globalization in culture, the earliest stage of comparative literature is world literature. And when comparative literature has progressed for over one hundred years, the culminating stage of comparative literature will also be world literature. That is why in the age of globalization, although literary studies are often reported to be “dead” and comparative literature is also reported to be “dead,” a new comparative literature has been reborn. I think this so-called new comparative literature should be called world literature. That is also why I designed the general theme of our conference as “comparative literature: toward the stage of world literature”. For me it is a culminating stage of comparative literature. During the past hundred years of evolution, world literature, a utopian term coined by Goethe, is no longer of utopian characteristics, but it has become an aesthetic reality. It has actually helped comparative literature, which is often reported to be in crisis, to get out of such crises. That is why not only in China, but also in the United States, more and more scholars enthusiastically participate in various conferences on comparative literature. Is that so?

Yes. The American Comparative Literature Association has seen a ten-fold increase in attendance over the last decade, and it has become more and more international. I was looking back at the program of the American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting for fifteen years ago, and there were about 150 papers delivered, and only three participants came outside of the United States. Last year at Harvard University, we hosted the association’s conference and we had 2100 papers delivered, and participants came from fifty different countries, including scholars from mainland China and Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, India—basically from all over the world. I think the world literature emphasis has become very significant within comparative literature. There is still classic comparative work
being done. “Traditional” comparative literature really meant looking at the literary relations of two countries, comparing two national traditions, often France and Germany, looking at the image one nation had of another. That is still done today. But I think this world literature emphasis now has many different projects and they are involving many people coming from around the world, not only Western Europe and North America, the major centers of traditional comparative literature.

We are seeing a lot of interest in China at present, as has become apparent in talking to some of your colleagues. Here we find an excitement of opening out to the wider literary world after the period before the Cultural Revolution where China and the West were relatively less closely interacting and China was more in connection with Russia; that then decreased during the Cultural Revolution, leading to a degree of isolation. Literature is never isolated in quite this way. One of the things we find when looking at the history of literature is that most national traditions rise out of broader regional circumstances and are nourished by international contact. Lu Xun is a particularly excellent example that he learned so much from his readings in Japanese and in German, he did so much translation, he translated hundreds of works, either from Japanese or German. He wrote his most famous story “The Diary of a Madman” shortly after translating Gogol’s story of the same name from Japanese. So it is retranslating, it was written in Russian, but it was translated from Japanese into Chinese, so you could see it as an example of inspiration across national and linguistic boundaries. As one of the most popular founders of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun was himself completely a figure of world literature.

Lu Xun is also regarded as one of the founders of comparative literature in China.

That’s right. We should also include Hu Shih, who studied at Columbia and got his PhD there and then came back to China. There is a lot of circulation cross institutions academically and mutual fertilization.

Yes. That is why since the Chinese Comparative Literature Association was founded in 1985, it has been open to all foreign participants in every one
of its triennial congresses. That is also why among all China's national associations for literary studies and even for the entire humanities, the Chinese Comparative Literature Association is the most open and most lively literary studies society. In every triennial congress of the CCLA, we invite foreign participants, especially from the Western countries, as well as from Japan, India and other neighbouring countries or regions. We do not have participants from as many as fifty countries; at most the participants are from twenty countries or regions. I think, although according to many American comparativists comparative literature studies in America was once in a crisis or reported to be “dead,” comparative literature studies in China has never been in such a crisis. It has always flourished. I think that is where a difference lies. We always encourage our colleagues to participate in literary studies beyond our own native country and language. Actually, in this way world literature has already helped comparative literature to get out of its crisis, if there were such a crisis. I have also found in recent conferences in American Comparative Literature Association, in which I once participated in 2005, world literature has been one of the heatedly discussed topics, especially in Haun Saussy’s Ten-year Report Comparative literature in An Age of Globalization, in which world literature is widely discussed. Do you think so?

Yes, world literature is increasingly a subject of interest to comparativists around the world.

What is the function of the anthologization of world literature and individual national literature? Shall we pay much attention to both canonicity and readability? Will it help to build up a canonical body of world literature or just merely circulate literary works of all countries in the book market?

I think probably China may be the originator of the great literary anthologies. China is perhaps the first country in which anthologies became important for circulating literature as early as before the Tang Dynasty, isn’t that right? I think there were important anthologies going back to the third century. Because of so much production of poetry and literature in China so early on, already the national tradition far exceeded what any one person could ever read. Then my understanding
is that people began to rely on anthologies to know what to read in early periods. Perhaps a reason why China has been very hospitable to world literature is that the problems of encountering the vast array of world literature are not different in kind from the problem of anthologizing Chinese literature itself. It is the same problem in a way, since for 2000 years, before America had any literature, before England had any literature, you had already created so much literature. I think anthologists do have a powerful effect, to help guide readers, to guide teachers, to guide students, but they are also very popular for general readers to find their way around the world of literature.

What principles did you use to select works for the Longman Anthology of World Literature? Did you always think that quality comes first or just consider the division of national literatures?

In the Longman Anthology, we had a couple of major goals when we established it. One was to move beyond the Euro-centrism of the older American anthologies of world literature, for literature in the United States or Europe usually meant Western European literature and perhaps some American literature. There was the Japanese Comparatist Sukehiro Hirakawa, who remarked that studying comparative literature in Tokyo University in the 1960s, it seemed like “a Greater Western European Co-prosperity Sphere,” as he said rather ironically. When world literature was used as a term, it referred to a very narrow subset of nations, and so there was the Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces, first published in 1956, where “the world” was really just Western Europe. The field gradually started to open up but not very far, so my co-editors and I were seeking to make a truly global anthology.

The Longman Anthology was created for use in American colleges, so it depends very much on a dialogue with people who teach the course in different schools and it was somewhat guided by, even constrained by, what people were going to teach. It’s not so much the matter of what students would read, but what the teachers would assign. And teachers are rather concerned often that if familiar texts work for them, they want to stay with that text. They do not necessarily want to try something new. It is a matter of building from where they are towards where
they want to go. The *Longman Anthology* now and even a new edition of the *Norton Anthology* has a proportion of about two thirds western writings and one third non-western, with about six thousand pages, 2000 pages are non-western literature, and 4000 pages are western literature. It is still unbalanced, not as various and inclusive as we would like it to be, but we are working within the constraints of the training of the current generation of teachers. We have to consider what they are going to teach.

In addition, we also wanted to give some sense of cultural context for the works we include. It is a great challenge in an anthology to show the variety of literary experience, to contextualize. Rather than have only isolated works one after another, we find groups of works to help teachers and students think together. For example, we have some sections on “What is literature?” In this section for Chinese literature there are readings on aesthetics, including the *Wen Fu* and others grouped together, to show traditional Chinese ideas of literature. We have another section like that for India, and for classical Greece we also have Aristotle and Plato. The result is that in different places we show what different cultures have defined as literature and its aesthetic nature and social role. Throughout the anthology, we group texts around issues that help to create bridges among cultures. We are certainly very concerned always to have works that we do have access to in good translations, since the quality of translation matters greatly to the success of a work.

*I am told by Martin Puchner that Norton Anthology of World Literature is mainly sold among English speaking readers. Is the Longman Anthology also sold among the English speaking readers?*

Yes, it is designed for the North American market. These anthologies are guided by market issues as much as by scholarship, so that it is a very large question in the United States and the market affects our choices, not only through what teachers want to use but also through what we can afford to pay publishers for permission to use the works. Even for classic works, the good translations are almost all recent, so they are in copyright, and you have to pay a large commission for the use of an excellent recent translation of Dante. To get a free “public domain” trans-
lation, you would have to go back 75 years, but such old translations rarely read well today. To buy the rights to publish in North America costs a lot, but the world rights would cost twice as much. The market is not there to pay the extra amount, so actually both the Norton and the Longman anthologies of world literature are almost entirely sold in the United States and in Canada because those countries are the initial rights market. I think some schools abroad can import our books, but North America is the dominant market. One implication is that world literature anthologies need to be published in different places and in different languages. This should not be done just by translating the same anthologies into another language, because a Chinese market must take into account what a Chinese faculty is interested in teaching, what Chinese students will be interested in reading, and the result is very likely to be a quite different set of writings, with some overlap to what is included in Longman or Norton, but a lot of different readings as well. What I would imagine is that there should be a more Asian emphasis in an anthology published in China and then there is anthology published in America.

So anthologizing world literature largely depends on literary market. In China, the situation is similar because, as you know, Chinese students and university teachers also have such anthologies of world literature which are called “selected works of foreign literature,” with the exception of Chinese literary works. That means the anthology only contains works by non-Chinese, or “foreign,” writers. Among all the anthologies the most popular and authoritative one is edited by Zhou Xiliang. He died in 1985, but his four-volume anthologies are still popular among ordinary readers and widely used by university teachers and students of literature. However, I think their object is rather different from yours because they lay more emphasis on the canonicity and quality of the selected literary works, plus certain political and ideological tendencies. China has a huge market, we have many university students, and some of the courses are compulsory, so students and teachers have to use the textbooks. That is why they sell well. But it is not necessarily the same case for other anthologies edited by some less known and less authoritative scholars. I think that Zhou’s anthology has more than one million
What Is World Literature?

copies in print. So the publisher must have made a lot of money. Also I am an anthologizer myself. I have been awarded a large project by the National Administration of Press and Publications which is called “Canonical Publication Project: Anthology of Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature”, in which I try to select the best literary works and the most canonical works of Chinese literature in the twentieth century to form six volumes. Volume One includes novels, about ten novels, all in excerpts. Volume Two includes twenty novellas and short stories. Volume Three includes over a hundred poems. Volume Four is devoted to prose writing because in China prose is very popular. Prose works are published not only in literary magazines but also in the supplements of newspapers. Volume Five is composed of some twenty plays. Volume Six focuses on literary theory and criticism, which is quite new. The Administration of Press and Publications knows that because it will be published in English, it will not necessarily have a big market. So they offered some financial support to encourage Chinese literature to go abroad. But even so, I am afraid in order to reach the English-language market effectively, we have to collaborate with either a British publisher or an American publisher. What do you think of this strategy?

The question is whether you have to do perhaps an abridged version, I believe that for American publishers, perhaps a two-volume version would be more practical rather than a six-volume version. Yes, I think you might have to adapt to what the American market would use.

So that means that we will edit two types of anthologies, one for the domestic market, and the other for the international market.

They will take different forms, which is very typical of world literature today. They will take shape differently to meet the interest in different places. I am thinking of Franco Moretti’s wonderful collection on the novel, published in five volumes in Italy and two volumes in a selection published in the United States. It has taken these two forms, and that is within a western context by an Italian scholar teaching in the United States.

Now the last question: as a comparatist in an American university who is very interested in world literature and also Chinese literature, would
you please tell us about the position of Chinese literature in the context of global culture and world literature? If the status quo is not so satisfactory, what shall we do? You are the founding editor of Longman Anthology of World Literature, how many writers and their writings have you included from Chinese literature, as compared with other anthology editors, such as Norton Anthology of World Literature by Martin Puchner, who told me that it includes more than twenty Chinese writers. It is certainly progress from the earliest Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces, which only included one Chinese author.

I think the first one had nothing from China.

Perhaps the second edition included one Chinese author.

Yes, possibly Confucius’s Analects…. We have thirty-two Chinese writers in the Longman Anthology, as well as many Japanese writers and also some Korean and Vietnamese writers, who I believe had never before appeared in an American survey anthology. The majority of our Chinese selections come from classical times, with good sections on the Confucian and classical texts, Lao Zi, Zhuang zi, Tang Dynasty poetry, and then later on we have good selections from Journey to the West, The Story of the Stone, about 75 pages each from those two major Chinese novels, and then we have a number of more recent works, including good selections from Lu Xun and Zhang Ailing in the early and mid-twentieth century. But we do not have any contemporary Chinese literary works now, so I think we need to include contemporary writers for our next edition, to find who are the most interesting contemporary short story writers and poets. I think the modern Japanese fiction is more widely known in the United States than modern Chinese fiction. I do not know why Japanese became known, but I think there are enough market reasons, with some publishers such as Kodansha making a real push to have Japanese works translated and published in America. Also, generations ago there were a lot more contacts for cultural and political reasons particularly in the postwar era between Japan and the United States then between China and the United States. Now is a great moment for increasing cultural exchange and circulation of Chinese writings in the United States. I
think you know that part of the pleasure for readers is discovering different parts of the world. American students, American readers are interested in reading literary works from around the world. We see this in the particular case of Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer who won the Nobel Prize in 2006. His novels have been translated into fifty-six languages. He came from a very small country with a language not widely spoken, and it is striking when he began to have worldwide success with his novel *My Name Is Red*. Then he was still in his forties, but I think he won Nobel Prize at the age of fifty-three, the youngest Nobel Prize winner of literature and that is due to the success of his works in translation. I expect that he has a much wider readership internationally that he could have in Turkey.

*In China he is very popular among the broad reading public. So translation is a very important means of promoting Chinese literature in the world.*

Indeed yes!

*As an anthologizer, you certainly have made great efforts to make Chinese literature well-known in the English speaking world. Some of my colleagues always think that the reason why Chinese literature has long been marginalized in the context of global culture and world literature is largely for lack of translation. Do you think translation is the sole reason? Are there other possible reasons?*

You have outlined several factors in your talk at our conference. One was Orientalism, though it was not alone orientalism that lead to the neglect. It was very strange that older literature was understood in the orientalist mood, as a depository of ancient wisdom should, and so there was a substantial Western reception of the *Book of Songs* and of Tang Dynasty poetry, but not so much interest in more modern writings. I think that unhappy orientalist heritage is fading away very fast. Now there is considerable interest in the contemporary. As an anthologist, my concerns are almost the other way. Americans have a very short historical memory and their tendency is to want to know what is new, and I have to nudge them also to read Du Fu and Lao Zi, not the only the latest work hot off the press.
Do you think that along with the growth of Chinese economy and the comprehensive power of China, Chinese literature will become more and more popular and Chinese will become one of the major world languages?

I am sure it will. The Chinese language is now taught in many American high schools, which was unheard of when I was a student. It has largely displaced German, which is almost impossible to study in American high schools now, whereas Chinese and Japanese are studied in my daughter’s high school.

I think if a literary history of the world includes Chinese and Indian and other major literatures, it will really become a history of world literature. Let us welcome the coming of a real world literature!

That’s right.
Modernity is deeply ingrained in the modern Chinese consciousness and the continuing search for modernity has also given an unusual impetus for reconstructing its culture through translation. While there is no doubt that globalization features prominently in the rapid rise of China, the world is largely unable to make sense of this somewhat unexpected pace of change. China is still a great mystery to the outside world and often misunderstood and misinterpreted. This is not entirely surprising, for China is a country full of perplexing contradictions, characterized by a long history of civilization and driven by a renewed awareness of modernity and modernization. The current state of its political and cultural discourse reflects the anxiety globalization has implanted in Chinese intellectuals, who have made various attempts—not very successfully—to theorize about the traditions and cultural practices in the country and their impact on the wider cultural and social value.

Globalization is relatively new for China, and much as the country seems to benefit from it, the concept still poses a bewildering challenge. As part of cultural reconfiguration after China opened up to the outside world beginning in the late 1970s, globalization has become increasingly relevant to the Chinese reality. However, many ordinary Chinese are totally unaware of the heated debates about globalization. The extraordinary achievements of China's economy have somewhat obliterated concerns about other social, cultural and political implications of globalization. But there is no doubt that the emergence and rise of modern China are invariably attributable to globalization, which helps reconstruct the cultural and intellectual dimensions of Chinese life. Translating Modernity makes an important contribution to our understanding of how cultural practice shapes Chinese society and cogently addresses two essential concepts: modernity and globalization in a cross-cultural context. And, by connecting these two concepts, Wang Ning is able to examine the vibrant energy in China's persistent pursuit of modernity and tentative flirtation with postmodernity, which has captured the attention and imagination of many avant-garde literary writers and critics alike.

Modernity, or rather the proverbial search for it, has been a key part of modern Chinese history after the late Qing Dynasty when the country began to be resuscitated through forced exposure, though in a very limited way,
to the outside world. Since then cultural translation has not abated except perhaps during the time prior to and during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. It should be noted that, however, the Cultural Revolution did not completely annihilate cultural translation: although literary works from the West and the Soviet Union were not openly published, they were made available in Chinese translation to elite Party insiders. Also, Chinese literature was translated into English and published in a magazine called *Chinese Literature* published by Foreign Literature Press in Beijing (There was also a French version). In the 1980s, Chinese cultural and intellectual life began to change radically with massive translation projects from Western languages, especially English, into Chinese. Not long after this, in an ironic twist, *Chinese Literature*, the only magazine to introduce Chinese literature to the world, ceased to exist due primarily to financial constraints. Professor Wang laments the imbalance of cultural translation between China and the West as reflected in Chinese literature being scantily translated into English, let alone other Western languages. The only prospect for correcting the vast imbalance is, as the he believes, to co-ordinate efforts at the national level to translate Chinese into world languages.

This book is by turns challenging, informative, thought-provoking, and surprising. Each chapter focuses on one theme and the central idea of cultural translation is strongly present in all the chapters attempting a dialogic theorizing of the implications of Western theories to Chinese cultural and intellectual creativity. By drawing on the extraordinarily rich resources of Chinese cultural practice, particularly its modern and contemporary literature and translation as well as Western influence on such literature, it offers some useful insights for understanding a Chinese cultural tradition that traverses a vast amount of debates. One example is particularly revealing: the application of Freudian psychoanalysis to contemporary Chinese literary texts is both timely and effective. However, despite the claim that “any well-educated person in present-day can see an obvious Freudian influence on contemporary Chinese literature” (26), perhaps linear causality is not so easy to establish. Not many Chinese readers are necessarily aware of a psychoanalytical approach to reading the related literary texts and for that matter, it is perfectly possible that the novelists in question might rely on commonsense to describe the inner working of the characters’ minds. Nonetheless, the well-known novella by Zhang Xianliang’s “Half a Man is Woman” is one of a long list of writers who have experimented with a psychoanalytical probing of central characters, showing strong Freudian undercurrents.

Interestingly and revealingly, the question of misunderstanding and misreading is raised and analyzed in the book. First of all, it is only fair to point
out that insomuch as that Western influence has significantly increased, the quality of translations does indeed vary and many of them are less than satisfactory or downright atrocious. Chinese translations in the early days of the reform period were often hastily and badly done. While contributing to the development of Chinese cultural discourse, these translations caused some serious semantic confusion. For instance, Meyer Abrams’ *The Mirror and the Lamp* published by Peking University Press in 1989, though carefully translated by three scholars, is fraught with errors and mistakes. And no less importantly, differing cultural and intellectual assumptions are responsible for misreading or misinterpretation because of different cultural traditions and deep-seated assumptions. Moreover, Wang points to the possibility of “intentional misreading”, which can be a good thing, for “innovation” may result from the Chinese perception of Western concepts (31). Further, the book demonstrates the influence exerted by such Western thinkers as Schopenhauer, Bergson, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre on the New Period Chinese literature through analyzing Wang Guowei’s aesthetic opinions, which resurfaced in the 1980s to cultivate and nourish literary creativity. Similarly, Sartrean existentialism was at one point a powerful critical apparatus particularly for “the scar literature”, thus foregrounding the horrors and traumas of the Cultural Revolution.

Many themes are explored under the rubric of postmodernism, a concept that has fascinated Wang. Usefully enough, he has summarized the six salient features of postmodernism in connection with contemporary Chinese literature, especially in its avant-garde form (pp. 40–1). This six part scheme proposes a dialogic model as a means of shedding light on the complex and fluid nature of postmodern literature in contemporary China. In this regard, it is of great significance to examine the avowed animating influence on modernist and postmodernist literary experimentation in contemporary Chinese novels. It is repeatedly stated that to establish a dialogic relationship between Chinese literature and Western literature, translating Chinese into world languages is of paramount importance. Evidently, it is easier said than done. Wang’s remedial proposal is to introduce Chinese literature to the world through translation, and he argues that the consumption of Chinese literature in the West is of great cross-cultural importance for Chinese culture to exert an influence on Western literature, which seems to be cross-culturally felicitous in the contemporary period.

However, this can be seen as an over-reaction on the part of the author to redress the severe imbalance of cross-cultural communication. As for the perceived likelihood of Chinese culture influencing Western literature, Wang offers a somewhat contradictory view. On the one hand, he is confident that
“increasing cultural and academic exchanges between Chinese and Western scholars and writers will fill the gap of Chinese influence on Western literature in the near future” (43). On the other, he turns towards “pessimistic” cultural realism because “statistical data” is contrary to sanguine expectation: “We have imported too much Western theory and introduced too many Western cultural trends and literary words, but we have exported too little Chinese theory and too few literary works!” (58). This insistence on exporting culture is no doubt distinctive but may prove problematic, since such a yawning “trade deficit” can barely be narrowed or eliminated in any artificially manipulative way. The author is entirely right in drawing attention to the grossly unequal patterns of cultural exchange between China and the West, but it is also important to be reminded that inter-cultural dialogue is historically and culturally conditioned, which defies any easy solutions.

Nevertheless, in the context of globalization, this cross-cultural imbalance can be productively addressed by the Chinese. The book has an interesting chapter devoted to the analysis of globalizing postcolonialism. The religio-cultural legacy of Confucianism is presented as a possible counter-balance to the type of globalization dictated by the domination of the West. The author reports that while the Chinese Writers Association has completed an ambitious project to translate one hundred contemporary literary works, the Chinese Government has funded hundreds of Confucian Institutes around the world. Of course, the primary purpose of these Institutes is to disseminate Chinese culture and to further cross-cultural communication rather than move into a global phenomenon of cultural domination. Such a measure can be seen as a crucial part of China’s effort to enhance its cultural modernization as well.

Chinese modernity was once starkly at odds with Confucianism, notably during the May Fourth Movement in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, Confucianism is still at the very root of Chinese culture. The virtual impossibility of expunging the near-religious doctrine is widely acknowledged. In order to promote Chinese culture, there is a good reason to revive it. *Translated Modernities*, therefore, duly highlights and persuasively discusses the importance of reconstructing a transformed Confucianism, or Neo-Confucianism. Wang is no doubt correct in insisting on the enduring value of Confucianism. As he sees it, traditional Confucianism can function to supplement with Western globalization. Inevitably and inextricably, the revaluation of Confucianism has rekindled interest in traditional Chinese culture. Consequently, Neo-Confucianism has become increasingly influential in China. Chinese scholars nowadays are more confident than ever before. In the past, there was a strong preference for one kind or another of Western theory
to underpin their theoretical inquiry. Today, fast translations between Chinese and Western languages, particularly English, thanks to the internet, allow the rapid dissemination of information and new ideas, and the academic ecology has thus changed significantly. This changed literary and critical practice calls for a rewriting of Chinese literary history in Chinese. For the author, it is not enough to just promote the Chinese language, which, as he observes, is becoming a major world language, but more importantly, the study of Chinese literature should include a high variety of Chinese or Chineses for the purpose of composing literary texts.

While Wang admits that “[c]onfronted with Western influence and globalism, revisiting Confucianism is certainly a positive step” (62), he shows no concern whatsoever for the effects of the worldwide promotion of Chinese culture in the form of Confucian Institutes. He maintains that “global Neo-Confucianism” (63) will not cause clashes with the Western civilization, as long as bridging dialogues between civilizations takes place constantly. Indeed, how such “bridging dialogues” have been and can be conducted is a truly challenging question posed to humanistic scholars. He observes: “… after hundreds of year’s [sic] of revisions, reinterpretations and reconstructions, especially by Tu Wei-ming, Cheng Chung-ying and other overseas Chinese scholars, dramatic changes have taken place in today’s Neo-Confucianism” (75). In other words, Confucianism is continuously renewed and critically scrutinized. The localization of Western theories and ideas is a prerequisite for deconstruction and reconstruction before it is possible for China to make more visible contributions to knowledge in a global context.

The all-important advent of the internet is an unmistakable sign of cultural globalization, and the language of the internet is duly discussed, seen by the author as “being challenged by “the rise of Chinese” (83). Given the ever-increasing number of internet users in China, most of whom use Chinese, localization has become as very important aspect of modern life. It is thus true that English in its “linguistic hegemony” (92) is indeed challenged globally, but remains the dominant media language, which is translated into Chinese for local consumption. In addition, the wide use of English as an international academic language provides striking evidence of its hegemony. Among other things, English is the most effective means to globalize scholarship. Likewise, the international role of English worldwide has many implications to the Chinese literary language. And the translation of English literary works has produced an enduring impact on the Chinese literary language which has undergone significant metamorphosis. Due to Western influences, such a language has been repeatedly “colonized”. In a way, it has become a “borrowed” language (149), but more precisely, it is a language with many “loaned” words
and syntactical constructions. And a literary language is always an innovative one, ready to experiment with new modes of expression. All this constitutes China's “cultural modernity” (149). In this particular sense, linguistic and cultural colonization is seen in a positive light, although it may be potentially controversial.

Nevertheless, American-style cultural globalization remains a serious concern. Translated Modernities, in this respect, offers a large amount of empirical evidence about the social, political and cultural complexities of the issue. Wang argues that “In today's China, many people simply hold that globalization means Westernization, and Westernization, Americanization, embodied in the world-wide popularization of McDonalds, Hollywood and the English language in Oriental and Asian countries” (67).

Young children love McDonalds, and the so-called “cultural colonization” has permeated Chinese society as an inevitable part of globalization. However, made in China products sell well globally, including in America. This is a true picture of globalization which draws heavily on European colonialism in the nineteenth century. Dialogue between cultures is essential to understanding global issues. Globalization does mean the flow of commercial as well as cultural products.

It is clear that a more constructive understanding of globalization is called for, and as the book indicates, dialogues can help not only understanding but also (re)production. New ideas are often locally (re)produced in a different form. As Wang writes, “Like any Western theories or cultural trends, once it has entered [China], it will be subject to certain metamorphoses and finally generate new and different versions and meanings. That is, globalization cannot occur until it has been localized, or becomes “glocalized” (68). This is very true but it also implies that “Western theories or cultural trends” are part and parcel of globalization, and the author’s grasp of the reality of globalization in China is patently firm. In the realm of critical theory and cultural exchange, glocalizion puts a positive spin on globalization in cross-cultural engagement. In a broad sense, an importation of foreign ideas invariably goes through some form of cultural translation and hence transculturation, which, along with a shifting dialogic focus, gives rise to something different, with formal, structural, and cognitive consequences for Chinese cultural modernity. As a result, traditional Chinese literary discourse is enriched and transformed by translating and working with Western literary and critical works. Cultural globalization is in fact a crucial impetus for the cultural and intellectual creativity of modern Chinese life.

Glocalization is best exemplified in creative constructions and interpretations of global texts. The book includes a concise chapter on Ibsen in re-
lation to Chinese modernity and even postmodernity. His *A Doll's House* has been performed by Chinese and Norwegian actors with “Chinese and Western cultural conflicts replacing the original family ones” (112). The key paradox is that Western influence is alternately espoused and resisted. As the author argues, “[i]n current Chinese critical circles, the prevailing debate on the ‘constructing of Chinese critical discourse’ is of a postcolonial attempt to resist Western influence” (207). This demonstrates a typically ambivalent cross-cultural mentality with a sharp dichotomy between modern Chinese literature and Western influence, which has helped China with its cultural modernization so as to shape its modern cultural discourse. A new generation of Chinese critics has tried to embrace Western literary theories, including Russian formalism, New Criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism and so on, which has provided the cultural and intellectual nourishment for an ancient civilization that urgently needed revitalization. Consequently, many novelists and filmmakers have become better informed about how to produce cultural artifacts in a more innovative way.

This book is not a simple conventional influence study and Wang takes pains to establish a dialogic conception between China and the West. As a collection of articles and essays devoted to discussions of various but related topics, inevitably there is some repetition from chapter to chapter, but it is wide-ranging enough to encompass a large range of hotly debated issues in Chinese cultural and intellectual context, thereby enlightening our understanding of a dialogic interplay of different voices in the process of cross-cultural communication. The rise of China may reshape the world with China being part of globalization. From both modern and postmodern perspectives, the book helps the reader arrive at fundamental aspects of Chinese cultural practices, which are of increasing relevance and importance to the world. Despite a built-in tendency to dichotomize China and West in cultural terms, *Translated Modernities* consists of an important and insightful approach to the elaborate process of localization and cultural adaptation within a value system derived from a different cultural tradition and practice in response to globalization. Throughout the book, translation is said to play the pivotal role in modernizing China and its culture, and in bringing it more responsibility on the world stage. China has learned to play the game designed by the West. And it has become plainly evident that China's cultural provincialism is diminishing and the move towards increasing globalization will be continued by the nation's apparent willingness to promote serious cross-cultural understanding.

Sun Yifeng
Although postcolonialism is not explicitly signalled in the title of the book, *Canadian Cultural Studies* is very much a meditation on the relation between colonized and colonizer, and colonial and postcolonial culture. As Mookerjea, Szeman, and Faurschou acknowledge in their introductory essay, Canadian cultural studies calls for a consideration of what it means to be “between empires” (1). More precisely, although the editors do not explicitly take up this concept, Canadian cultural studies grapples with Canada as a “Second World,” as articulated in Stephen Slemon’s conceptualization, and a settler colonial nation. The struggle to articulate Canadian culture, and Canadian cultural studies as a field, between the historical dominance of Britain and the influence of the United States emerges with tremendous clarity in many of the essays selected for this volume.

A number of the essays in the opening section of the volume, “Canadian Cultural Theory: Origins,” attend to precisely this struggle. For Mookerjea, Szeman, and Faurschou, the origins of cultural theory in Canada are very much located in the ways in which essays by Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, George Grant, and Northrop Frye navigate the question of national culture. But they are also apparent in the later essays by Anthony Wilden, Ian Angus, Maurice Charland, Jody Berland, and Serra Tinic. As Wilden notes, “Neither the British nor the Americans look upon Canada as a foreign country… and their attitudes towards Canada and Canadians are all too often infected with an imperial paternalism, both conscious and unconscious” (213). Canadian culture, these essays intimate, contests this economic and ideological imperialism.

However, as the discussions of race and indigenous culture in essays by Himani Bannerji, Eva Mackey, Kristina Fagan, Lee Maracle, Len Findlay and Katharyne Mitchell make clear, Canada can also be positioned as itself a colonial force. Indeed, Wilden’s turn towards work such as that of the 1976 Déné Declaration as a site from which Canadian culture might look to articulate common ground, as well as the editors’ situating of Harold Cardinal’s “Buckskin Curtain” as a part of the “origins” of cultural theory in Canada, suggest the necessity of an understanding of Canadian culture which attends to its dual role as dominated and dominant. It is this position of being colonized and colonizer that reveals the ways in which Second World and settler colonial theory continue to resonate for Canadian cultural studies. As
Will Straw notes in the nod towards the potential affiliations with intellectual work occurring in Australia at the conclusion of his essay in this volume, the circuits of Second World thinking can be enormously productive.

Even though they engage with the nation as a locus of culture, *Canadian Cultural Studies* is not parochial in its approach to national culture. The essays included emphasize the ways in which cultural theory in Canada looks outward and embraces the fluidity of national identity constructions. Sometimes, borders are porous for a reason as Ioan Davies suggests in his anecdote about going to the Toronto International Film Festival to catch “Iranian films and think about Jean-Luc Godard” with “Fred” (455).

Given the tremendous work of this volume as a contribution not only to Canadian cultural studies, but also to postcolonial cultural studies, the opening paragraph of Fredric Jameson’s “Foreword” is puzzling. Tracking the emergence of cultural studies in the United States with that of British cultural studies, and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies specifically, he suggests that “the development of cultural studies in the non-English speaking world has been more belated and more rudimentary, partly owing to the late development in so many parts of the world of a commercial mass culture (as opposed to popular cultural traditions), so much of which was imported from the United States in the first place” (x). It is hard to think of Bollywood film in India, or Latin American *telenovelas*, or J-pop and *kayōkyoku* in Japan as late developments. Perhaps, Jameson’s suggestions might be best understood as a small echo of the kind of debates that his work on third world literature and national allegory sparked in postcolonial studies. As the subsequent debates over those assertions show, these claims can be immensely productive and powerful. Indeed, they point to the need for cultural criticism to take up precisely the kinds of meditations on time and temporality that Stephen Crocker attends to in his essay on non-synchronicity and globalization in post-Second World War Newfoundland.

In outlining the multiplicity of approaches to Canadian cultural studies, one of the volume’s great strengths lies in its consideration of Francophone cultural studies in Canada. The essays by Paul-Émile Borduas, Fernand Dumont, Jocelyn Létourneau, and the thoughtful “Afterword” by Yves Laberge all highlight the value of thinking beyond Anglophone networks.

Finally, the inclusion of selections from government documents provides excellent primary material for students and scholars interested in taking up the relationship between national culture, cultural studies, and government policy. The selections from the Massey Commission, the *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, and *Multiculturalism and the*
Government of Canada offer useful and necessary contexts for considering the development of cultural studies in Canada.
This reader is a timely and provocative reflection on Canadian cultural studies. While some readers may be familiar with many of the essays, encountering them again will prove to be rewarding for the new insights that their juxtapositions in this volume offer. This volume attests to not only to the substantial history of cultural theory in Canada, but also to its vibrancy.

Lily Cho
Notes on Contributors


David Damrosch is Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University. He is the author of What is World Literature? (2003) and How to Read World Literature (2008) and other books. He is also an editor of the Longman Anthology of World Literature and of The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present (2010).

Bishnupriya Ghosh is Professor with the Department of English at University of California Santa Barbara. Her teaching interests include global studies, postcolonial theory and media studies, and gender/sexuality studies. She publishes essays on literature, film, postcolonial criticism and theory in journals such as Journal of Postcolonial Studies.

Emily Johansen is Assistant Professor with the Department of English at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on contemporary transnational fiction, critical theory, and cosmopolitanism. Her current book project, “Placing Cosmopolitanism,” considers the intersections between theories of cosmopolitanism and place as a way of imagining a more politically engaged vision of the cosmopolitan everyday. She has recent articles in Canadian Literature, Politics and Culture, and Postcolonial Text.

Soo Yeon Kim is a Lecturer with the Department of English Language and Literature at Kookmin University, Korea.

Belinda Kong is Assistant Professor of Asian Studies and English at Bowdoin College. Her teaching and research focus on transnational Asian American and Chinese diaspora literature. Her book, Outside the Square: Tiananmen Fictions in the Chinese Diaspora, is forthcoming with Temple University Press.

Lewis MacLeod is Assistant Professor with the Department of English at Trent University. His research interests include modern and postmodern British literature, postcolonialism, masculinities, and narratology.
Contributors

**Sun Yifeng** is Professor and Head of the Department of Translation at Lingnan University. He is the author of several books including *Fragmentation and Dramatic Moments* (2002) and *Perspective, Interpretation and Culture: Literary Translation and Translation Theory* (2004 and 2006).

**Wang Ning** is Professor of Comparative Literature at Tsinghua University in Beijing and Zhiyuan Professor of Humanities at Shanghai Jiaotong University. He is the author of *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives on Globalization and China* (2010), as well as other books and many scholarly articles.

**Jini Kim Watson** is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University. Her areas of research include Asia-Pacific literature and cultural studies; postcolonial studies; spatial and architecture theory; comparative modernities; and feminist and critical theory.

**Brian Yost** is Instructor with the Department of English at Texas A&M University. Currently, he teaches composition and rhetoric.