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INDONESIAN LITERATURE AFTER REFORMASI: THE TONGUES OF WOMEN

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Abstract
The end of the Suharto regime in May 1998 unleashed a flood of free speech in Indonesian literature and the popular press, which had long been suppressed during the "New Order" period. In literature, this new freedom was signified by the theme of "Sastra Reformasi," a literature of "Reformation." This writing was socially committed to changing the regime and promoting new and more democratic values. This paper discusses works by three major writers of this new era, all of them women: Helvi Tiana Rosa, Ayu Utami, and Dewi Lestari. Each of these writers deals with this period of rapid social change, and its impact on social and personal (especially sexual) morality. The paper suggests that the tongues of women are beginning to speak, with an increasing strength in various and sometimes violent ways, to the enormous changes in personal values which are continuing to take place in Indonesian society.

Keywords
Indonesian women writers, Reformation literature, self-fulfillment, sexuality, violence in Acheh

About the Author
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Introduction

The resignation of President Suharto in May 1998 was followed by an amazing reassertion of free speech throughout Indonesia. During the "New Order" period, newspapers, magazines, writers, and public performances had been carefully scrutinized by government authorities to ensure that nothing was said or published which might "disturb public order." Newspapers and magazines had regularly been banned (most notably in June 1994, with the closure of *Tempo*, *Detik* and *Editor*); theater performances were censored and had sometimes been closed (for example, the play "Suksesi" ("Succession") by Riantiarno's Teater Koma in October 1990); books had been forbidden circulation (including the works of Pramoedya Ananta Toer); and, on occasion, writers (for example, Wiji Thukul) had even "disappeared" when their criticism of the government became too vocal. In consequence, authors turned to absurdist styles of writing, which

apparently had little do with the critical depiction of the society in which they lived. As Henk Maier, Professor of Malay at Leiden University in the Netherlands, has argued: "Rejecting realism and strict moralism, the tales of the seventies and eighties were preoccupied with an experimental freedom and playfulness that confused the critics, alienated those who thought that 'literature' still had a role to play in the New Order, and discouraged new and young readers who subsequently turned away from *sastra* as a crucial manifestation of national culture" (258). It was Maier's opinion that "Suharto and his administrative apparatus have castrated a generation of writers, robbing them of their generative power, the power of being historical witnesses who could tell others about what is happening before their very eyes" (258).

This new freedom of speech flooded the newspapers, the magazines, and the literature itself. Writers everywhere frankly criticized the government. In literature, this new trend was known as *sastra reformasi,* Reformation Literature. A humorous example of the criticism can be found in Agus Sarjono's striking poem, "Sajak Palsu" ("Fake Poem"):

> Good morning sir, good morning ma'am, the school children say
> with fake politeness. Then they study fake history
> from fake text-books. When school is finished
> they are horrified to see the range
> of their fake marks. Unable to enter university,
> they go to their teachers' homes to offer
> their fake respect and envelopes
> full of money. With fake smiles,
> the teachers pretend to refuse, then finally
> accept the envelopes and make fake promises
> that they will change the old fake marks
> for new fake marks. The semesters pass,
> and they are born as fake economists, fake lawyers,
> fake agricultural scientists, fake engineers.
> Some become fake teachers, scholars,
> and artists. Passionately they rush to take advantage
> of fake developmental policies based on fake economics.
> They witness fake trading based on fake exports
> and fake imports, offering fake quality goods.
> Fake banks busily offer fake bonuses and gifts,

while silently providing loans based on fake
letters of security signed by fake officials
from the fake state banking authority.
Society trades with fake money supported
by fake exchange rates.
Fake currencies snarl at fake exchange rates
until the whole structure collapses
and the crisis destroys the fake government
through fake bad luck. The fake people
shout with fake delight and debate fake concepts
at fake seminars, honouring the arrival
of a fake democracy,
a democracy which is so brilliant
and so very, very fake. (79-80)

WOMEN WRITING

Besides politics, authors also wrote about private concerns, particularly sexuality, in a way which had not been seen before. Remarkably, the most exciting and innovative writers of post-Reformation Indonesian literature were women. In itself, this was a significant new development in Indonesian literature. For the first time, women held centre stage in Indonesian writing, and readers could now hear women themselves speaking frankly about personal and social female experience, female subjectivity, and female bodies.

In Indonesian prose, the voice of men writing *about* women has long been the dominant voice. This was true of the major works of the prewar canon. Marah Rusli's *Siti Nurbaya* (*Siti Nurbaya,* 1921) is the story of a woman, Siti Nurbaya, forced to marry an ugly old man she does not love, Datuk Meringgih. Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana's *Layar Terkembang* (*With Sails Unfurled*, 1936) tells of the fates of two very different sisters, one modern in her outlook, the other traditional in her expectations of love and marriage. Armijn Pane's *Belenggu* (*Chains*, 1941) is the story of a prostitute. It is also true of more recent works, such as *Bumi Manusia*, (*This Earth of Mankind,* 1980), and *Gadis Pantai*, (*The Girl from the Coast,* 1987), both by Pramoedya Ananta Toer who is now widely revered as Indonesia's greatest novelist of the twentieth century.

In poetry, too, we have often heard the voice of men writing about women. These

include distant disembodied descriptions, in which men address women as "you" (*kamu*) in an intimate way. Sapardi Djoko Damono's very beautiful poem "*Aku Ingin*" ("I Want"), for example, begins: "*aku ingin mencintaimu dengan sederhana*" ("I want to love you simply") (see Aveling 180-1). What she wants is never asked. In other poems, we have heard the voices of men in different ways urging submission by their wives to the "five womanly duties" proclaimed by the state in the 1970s. These duties are: (1) to support her husband's career and duties; (2) to provide offspring; (3) to care for and rear the children; (4) to be a good housekeeper; and (5) to be a guardian of the community (125). Darmanto Jatman's most famous poem "*Isteri*" ("A Wife") begins: "*Isteri sangat penting untuk ngurus kita/ Menyapu pekarangan/ Memasak di dapur/ Mencuci di sumur/ mengirim rantang ke sawah/ dan ngeroki kita kalau kita masuk angin*" ("We need a wife to look after us / To sweep the yard / Cook in the kitchen / Wash at the well / send food to us when we are in the fields / and massage us when we have a chill") (see Aveling 188-91). The pronoun *kita*, "we," is inclusive; the reader, necessarily, is assumed to need a wife as well. What a wife needs is, again, not a question that is ever asked.

The new voice is not the older literary voice of women who accept the traditional roles of wife and mother, with an occasional sigh when things go wrong. Rather, it is the voice, or more correctly the voices, of young, educated Indonesian women writing in an honest and a critical way about the lives, the pleasures and the suffering, the sexuality, and the need for full self-expression, of themselves and other Indonesian women like themselves.

In this paper I want to introduce and discuss some of the works of three women writing around the time of the beginning of the Reformation era: Helvy Tiana Rosa (born 1970), Ayu Utami (1968), and Dewi Lestari (1976). They grew up in an independent Indonesia, knowing no other President but Suharto (who held power from 1966 to 1998). These women belong to a modern (even post-modern) world. They are tertiary educated and were educated in the Indonesian language. They have a close involvement with the mass media. Religion formed an important, and natural, part of their development. It is possible that these women writers, and others like them (Dorothea Rosa Herliany, a major poet, for example, and the fiction writer Oka Rusmini, a brahmin Balinese, raised in Jakarta but now living as a journalist in Bali), were, and indeed still are, the forerunners of a whole post-Suharto era in Indonesian literature, the generation sometimes called "the Generation of the year 2000" (see Korrie Layun Rampan).

HELVY TIANA ROSA

Born in Medan, North Sumatra, in 1970, Helvy Tiana Rosa graduated in 1995 from the Middle Eastern Studies Program of the Department of Arabic, University of Indonesia, Jakarta. At university, she established an alternative Muslim women's theater group in 1991 and directed some of its productions. She began working with the children's magazine, *Annida*, in 1992, and is now its editor. The magazine is popular with Muslim youth and sells approximately 40,000 copies each fortnight. She also established the organization, Forum Lingkar Pena, in 1997, and it now has some 3,000 young writers as members. Helvy has published some sixteen books, and her works are included in another fifteen anthologies.

"RED NETS"

Here I want to discuss just one of her stories, "Jaring-jaring Merah" ("Red Nets"), which was published in the literary magazine, *Horison*, in April 1999, and was subsequently chosen as one of the ten best stories in *Horison* for that decade. The story is remarkable for its courageous criticism of the Indonesian government and its sympathy for women who have been violated in war.

"Red Nets" is a horrifying account of actions allegedly undertaken by the Indonesian Army, or parts of it, towards villagers in the Province of Acheh, as part of the Army's efforts to crush the rebel Free Acheh Movement (GAM, Gerakan Aceh Merdeka). Criticism of the Indonesian Army is, as one might imagine, a rare and a bold action in a time of potential national disintegration (see Korrie Layun Rampan 296-303).

The story falls into four clear sections and is told in a mixture of real and dream-like scenes. The narrator is a young woman, Inong, whose character hovers between absolute insight and the mental derangement caused by the brutality of war.

In the first section, Inong sees two wild dogs tearing at a corpse, while she walks through the forest at night. The dogs snarl at Inong, as if to frighten her.

> "Frighten me?" she asks. "Don't these mangy dogs know that I have seen three to seven corpses floating each day in the river near my house! I saw Yunos Burong's throat slashed and his head displayed to the villagers. I have seen the bodies of those who have been shot on the back of a yellow truck. Their blood spurted everywhere. I saw my neighbor, Rohani, stripped, then gang-raped, before her house and husband were set alight. I was there when *Geuchik* [the Village Headman] Harun was tied to

> a tree and shot repeatedly. I saw it all! Everything. I also saw them slaughter … my family, for no reason." (Trans. mine, Korrie Layun Rampan 296-7)
>
> She then sees two men wearing boots (soldiers) approaching her. The men dismiss her as:
>
> "That mad woman!" who "used to be pretty once." Inong sings, "with the moon, the clouds, and the night air. With the whispering of the wind, an owl and the howling of the dogs. With the shadows of my Father, Mother, Ismail and Agam. We sing, we dance *bungon jeumpa.* Then I smile shyly, just as I did when Hamzah, my fiancé, used to ride his bicycle past our house. Once. Yes, once." (298)

There is only one person who cares for Inong in her madness, Cut Dini. Inong doesn't know much about Dini, except that she is a member of an NGO, an *aktivis mesjid* (Muslim activist), who has returned to Acheh after finishing her studies in Jakarta. Dini washes Inong, feeds her, provides her with psychological support, and comforts her by chanting the Koran. Dini represents the Muslim activism to which Helvy is so passionately committed in her own life. The character is didactic but, in a predominantly Muslim state, she can be expected to arouse wide-spread sympathy, a sympathy which is here directed against the national military forces. NGOs form a necessary, but not always popular, leaven in the strongly authoritarian Indonesian state.

In the third section of the story, two soldiers visit Cut Dini and offer her money if she will sign a statutory declaration promising to "say nothing to outsiders." (The term "*orang asing"* can refer to non-Indonesians, perhaps western journalists, or simply to those from outside the region.). Dini angrily rejects their offer: "No!" she insists. "What about the rapes, the tortures, the slaughterhouse at the *rumah geudong*, the corpses scattered around The Hill of the Skull, the Yellow Bridge, Tamiang River, Cot Panglima, Krueng Campli Forest … everywhere! The villages of three thousand widows, the orphans abandoned" (3).

In their reply, the soldiers plead that they are only fighting against the GPK (an alternative term used by the Indonesian Army to refer to GAM–Gerakan Pengacau Keamanan, The Movement to Disrupt Security); that what has happened is a military operation, whose one purpose is to protect the peace of society (*menjaga keamanan masyarakat*). This provokes a further response from Cut Dini: "Who are the people really afraid of? Many of them were forced to become *cuak* (military spies), to spy on and treat their own friends as followers of Hasan Tiro and the Free Acheh Movement. But it is

all finished. There is no place here for people like you now" (300). The response uses language in various ways. It is the national language, Indonesian, but it continues to incorporate sympathetic references to the regional language, Achehnese. It rejects the distorted language of the state, which refuses to admit that the rebels have an ideological commitment of their own. Finally, it accepts wider national and international accounts of what is happening in Acheh as potentially carrying their own truth, a truth which is suppressed in the immediate region.

The fourth section of the story is divided into two parts. The first part returns to Inong's madness. It begins with Inong's graphic dream of the death of her family members and her own rape. The part second tells of the appearance of another two soldiers. Dini pleads with these men: "She is only one of thousands of victims of savagery (*korban kebiadaban*), Pak. Help us, give us justice. You have seen for yourself. Those elements (*oknum-oknum*) have taken everything this poor woman had." And despite Cut Dini's reassurance, "Inong…, they will help us" (303), the story ends with Inong's floundering, as she struggles with the red cords which bind her. Here Helvy offers to salvage the reputation of the Army, but only if they will declare their commitment to social justice.

This is an extraordinary story about an extremely difficult situation, told through–and on behalf of–women and the civilian population under attack. "Operation Red Net" ("*Operasi Jaring Merah"*) was the military code name for its operations against GAM during the 1990s. During these operations, over a thousand civilians were killed, almost twice as many disappeared, hundreds of women were raped, almost seventeen thousand children were left orphans, and over a hundred buildings (including schools) were burned. Helvi carefully blames these events only on "certain elements" in the Indonesian Army, and calls on other parts of the Army to put the situation right. Her concern for women, her belief in their power to stand against (and sometimes be crushed by) social violence, and her faith in the healing power of Islam, is new in Indonesian literature, and unmistakably powerful.

AYU UTAMI

Ayu (Yustina Ayu) Utami was born in Bogor, West Java, on the 21 November, 1968. She is a graduate of Department of Russian at the University of Indonesia and has worked as a journalist for such magazines as *Matra, Forum Keadilan,* and *D&R,* as well as being an editor of the cultural magazine *Kalam*. After the banning of the magazines *Tempo, Editor,* and *Detik* in 1994, Ayu was a founding member of the Aliansi Jurnalis Independen (AJI, Alliance of Independent Journalists), which protested against censorship of the press by the

Suharto regime.

Saman (A Name) is the first part of a larger novel, *Laila Tak Mampir di New York (Laila Didn't Stopover in New York),* which won the major prize in the Novel Writing Contest held by the Dewan Kesenian Jakarta (Jakarta Arts Council) in 1998. Originally published in April 1998, before the fall of Suharto, *Saman* was phenomenally successful. It had already reached its thirteenth printing in June 1999, and its fourteenth in March 2000. (Most Indonesian novels only print one edition and sell a total of 2-3,000 copies over a period of perhaps three to five years.)

Despite their common concerns about Indonesian political corruption, "Jaring-jaring Merah" and *Saman* are written from very different perspectives. *Angkatan 2000* includes a smiling picture of Helvy Tiana Rosa wearing a Muslim head-scarf. The back cover of *Saman* showed a picture of a windswept Ayu in long-sleeved t-shirt and jeans, somewhere in the deserts of mid-west America. The back cover also carried praise from such major literary figures as Sapardi Djoko Damono: "Fantastic … displays a compositional technique which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been attempted by other writers in Indonesia, and perhaps not in other countries either." The novelist and public intellectual Dr. Umar Kayam wrote on the back cover: "I don't think any other young writer could compete with her now. And probably not many older writers either." The veteran Pramoedya Ananta Toer was overwhelmed: "The writer shows the highest possible integrity … I could only read it with great difficulty. It made me feel as though I was a political prisoner all over again." And the social activist Roman Catholic priest, the late Y. B. Mangunwijaya, added: "Superb, splendid [in English] … This novel can be enjoyed by mature readers and will be of great use to them. It is a very mature work. And honest. Especially about politics and social anthropology, and even more particularly about religion and faith." Ayu represented a more modern, secular Jakarta perspective on the nation at this point in its history.

Not all readers were as impressed as the major Indonesian writers cited on the back cover of the novel. Questions were also raised in 1998, particularly by men, as to whether a woman could properly write such a work. Most readers, especially women readers, felt that the remarks were condescending and insulting.

SAMAN

During the 1960s, the novelist Iwan Simatupang attempted to introduce the tenets of the French "New Novel" into Indonesian, against the predominantly realist tone of writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Umar Kayam. These principles led him to write the

sort of work described by one of the characters in his *Ziarah* (*The Pilgrim,* 1969), as "a novel without a hero, without a theme, and without morals" (112-3). Although less extreme than Simatupang's work, *Saman* (and its sequel *Larung*, 2001) are well-crafted contemporary novels, told through the use of a series of unreliable, shifting, first-person narrators who are more ordinary characters than Simatupang's vagrants, madmen, and heroes. Both parts of *Saman* treat the serious concerns of the late New Order young rich elite: school, travel, sexual relationships, politics, the environment, international business, NGOs, institutional religion, and even the antics of ghosts.

In *Saman* the stories of four young women, and that of the ex-priest /NGO activist, Saman, are inter-woven and non-sequential. Saman's story is largely political. His story begins halfway through Chapter One with the death of a young local worker following an explosion on an oil-rig. The story later tells of the attempts of one of the workers on the rig, Sihar, to confront the company over the death. In this struggle, Sihar is assisted by an NGO worker, now known as "Saman."

Saman's earlier life is described in Chapter Two, where he is still called Athenasius Wisanngeni. In the traditional shadow theater, *wayang*, Wisanggeni is a minor character: a bold and aggressive son of Arjuna from a heavenly nymph, who refuses to speak anything but low Javanese to the gods. In *Saman*, Wis is a devout Catholic. We follow his ordination to the Catholic priesthood and his return to minister in the village of his childhood, Perabumulih, the site of the office of the oil company in the previous chapter. Some of this chapter is devoted to a "ghost story," telling about a series of spirit children born to Wis's mother, whom he hears but never sees. The major part of the chapter, however, deals with Wis's struggles to help the villagers fight against a government supported company which seeks to coerce them into growing palm oil, rather than their currently successful rubber. By using outside resources, Wis is able to hold off the company for a long time. Finally, however, he is taken captive by the company's goons and tortured. This leads to a mental breakdown, and a loss of vocation as he realizes that he is unable to help the villagers because he is not one of them. He supports them but, unlike them, he has nothing to win and nothing to lose, by supporting their struggles as priest. There is also a somewhat childish sense that God has failed to support him as he struggled to practice care for the poor and humble. As the ramshackle shed in which Wis is imprisoned begins to burn, he is saved by his spirit siblings. The ghost story is presented as being as real, and as important, as Wis's spiritual crisis and his practical liberation theology. The book shows absolutely no faith in the Indonesian legal system, and the struggle to convict the manager of the rig is successful only because of an elaborate trick which the two men manage to perpetrate.

The second, and more prominent aspect of the novel, is romantic. Chapter One follows Laila Gagarina over one day, the 28th May 1996, as she waits in Central Park, New York, for her lover, who is Sihar. The language is soft, yearning and not a little naïve. It opens:

> In this park, I am a bird. I have flown thousand and thousands of miles from a country with no knowledge of the seasons, migrated in search of spring, where I can smell the fragrant grass, and the trees whose names and ages are all unknown to us.
>
> The fragrance of the wood, the cold stones, the smell of tree trunks and the mushrooms–do any of them have names, or ages. People give them names, the way parents name their children. (Trans. mine 1)

The chapter marks the passing day three times (at 10 A.M., 12 P.M., and 3 P.M.) as Laila continues to wait for Sihar. Between 10 and 12 o'clock, we are taken back to her first meeting with Sihar in 1993. Two other stories run through this flashback. The first is Laila's subsequent difficulty in losing her virginity to Sihar. She is, as she laments several times, *masih perawan*, still a virgin, despite Sihar's earlier attempts to remedy this affliction at a hotel by the beach on 22 April 1995. The symbolic message that the park setting seeks to convey is an encouragement of spontaneous natural behaviour, beyond language and conventional social morality. Laila lacks the courage to live this message out in Indonesia, but hopes that America might be different.

The love interest is revived in Chapter Three. Laila, after her disappointment at not meeting Sihar, returns to the house of her old school friend, Shakuntala, who is now studying dance in New York. The chapter opens aggressively:

> My name is Shakuntala. My father and my siblings call me a slut.
> Because I have slept with several men and several women. But I've never asked for any payment. My father and my siblings don't respect me. I don't respect them. (115)

In this chapter, we are led through Shakuntala's various sexual experiences, including the loss of her virginity to a teaspoon, and an early affair with a hairy European giant.

In Chapter Five politics and romance merge, as the novel traces with increasing

urgency Saman's affair during May 1994 with another of Laila's friends, Yasmin Maningke, "the girl who has everything" (24), including a husband.

It can be argued that the major theme of both aspects of the novel is the search for freedom. The women seek to be free to express their own sexuality. There is a long and direct discussion of women's rights (180-1.) Saman's main concern, first as a priest, later as a member of an NGO organisation, is with empowering villagers. The suggestion that Father Wis is seeking to engage in the praxis of "liberation theology" is raised by the army (103), but also dismissed as totally inaccurate ("bullshit belaka" 107). Saman instead explains his own motives as a way of creatively working out the human capacity for love (161), and his growing affair with Yasmin is presented as a way of his attaining full adult maturity.

As Barbara Hatley has argued:

> Saman … breaks all the rules. Most startling to readers, it seems, are its transgressions of sexual taboos. Here there is no distancing of a female narrator from sexual expression and assertiveness. All four women … speak intimately, frankly and with earthy humour to one another of their sexual experiences as well as their conflicts with their parents and others. ("New Directions" 454)

We may also note that the detailed criticism of fraudulent business practices, with the support of the military-civil regime, prior to the fall of Suharto, would have made a significant impact on readers (see Collins).

Some Indonesians have also questioned the nature of the "liberation" which all the characters in that work seem to be seeking. The East Javanese poet Tjahjono Widijanto, wrote an article entitled "Dari 'Siti Nurbaya' hingga 'Saman'" ("From Siti Nurbaya to Saman"), in *Kompas*, as early as May, 1999:

> *Saman* … attempts to express the new phenomena of a "sexual revolution" which is taking place in the larger cities. There is a shift in values, in which women feel that they have found a symbol of their own independence through sexual freedom. This especially applies to upper class women. The novel explicitly portrays the dark picture of the generation produced by the New Order who are the victims of the culture of modernism, developmentalism, and completely permissive capitalism.
>
> The women presented in Saman basically depict how women were the obscene

> victims of the New Order culture which was well advanced into capitalism and materialism. On the one hand, the women in the novel have a far larger public than domestic sphere in which to move, but, on the other hand, they still represent the amulet of a culture which experiences depression as it tries to translate the meaning of rebellion, freedom and independence.
>
> They are still Siti Nurbayas—modern Siti Nurbayas, facing newer, crueler and more sophisticated Datuk Meringgihs, an utterly permissive capitalism, which is more dazzling, more cunning, freer and more deceitful (trans. mine 199).

This criticism is also an explicitly Islamic response to changes in contemporary Indonesian society, and an assertion of contrary moral values. It is hard to deny, from a more secular perspective, that the political story belongs to Saman and Sihir; and the romantic adventures to the female characters, who must wait upon the pleasure of their men. This is, from any perspective, a limited form of liberation.

DEWI LESTARI

The third author I wish to discuss here, Dewi Lestari Simangunsong, is younger than either Helvy Tiana Rosa or Ayu Utami. "Dee," as she is often known, was born in Bandung on the 20th January, 1976. The front cover, inside flap and back cover of early editions of *Supernova* all carry the address of Dee's web-site www.truedee.com. Here readers will find that she is an "Aquarius (and proud to be one)." Dee is also a graduate and holds the degree of Bachelor of Political Science in International Relations from Universitas Katolik Parahyangan. However, she was best known prior to the publication of *Supernova* as a singer and songwriter in the all-girl band RSD, Rida Sita Dewi. The back cover of the novel also notes that she is a cultural activist and speaker at seminars. Finally, the cover acknowledges Dee's interest in "spirituality and science—which she considers to be 'the only windows which are capable of being shattered at any moment'—these have led her to an exploration of values which she has later presented in this work."

Supernova was published by Dee's own company, Truedee Books, at the end of 2000. From other sources, we know that while *Saman* sold 30,000 copies in its first three years, *Supernova* sold a staggering 70,000 copies in its first six months. *Supernova* does not claim to have won any prizes. Nevertheless, it was short-listed for the major Khatulistiwa Award, offered annually in Jakarta. (Although it did not win, Dee's commented at the time: *"finalis*

yang paling funky" ("maybe I didn't win, but at least I was the funkiest finalist") ("Dewi Supernova" 12, trans. mine).

The book positions itself as contemporary and highly accessible "literature" (the classification is prominent on the back cover) but of a rather popular kind. Its cover is bright blue and garish, bearing a postmodern scientific collage. Compared to Ayu's rugged portrait, that of Dee is both tasteful and alluring. Similarly, the novel carries the obligatory praise from established writers (having been, in fact, launched at the Jakarta Arts Centre, in February 2001), but on a page inside the back of the book. These "expert commentators" include the important but perhaps less prestigious journalist and novelist Arswendo Atmowiloto and playwright Putu Wijaya, as well as the major poet Taufiq Ismail who writes: "One of a number of works of creative renewal published in Indonesian literature over the past three years. An intelligent, unique and shattering exploration of values through science, spirituality and love." The critic Jakob Soemardjo states: "An interesting novel from a writer of the younger generation. This is an intellectual work of literature in pop art form, fully played out in the real world. It opposes old values through the presentation of new arguments, so that readers can gain new perceptions of their own existence." But there is also another page of "comments from non-experts." These include Dee's friends (including one undergoing an identity crisis), her production team, her sister, and Arian, a friend and musician who insists, in English: "You rock, girl! UNDERGROUND RULES!!" Even Dee's father is there too, unfortunately not wearing his glasses: "I never thought my little girl could write a book like this. But why did you make the print so small?"

In some ways, perhaps the most apt comment might be that of Dewa Nur Hakim, not quoted in the book itself. In the glossy *Djakarta Magazine* (September 2001), he describes *Supernova* as "a debut novel impressive not just for its vitality and assured flow, but mostly for the sheer audacity of its scope and moral statements, its eclectic nature and shameless ambition" (10).

SUPERNOVA

The youthful, parodic defiance of serious literature which I have already described as being characteristic of the outside of *Supernova* is also evident on the inside. *Supernova* is a story within a story, told by two homosexuals, Dhimas and Ruben; something completely unknown in Indonesian literature. Dhimas is a graduate in English Literature from George Washington University in Washington DC, a lecturer and a poet. Ruben, perhaps even

more remarkably, is an Indonesian Jew. He is a graduate of the Medical School of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, and a "quantum psychologist" with a boundless interest in "theories about cosmology, which only he can understand" (Dewi *Supernova* 9). The two men first met at a drug party in Washington, while they were both still students. At this meeting, Ruben believed Dhimas to be a rich young Indonesian with far too much money, while Dhimas's first impression of Ruben was that he was a scholarship student, a "nerd," and a cynic. Ruben's impression turned out to be wrong; Dhimas' apparently was not. Their relationship continued after they returned to Jakarta and the story they create is written in honor of their tenth anniversary as "best friends" and "partners in life" together (74).

The story within the story grows from a further story (24-5), a myth which might be translated into English as follows:

A Knight fell in love with the youngest Princess
who came to earth from the land of the fairies.
One day the Princess returned to her home in the sky.
The knight was sad.
He knew how to ride a horse and how to fight with his sword,
but he didn't know how to fly.
The Knight left his castle and asked the butterflies to teach him to fly.
But the butterflies could only help him to fly to the top of the trees.
So the Knight asked the sparrows to teach him to fly.
They could only help him fly
to the top of the church steeple.
So he asked the eagles to teach him to fly.
They could only take him to the top of the mountains.
There was no winged creature who could teach him to fly any higher than that.
The Knight was sad, but he didn't give up.
He asked the wind to teach him to fly.
The wind taught him to fly around the world,
to fly over the mountains and above the clouds.
But the Princess was still much higher in the sky,
and the wind couldn't fly that high.
The Knight despaired and this time he did give up hope.
One night a Falling Star heard him crying.

The Star stopped and offered to teach him how to travel at the speed of light.
To travel faster than lightning and to fly higher than a million heavens.
But, there was one condition.
If the Knight didn't land right in front of the Princess,
he would die.
The dangerous speed at which he would be travelling
would smash him into a fine red powder, and that would be the end of him.
The Knight agreed. He was prepared to trust
his very life to the Falling Star.
And he was ready to surrender his soul
to a split second in time.
The Falling Star took his hand and whispered:
"This is a journey of True Love.
Close your eyes, oh noble Knight, and tell me to stop
as soon as you feel the presence of the Princess."
They sped through the sky.
The cold air seemed to tear the handsome Knight's heart into pieces
but his soul was warmed by his love for the Princess.
And when he finally felt that she was there, he shouted: "Stop!"
Looking down, the Falling Star
was stunned by the beauty of the lonely Princess.
The Princess shone like Orion in the darkness of her galaxy.
The Star fell in love with the Princess
and let go of the Knight's hand,
the Knight who was made from love and trust.
The Knight sped through the air
Towards his own destruction.
But the Star landed
and claimed the Princess.
The poor Knight.
As a reward, he became the Aurora in the North Pole,
a symbol of his elegance and honesty to this very day.

In sketching the personalities of the present day Knight, Princess and Falling Star, the main characters of their story, Ruben and Dhimas turn their back on Indonesian

literature in general and Simatupang's work in particular. As Ruben insists: "It's a waste of time writing about tramps or a village setting with fake cultural artefacts. In reality, yuppies are the mouthpiece of the nation. They have the potential to develop this country and, at the same time, the greatest potential to destroy it" (11).

Supernova has no overt political content. The story the two men create is a conventional three-sided love story. In fact, it is a "cinetron" story, a television soapie taken onto the page, as they both explicitly recognise, cleverly forestalling any criticism from the reader (39). Having turned their backs on tramps and kitsch village settings, Ruben and Dhimas decide that "all the characters must be young, productive, urban, metropolitan, with good access to technological and information systems" (11).

Ferre, the Knight, is in fact only twenty-nine years of age. He is the Managing Director of a large multinational firm: "he is superior to his colleagues in his manner of thinking, the way he dealt with faxes, received the various reports, the telephone calls from here and there which never allowed him an opportunity to enjoy the view as he journeyed through life." Nevertheless, although he "could live the life of a jet-setter, spending his time at wild parties and engaging with the endless number of women who offer themselves to him for his pleasure" (18-9), he never does. His appearance is, in fact, cold and indifferent. This is the result of a childhood wounding: while Ferre was still a boy, his father left Ferre's mother for another woman, and the wife committed suicide. Re's childish response to reading the myth of the Knight, the Princess and the Falling Star was a commitment to protecting himself and trusting no one. He wanted to see the Falling Star punished and the Princess realise all that the Knight had done for her. Through the betrayal of his parents, and the imbalance of the myth, Ferre has closed off his own emotions and abandoned himself to his work. He is the wounded hero, who might be a poet (something Dhimas is very keen on) if only he could allow himself to feel his own emotions.

The Princess is Rana. Dhimas doesn't particularly like her, because her life seems to him to be so absolutely predictable: "birth—kindergarten—primary school—junior high school—senior high school—college—work—marriage—children—grandchildren—death—food for worms" (30). The daughter of the aristocratic Raden Ajeng Widya Purwaningrum, Rana has been emotionally damaged in a different way from Ferre. She has been increasingly confined by the social expectations which were placed upon her as she was raised to fit into a material and highly structured social world, the world of the new social elite of industrial Indonesia. A graduate of the Institute of Technology in Bandung, one of the best schools in Indonesia, Rana is married to Arwin, a highly successful contractor, with an even better social background than her own. She suffers the further constraints of feeling herself to be married to his family and his whole class (78, 104).

There is a vitality, and an innocence, to the way Dee writes about young love. This is evident in Rana's own memory of what she expected of marriage:

> Rana didn't tell him how intoxicated she had been with love … in love with the image of love in the form of a new home together: the young couple, with their own house together in some new real estate area, paying their car off together, pushing their shopping cart hand in hand in the supermarket, discussing which brand of detergent to buy, what sort of instant noodles, which type of chilly sauce was best. (27)

Naturally things have not worked out this way, and Rana reluctantly accepts the tedium of regular marriage—until she meets Re. For Ruben and Dhimas's purposes, Rana has the potential, once Ferre falls in love with her, to magnify his suffering to the point of complete personal disintegration.

There is an ambivalence about the central myth, which reflects the queerness of the two narrators. Indonesian words do not show gender. We know that the Knight is a man, and the littlest Princess a woman. But is the Falling Star a man or a woman? Does the Star befriend the Knight out of motherly kindness or masculine friendship? Does the Star fall in love with the Princess as a man or a woman? The ambivalence can serve to underline the strangeness in Indonesian literature of any sympathetic treatment of a homosexual couple, and it creates further possibilities for the three contemporary characters who are caught up in the drama of their own sexualities.

There are many aspects to The Falling Star. Diva is the most complex (if that is the right word) of all of the characters. Diva is a high class prostitute. She is beautiful, intelligent, rich, absolutely independent, and as Ruben says, completely "self-actualised," following the term proposed by the psychologist Abraham Maslow. (For those not familiar with Maslow, Dee provides a brief explanation of his ideas in a footnote. Beside footnotes, the book also has a bibliography—and an index!) Diva is also hard, cold and indifferent with her clients and those with whom she must deal in everyday life. But, of course, she also has a heart of gold and is extremely kind to her driver and to children in general. She is also very wise and runs her own web-site from which she dispenses advice on the good life and the nature of reality. Diva, as it turns out, also had a troubled childhood and was raised in an orphanage. Despite her immoral lifestyle, Diva's moral certitude makes the reader feel as though it is the "respectable" male clients who are prostituting themselves in their daily lives.

There are three stages in the plot of *Supernova*. The first is the story of Ruben and Dhimas themselves. The second is the story of Re and Rana. The third is that of Re and Diva. In a conventionally moral way, Rana finally decides that she loves her husband more than she loves Ferre. Re and Diva are destined to be together only briefly, because Diva's independent nature will not allow things to be otherwise. The third is, of course, that of Ruben and Dhimas themselves.

The novel is strongly moral. Re and Rana's affair is lived out with passion but also with consistent uncertainty as Rana refuses to damage the good standing of Arwin's family. Her problem is that she has "a husband whom she must keep for the stability of the social order, and a secret lover whom she loves half to death" (104) —not an issue which would take very long in a western soapie, one feels. Eventually, Rana decides that she will indeed leave her husband to be with Re. Remarkably, it is Arwin who finally encourages Rana to leave. "If you really love him, I'm ready to let you go" he tells her after her operation in hospital for a heart condition. "I won't make things difficult for you. For us. We've both suffered too much already. Don't you think so?" (152)

Rana's response is not what he expects:

> The sentence carried Rana into a completely different dimension. It moved her to see the face of the man she had married three years ago in a completely different way, no longer with distaste. There was a strange meaning in his gaze, a love that liberated. Arwin clearly loved her in that way. She couldn't, nor could her lover
>
> It was Arwin's turn to be surprised when his wife's tears began to fall and she held him tightly. This was obviously not a farewell embrace, but the opposite, the embrace of someone who had just come home.
>
> In her tiny little nest, Rana had found the meaning of freedom. She flew … just at the very moment she had never expected to. (152)

The scene is completely corny, deliberately so no doubt, and Ruben and Dhimas have already foreshadowed this in their undercutting comment when Arwin first learns of the affair earlier in the book:

> "It's amazing," Ruben whispered, "I never expected him to think like that."
>
> "He really loves his wife. When love reaches a certain point it can extinguish the ego." (106)

And it therefore raises what is surely one of the central issues in the novel: the importance of love as a maturing force in the lives of independent mature adults.

There is an interesting brief scene in *Supernova* where Rana asks her mother: "during all the time you've been married to daddy, have you ever felt bored, or that something is wrong, or something is missing" (119). The mother's answer is, on the surface, one that sits uncomfortably with Rana: "Later, when you've been married for ten or fifteen years, you'll understand for yourself. Then you won't ask about the sort of happiness you're talking about now" (120-1). Maturity is the key to *Supernova*, and the novel's thinking on this topic is more complex than its pop surface suggests.

In simple terms, this issue of love as a maturing force in human life is also at the core of the second plot, the story of Re and Diva. For much of this story, Re is oblivious of Diva's existence, even though she lives directly across the road from him. During this time, we see Diva both as a professional model and a prostitute—hard, cold, calculating and uncaring—but also as the warm, affectionate woman who gives large amounts of her money for the welfare of children, protects her chauffeur's drive from poverty, and shops at the local market, where she regularly buys plants for the orderly garden at the back of her house. We see her with her customers, and we see her with the one man who gives her sexual pleasure, Gio, a rich Portuguese-Chinese (Timorese?), who spends his life climbing mountains, rafting rivers and visiting unexplored lands. (Diva speaks fluent Portuguese with him, of course.)

We also see Diva as "a cyber Avatar" (12; 127-8), Supernova herself, dispensing psychological and spiritual advice through her computer. Within the novel there is also a complex New Age metaphysics which grows from chaos theory underlying the development of both the embedded plots. (Dee presents them earnestly and at length, but, like everything else, also mocks them.) The theories owe as much to Deepak Chopra, Father Mangunwijaya, Maslow and Krishnamurti, as they do to Schrodinger, Bohm and Brodie. Some scientists have considered Dee's knowledge of physics to be weak. I personally am of the opinion that science in literature need be no more accurate than history in literature, but I shall not pursue that here.

Diva tells one of her correspondents:

> I am simply offering a new perspective. Untying the knots I see you all suffering. You decide what happens next. I have absolutely no interest in whether the knowledge I present fits with the rules, norms, culture and ideology in which you and most people believe. My aims are not comparative. I offer analogies for you to think about, to create a better life and world. That is all. (76)

And another:

> I am "post" everything you believed last year, yesterday, in fact just a moment ago. We are still evolving. (75)

Dee can even undercut this philosophising too: "So that's it, our Avatar preaches over the internet" Dhimas comments with enormous obvious disappointment (130).

It is only after the "point of bifurcation" has been reached, that Rana has left Re and he is locked in his own house in enormous despair, that Diva and Re finally meet. She joins the group outside his door, gains immediate access, sends him off to bathe (like a naughty child), and returns with the best *macaroni schotel* he has ever tasted. Thereafter they meet on a daily basis, in her garden, enjoy her cakes and discuss such passing matters as "the free market, e-business, the third world debt, labour and even Marxism," all of which Diva understands extensively, and can back up with appropriate facts and figures (181). They are, of course, "just good friends" (188). Until finally Dhimas decides to finish the story, by letting it take its own automatic course (190).

This is how it develops. Re is drawn to Diva as she sits before her computer. In response to his question as to who she really is, Diva answers: "I am your last lesson in how to fly. Beginning from the flapping wings of the tiny butterfly (a reference to Rana and Re's first meeting—H.A.) … and ending with the brightness of a falling star. You have experienced a beautiful and most magical metamorphosis, Ferre … and now you are a real Knight. You fell, but you rose again, you slipped but you were not destroyed" (196).

Re's initiation into maturity is indeed sexual ("The blood pounds. Energy dances. An elemental harmony of love," says page 205 dramatically). And it is also Diva's initiation as well, in answer to his earlier question: "has Supernova ever fallen in love?" (197). But clearly, for both of them, love and sexuality are not the same thing. The crucial element is the awakening into true self awareness. Following which, they both move on, to lead their separate, adult, lives. (Can we imagine Re marrying Diva? It is as unlikely as Dr Sukartono marrying Yah in the earlier novel to which *Supernova* bears some interesting parallels:

Armijn Pane's *Belenggu*, in which the prostitute also leaves the hero to travel overseas.)

Ferre, Rana and Diva are all changed by their experiences. But, in a way, they also continue being who they originally were, but with a new awareness. In the end, the story of Dhimas and Ruben also goes nowhere. They too finish as they began: "two men with no surnames"[1] holding hands and in love (210), except that they eventually realise that they too are characters in a book and will disappear as soon as the reader closes the last page. (Ruben does in fact have a surname, Ruben Ehud, perhaps short for "Yahudi" Jew [65].)

Is *Supernova* "good literature"? That depends, as the critics say. Like Tristam Shandy, for example, it is an extremely enjoyable, intelligent work, which does not take itself terribly seriously but does have some important moral things to say about the human condition. It also casts interesting lights on other works of the years after 1998 and after, and on how we respond to them, by indicating, for example, the ruthlessness and despair of Laila and her friends. In any case, the idealist politics of the earlier authors, Helvi Tiana Rosa and Ayu Utami, has significantly been replaced by a conservative assertion of bourgeois social values, and the function of religion modified by a New Age spirituality that is part of a global counter-culture.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with another poem, "Ziarah Batu," by Dorothea Rosa Herliany. Many of her works written between 1996 and 1998 increasingly emphasized the constraints of the lack of free speech which marked the approaching demise of New Order. She noted how hard it was under the many restrictions then in force (including the threat of arrest and imprisonment) to express personal opinion, and to affirm a belief in literature as a way of still speaking the personal and the ethical in a state which had grown authoritarian and corrupt. Yet she spoke with a force and preciseness that no male author could match. In a book entitled *Kill the Radio: Sebuah radio kumatikan* (2001), Dorothea wrote:

A Pilgrimage to a Rocky Place
To our Orators

stones speak in silence,
hard in the roaring, aimless currents,
wounds form in the air, blood flows,
dripping for hundreds of years, sweeping away

the sweat of our silent consciences.
rocks speak in cold words,
squeezing thousands of years of longing
into hard shapes, searching for room
in the emptiness filled with the harsh breathing
of wild animals,
searching for land
in a small space within the soul.
i choose the language of rocks
as a way of breaking
the arrogance of your being.

In their different ways, the works of Helvy Tiana Rosa, Ayu Utami, and Dewi Lestari all use "the language of rocks" as a way of attacking the hypocritical "arrogance" of the society in which they live, and to assert the rights of the tongues of women to speak in an honest, frank and unrestrained manner. Their writings present us with a more violent, more difficult, more complex, more sophisticated, and more ambiguously Islamic, Indonesia than we have known before. The challenge is to learn how to respond to these works and adjust to the post-modern, and post-Reformation, humanity which they represent.

NOTE

1 Ruben does in fact have a surname, Ruben Ehud (65), perhaps short for "Yahudi" Jew.

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APPENDIX: ORIGINAL INDONESIAN TEXTS

Agus Sarjono: "Sajak Palsu"

(1998)

Selamat pagi pak, selamat pagi bu, ucap anak sekolah
dengan sapaan palsu. Lalu mereka pun belajar
sejarah palsu dari buku-buku palsu. Di akhir sekolah
mereka terperangah melihat hamparan nilai mereka
yang palsu. Karena tak cukup nilai,
maka berdatanganlah mereka ke rumah-rumah
bapak dan ibu guru untuk menyerahkan amplop berisi
perhatian dan rasa hormat palsu.
Sambil tersipu palsu dan membuat tolakan
tolakan palsu, akhirnya pak guru dan bu guru
terima juga amplop itu sambil berjanji palsu
untuk mengubah nilai-nilai palsu dengan
nilai-nilai palsu yang baru. Maka sekolah
demi masa sekolah berlalu, mereka pun lahir
sebagain ekonom-ekonom palsu, ahli hukum palsu,
ahli pertanian palsu, insinyur palsu.
Sebagian menjadi guru, ilmuwan
atau seniman palsu. Dengan gairah tinggi
mereka menghambur ke tengah pembangunan
palsu dengan ekonomi palsu sebagai panglima
palsu. Mereka saksikan ramainya
perniagaan palsu dengan ekspor
dan impor palsu yang mengirim dan mendatangkan
berbagai barang kelontong kualitas palsu.
Dan bank-bank palsu dengan giat
menawarkan bonus dan hadiah-hadiah palsu
tapi diam-diam meminjam juga pinjaman
dengan ijin dan surat palsu kepada bank negeri
yang dijaga pejabat-pejabat palsu. Masyarakat pun

berniaga dengan uang palsu yang dijamin
devisa palsu. Maka uang-uang asing
menggertak dengan kurs palsu
sehingga semua blingsatan dan terperosok krisis
yang meruntuhkan pemerintahan palsu
ke dalam nasib buruk palsu. Lalu orang-orang palsu
meneriakkan kegembiraan palsu dan mendebatkan
gagasan-gagasan palsu di tengah seminar
dan dialog-dialog palsu menyambut tibanya
demokrasi palsu yang berkibar-kibar
begitu nyaring
dan palsu.

From "Jaring-jaring Merah"

Ngeri? Oi, tahukah anjing-anjing buduk itu, aku melihat tiga samai tujuh mayat sehari mengambang di sungai dekat rumahku! Aku juga pernah melihat Yunus Burong ditebas lehernya dan kepalanya dipertontonkan oada penduduk desa. Aku melihat orang-orang ditembak di atas sebuah truk kuning. Darah mereka muncrat ke mana-mana. Aku melihat tetanggaku Rohani ditelanjangi, diperkosa beramai-ramai, sebelum rumah dan suaminya dibakar. Aku melihat saat *Geuchik* Harun diikat pada sebuah pohon dan ditembak berulangkali. Aku melihat semua itu! Ya, semuanya. Juga saat mereka membantai … keluargaku, tanpa alasan. (*Angkatan 2000,* 296-7)
Aku bernyanyi bersama bulan, awan dan udara malam. Bersama desir angin, burung hantu dan lolongan anjing hutan. Bersama bayangan Ayah, Mak, *Ma'e* dan *Agam.* Kami menyanyi, kami menari *bungong jeumpa.* Lalu aku tersenyum malu, saat Hamzah yang telah meminangku, melintas di depan rumah dengan sepedanya. Dahulu. Ya, dahulu. (298)

"Tidak!! Bagaimana dengan perkosaan dan penyiksaan selama ini, penjagalan di *rumoh geudong,* mayat-mayat yang berserakan di *Buket Tangkuruk,* Jembatan Kuning, Sungai Tamiang, Cot Panglima, Hutan Krueng Campli … dan di mana-mana … Lalu perkampungan tiga ribu janda, anak-anak yang terlantar … Kenyataannya masyarakat takut pada siapa? Dulu, banyak yang terpaksa menjadi *cuak,* memata-matai dan menganggap teman sendiri sebagai pengikut Hasan Tiro dari Gerakan Aceh Merdeka. Tetapi sekarang semua usai. Tak ada tempat bagi orang seperti kalian di sini." (300)

"Ia hanya satu dari ribuan korban kebiadaban itu, Pak. Tolong, beri kami keadilan. Bapak sudah lihat sendiri. Oknum-oknum itu menjarah segalanya dari perempuan itu." (303)

From Saman

Di taman ini, saya adalah seekor burung. Terbang beribu-ribu mil dari sebuah negeri yang tak mengenal musim, bermigrasi mencari semi, tempat harum rumput bisa tercium, juga pohon-pohon, yang tak pernah kita tahu namanya, atau umurnya.

Aroma kayu, dingin batu, bau perdu dan jamur-jamur – adakah mereka bernama, atau berumur? Manusia menamai mereka, seperti orang tua memanggil anak-anaknya. (1)

Namaku Shakuntala. Ayah dan kakak-perempuanku menyebutku sundal.

Sebab aku telah tidur dengan beberapa lelaki dan beberapa perempuan. Meski tidak menarik bayaran. Kakak dan ayahu tidak menghormatiku. Aku tidak menghormati mereka. (115)

From Tjahjono Widjanto: "Dari 'Siti Nurbaya' hingga 'Saman'":

Saman .. yang mencoba mengungkapkan fenomena terjadinya "revolusi seksual" di kota-kota besar. Terjadinya sebuah pergesaran nilai-nilai dimana perempuan merasa menemukan simbol kemandirian melalui kebebasan seks. Mereka justru perempuan-perempuan golongan atas. Novel ini dengan gamblang memberikan potret buram generasi produk Orde Baru yang merupakan korban kebudayaan modernisme, pembangunisme, dan kapitalisme yang serba permisif.

Sosok-sosok perempuan yang ditampilkan dalam Saman pada dasarnya menggambarkan betapa kaum perempuan menjadi korban carut-marutnya kebudayaan Orde Baru yang larut dalam kapitalisme dan materialisme. Perempuan-perempuan dalam novel tersebut adalah perempuan yang pada satu sisi mempunyai ruang publik yang lebih besar dibandingkan ruang domestiknya, tetapi di sisi lain perempuan-perempuan itu tetap merupakan tumbal kebudayaan yang mengalami depresi dalam menerjemahkan makna pemberontakan, kebebasan, dan kemandirian.

Mereka tetaplah Siti Nurbaya-Siti Nurbaya modern, yang menghadapi Datuk Meringgih baru yang lebih kejam dan lebih canggih, yaitu kapitalisme serba permisif dengan bentuk lebih gemerlap, lebih cerdas, lebih bebas, dan lebih culas.

From Supernova

Ksatria jatuh cinta pada Puteri bungsu dari Kerajaan Bidadari.
Sang Puteri naik ke langit.
Ksatria kebingungan.
Ksatria pintar naik kuda dan bermain pedang,
tapi tidak tahu caranya terbang.
Ksatria keluar dari kastil untuk belajar terbang pada kupu-kupu.
Tapi kupu-upu hanya bisa menempatkannya di pucuk pohon.
Ksatria lalu belajar pada burung gereja.
Burung gereja hanya mampu
mengajarkannya sampai ke atas menara.
Ksatria kemudian berguru pada burung elang.
Burung elang hanya mampu membawanya ke puncak gunung.
Tak ada unggas bersayap yang mampu terbang lebih tinggi lagi.
Ksatria sedih, tapi tak putus asa.
Ksatria memohon pada angin.
Angin mengajarkannya berkeliling mengitari bumi,
lebih tinggi dari gunung dan awan.
Namun sang Puteri masih jauh di awang-awang,
dan tak ada angin yang mampu menusuk langit.
Ksatria sedih dan kali ini ia putus asa.
Sampai satu malam ada Bintang Jatuh
yang berhenti mendengar tangis dukanya.
Ia menawarkan Ksatria untuk mampu melesat secepat cahaya.
Melesat lebih cepat dari kilat dan setinggi sejuta langit dijadikan satu.
Namun kalau Ksatria tak mampu mendarat tepat di Puterinya,
maka ia akan mati.
Hancur dalam kecepatan yang membahayakan,
menjadi serbuk yang membedaki langit, dan tamat.
Ksatria setuju. Ia relakan seluruh kepercayaannya
pada Bintang Jatuh menjadi sebuah nyawa.
Dan ia relakan nyawa itu bergantung
hanya pada seserpih detik yang mematikan.
Bintang Jatuh menggenggam tangannya.

"Inilah perjalanan sebuah Cinta Sejati," ia berbisik,
"tutuplah matamu, Ksatria. Katakan untuk berhenti
begitu hatimu merasakan keberadaannya."
Melesatlah mereka berdua.
Dingin yang tak terhingga serasa merobek hati Ksatria mungil,
namun hangat jiwanya diterangi rasa cinta.
Dan ia merasakannya … "Berhenti!"
Bintang Jatuh melongok ke bawah,
dan ia pun melihat sesosok puteri cantik yang kesepian.
Bersinar bagaikan Orion di tengah kelamnya galaksi.
Ia pun jatuh hati.
Dilepaskannya genggaman itu.
Sewujud nyawa yang terbentuk atas cinta dan percaya.
Ksatria melesat menuju kehancuran.
Sementara sang Bintang mendarat turun untuk dapatkan sang Puteri.
Ksatria yang malang.
Sebagai balasannya, di langit kutib dilukiskan Aurora.
Untuk mengenang kehalusan dan ketulusan hati Ksatria. (24-5)

"Percuma pakai tokoh gelandangan atau setting desa dengan sok-sok pakai aksesoris kebudayaan daerah. Pada kenyataannya para yuppies tadi yang bakal jadi corong bangsa. Yang mampu membangun sekaligus paling potensial untuk merusak." (11)

"… lahir—TK—SD—SMP—SMA—kuliah—kerja—nikah—punya anak—punya cucu—mati—dimakan cacing." (30)

Rana tak menceritakan bagian saat ia benar-benar mabuk cinta. Mabuk akan imaji cinta yang terwujud dalam bahtera rumah tangga; pasangan muda, rumah milik bersama di **real estate** baru, kredit mobil ditanggung berdua, mendorong kereta belanja sambil bergandengan tangan di supermarket, berdebat soal deterjen merk apa, mie instan apa, dan sambel botel keluaran pabrik mana. (27)

"Kalau kamu benar-benar mencintainya, aku rela kamu pergi. Aku tidak akan mempersulit keadaanmu. Keadaan kita. Kita sama-sama sudah terlalu sakit. Bukan begitu?"

…

Kalimat itu membawa Rana ke dimensi yang sama sekali lain. Menggerakkannya untuk melihat

wajah pria yang dinikahinya tiga tahun lalu dengan pandangan baru, tidak lagi tawar. Ada satu makna yang secara aneh terungkap**,** cinta yang membebaskan. Ternyata Arwin yang punya itu. Bukan dirinya, bakan bukan pula kekasaihnya."

Giliran Arwin yang terhenyak ketika isterinya malah menghambur jatuh, mendekapnya erat-erat. Rasanya bukanlah pelukan perpisahan, namun sebaliknya, pelukan seseorang yang kembali.

Di dalam sarang kecilnya yang pengap, Rana justru mendapatkan makna kebebasan. Ia terbang … pada saat yang sama sekali tidak diduganya. (152)

"Menakjubkan," Ruben mendesah, "aku sama sekali tidak menyangka dia akan berpikir begitu"

"Dia teramat mencintai isterinya. Cinta yang sampai di titik tertentu akan mengaburkan ego." (106)

"… selama Ibu menikah dengan Bapak, pernahkah sekali saja Ibu merasa jenuh, atau seperti ada yang salah, seperti ada yang kurang …" (119).

"Nanti, setelah kau menjalani pernikahanmu sepuluh atau lima belas tahun, kau akan mengerti sendiri. Kebahagiaan yang yang kau maksud sekarang tidak akan kau pertanyakan lagi nanti…." (120-1)

"Saya hanya menawarkan perspektif baru. Mengolah simpul-simpul yang saya lihat bagi Anda semua. Andalah yang menentukan selanjutnya. Saya tidak punya kepentingan sedikit pun atas cocok tidaknya pengetahuan ini dengan konstitusi, norma, budaya, atau ideologi apapun yang Anda dan orang banyak percaya. Tjuan saya bukan mengkomparasi. Saya menawarkan anologi untuk Anda refleksikan, demi kehidupan dan wajah dunia yang lebih baik. Itu saja." (76)

"Saya 'post' terhadap apapun yang Anda pegang tahum lalu, kemarin, bahkan detik yang barusan lewat. Kita sedang berevolusi. (75)

"Jadi maksudmu, Avatar kita khotbah di internet, begitu?" (130).

"Akulah pelajaran terakhirmu untuk bisa terbang. Berawal dari kepakan sayap kupu-kupu kecil … berakhir dengan kilatan bintang jatuh. Kau telah mengalami metamorforsa indan dan sang magis, Ferre … sekarang kamu menjadi Ksatria yang sejati. Jatuh, tapi mampu bangkit. Melesat, tapi tidak hancur" (195-6).

"Debur darah. Tarian energi. Harmoni cinta nan elemental." (205)

"Mereka lalu berpegangan tangan erat. Dua pria yang tak punya nama belakang di dalam sebuah kamar kerja. Saling mencintai." (210)

Dorothea Rosa Herliany: "Ziarah Batu"—kepada Para Orator
(1996)

bahasa batu yang diam, keras dalam
dentum arus tak ke mana
udara luka dalam cucuran darah
menetes beratus tahun
mengikis keringat kebisuan nurani

bahasa batu yang dingin
beku meremas ribuan abad rindudendam
mencaricari udaraterbuka
kekosongan yang menyimpan dengus
nafas hewanhewan liar
yang mencari tanah
dalam sejengkal jiwanya

kupilih bahasa batu
buat memecah keangkuhan nuranimu.

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING FILIPINO AMERICAN HOUSEBOY: SPECULATIONS ON *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* AND UNITED STATES IMPERIALISM

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Abstract
The creations of a new cultural formation, US imperialism, development, and globalization are traced in this article by the use of James M. Cain's 1936 pulp novella-turned-film *Double Indemnity*. Representations of the Fil-Am houseboy, his disappearance and re-appearance in the texts, provide an impetus for discovering the cultural transitions from the colonial to the postcolonial periods.

Keywords
colonialism, panopticism, surveillance

About the Author
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Like much textual criticism, this essay is an extended examination of a fairly small detail. That small detail comes from the history of *Double Indemnity*, James M. Cain's pulp novella serialized in 1936 and adapted in 1944 into one of the greatest American films ever made. Specifically, this essay focuses on the literary appearance and cinematic disappearance of the Filipino American houseboy employed by Walter Huff, the narrator of both the film and novel. *Double Indemnity* remains a canonical film noir, that cinematic genre emerging from the 1930s writings of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, and Cain, among others. With this canonical status in mind, I propose that the ways in which mainstream American culture, as instantiated by *Double Indemnity*, mobilizes Filipino American difference that can be read as an index for tracing the jagged cultural transitions from the territorial colonialism of the Age of Empire to the current world order of neo-liberalism under globalization. This article posits that the ideal of American isolationism that had a popular resurgence in the interwar period (c. 1919-1941) in the United States

conveniently converged with the rise of anticolonial consciousness throughout the colonized world. The figure of the Filipino American houseboy, with all his trappings of a waning colonial order, seemed altogether erasable, even desirably so. By 1944 he was written out of the film with little fuss. Yet the dictates and methodologies of revisionism in the contemporary period have made him important, in ways that are probably well out of proportion to his significance at the time of his emergence and even his disappearance. In recognizing that houseboy's significance—to 1936, to 1944, and to the present—we recognize the curious uses to which American culture has put "difference" in the triumphal narrative of its shepherding of the world into its vision of modernity.

But first, allow me to offer a brief and heuristic word about the approaches taken in this essay and the cultural politics of literary criticism in the United States. For anyone who has been following developments in cultural studies in the United States over the past three decades or so, the generalities that follow are quite familiar. Broadly speaking, with the rise of insurgent academic fields such as Asian American and Ethnic Studies in the United States, there emerged two main forms of revisionist cultural criticism for exploring the interplay of major and minor traditions, and two offshoot forms. One main method involves the critical reading of hegemony in canonical texts in order to recognize, say, patriarchy, racism, and imperialism in a major work, such as *Moby-dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*. In this well-worn form of criticism, enshrined classics are read for symptoms of dominant ideologies on the wane. These critical reappraisals of the status of monuments of culture have been celebrated as a long-overdue displacement of outdated ideas that tragically made the nation what it is, and these exegetical labors have been excoriated as a shrill erosion of the bedrock beliefs that gloriously made the nation what it is.

The other main method of reading involves the interpreting and championing of texts comprising a minor tradition, often with attention paid to the minority status of the author. This method would help make a text like Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, one of the most widely taught texts (by a living author) at US universities (see Patricia Chu 86-96). These critical reappraisals of that which has been marginalized have transformed both the content of what counts as American culture as well as the structures and institutions in which that counting takes place. Depending on whether one views the present as tragic or glorious, those transformations are either welcome or disturbing.

Broadly speaking again, the two offshoot reading practices are what we might call pendular corrections of the first two. The main correction for the championing of a minor text has been is the recognition of some of the same tendencies found in major texts. The

precondition of such a critique is the notion that a minor text has gotten so conventionally successful that it has begun to serve a major function. As for the other swing of the pendulum, the main correction for the reading of hegemony in a major text is the location of counterhegemonic possibilities that radically undermine the very ideologies that seemed to be unproblematically reproduced in a *Moby-Dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*. For better or for worse, the major status of a major text remains.[1] With its focus on one of the most respected films in American history, as well as its differently respected source material, this essay most fits this last form of criticism: a symptomatic reading of hegemony.

AN INSIDE JOB

At heart, *Double Indemnity* is the story of an abortive inside job. In this caper, a world weary insurance salesman, Walter Neff (Neff is his name in the film; Huff is from the novella) uses his considerable knowledge of his own firm's policies and investigative methods in an effort to profit, monetarily and romantically, from another man's death. His accomplice in this affair is the murdered widower's second wife, Phyllis, who most likely killed her husband's first wife. The two conspirators meet when Walter makes a house call to renew an automobile insurance policy. The eventual murder victim, Mr. Nirdlinger (Nirdlinger is his name from the novella; Dietrichson is from the film) is not home. But his comely wife is. The murder-for-profit plot is hatched when she offhandedly inquires about buying an accident insurance policy for her husband. Neff tells us this is a dead giveaway for bad intentions: "Maybe that don't mean to you what it meant to me … [W]hen there's dirty work going on, accident is the first thing they think of" (108). As an inside job narrative, *Double Indemnity* gives equal time to law enforcement and lawbreakers, or more precisely, insurance investigators and committers of fraud and, of course, murder.

The police and state power are virtually absent from *Double Indemnity*. "They're satisfied. It's not their dough." So says Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), the bulldog of an insurance investigator who works with Walter Neff. He is explaining why police detectives are less tenacious than he is when it comes to sniffing out foul play. Keyes's instincts—what he calls his "little man"—will not let the corpse of Mr. Dietrichson, which was tossed off the back of a slow-moving train, rest in peace. In this pronouncement, Keyes articulates the dividing line between the state and private enterprise: namely, "dough." But the border between state power and private industry in *Double Indemnity* is not limited to profit motive. In grasping the supple conception of the state in *Double Indemnity*, I argue that we can read the uneasy ascendance of the United States as the new world power by

mid-century.

The storied lost ending of the film of *Double Indemnity* illustrates a point at which state power diverges from private interest. In its final, released form, the movie ends with salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray), near death on the floor of his firm, the Pacific All-Risk Insurance company. He slowly bleeds to death from a gunshot administered by his partner in crime, the widow Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). Yet this death scene was not the original shot. Paramount spent more than $150,000 on a set depicting Walter's execution in prison. They built an exact replica of the actual gas chamber at San Quentin Prison and dramatized the dropping of the poison gas pellets used to end a convict's natural life. In characteristic bravado, Wilder "frequently called [this scrapped scene] one of the best scenes he ever made" (Schickel 63).[2]

This execution scene, as well as a few depicting Neff's trial, never made it into the release print. Somehow this resolution did not work for the film. Ostensibly, Wilder says that he wanted to depict Neff as "a victim, not a murderer." Analyses of film noir, which frequently cite *Double Indemnity* as a "paradigm movie" for the genre whose name would not be coined until the after WWII, would say the Neff was a victim of the "femme fatale." In this article I offer an alternate for understanding this landmark film's famous and studied finale. The film ending may tell us something about the meaning of United States imperialism, more specifically, about the cultural logic of the disciplinary institutions of United States imperialism, institutions that creatively sidestepped direct state power, and in doing so, sidestepped the label of formal colonialism. Another part of the novel that did not make it into the film when it was adapted from Cain's admittedly inferior serialized novel is Walter's Filipino American houseboy. In some respects, this unnamed servant performs the role of the "domestic woman," the film noir figure who functions as the polar opposite to the femme fatale. He maintains the comfortable home that the femme fatale wrecks.

These most likely coincidental erasures provide an interesting moment in American culture from which we can read emergent US imperialism. If we reinscribe empire into this canonical film, in its form as well as its content, we can begin to see the formation of disciplined subjects constituted by and constitutive of a new cultural formation that goes by such names as United States imperialism, development, and globalization. Indeed, as I will discuss below, references to the American colonization of the Philippines were explicit in Cain's short novel but entirely invisible in Wilder's (and Raymond Chandler's) adaptation of it. The disappearance of Huff's Filipino American houseboy is a cold case that the postcolonial and multicuulturalist present can now reopen.

FINDING THE LOST FILIPINO IN AMERICAN CULTURE

"Boonie" is a favored word in the study of the relationship of the United States and the Philippines, as it is perhaps the most widely used signifier in colloquial American English that has a philology and etymology that links the US with its former colony in the Pacific. Other favorites are "cooties" and "manila folder." Lost and forgotten and forgetful are adjectives commonly applied to Filipino Americans, as Oscar Campomanes has instructively noted. Like many linguistic items assimilated into American English, "boonie" is uttered by a great many speakers who are not burdened with its history. The word can effectively function without reference to its origins or its history of assimilation and usage in an expansionist American culture; indeed the word may function well precisely because it has, by and large, managed to outrun its past and circulate as relatively unmarked by distracting particularity. After all, pondering the specific history of every signifier would make communication radically difficult. And in recent times, the pedantic pondering of such histories is for, say, contributors to conservative talk radio, the textbook example of political correctness gone too far.

But, as the aphorism goes: ontology recapitulates philology. That is, the existence of term contains its history of usage. In broader terms, everyday life – from the products we consume to the labor we perform to the culture we reproduce—is suffused with secreted histories. Putatively innocent usage—of words, of commodities—is the precondition that makes historical revisionism possible and necessary. Such revisionism has occupied politically engaged scholarship and cultural production in the post-Civil Rights era in the United States, particularly in Ethnic Studies (see Palumbo-Liu's *Ethnic Canon*, Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, and Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*). In tracing, say, the history of a word's usage and circulation, as well as the disappearance of that history, we trace the genealogy of an absence, and in doing so, shed light on interests that that disappearance may serve.[3] Narrating the genealogy of an absence then illuminates a history of hegemony, a history that flows from the by-now familiar act of defamiliarizing the quotidian. Not surprisingly then, the recognition of the forgotten pasts of everyday life – found in objects from commodities to words to persons to boonie hats – has become perhaps the defining trope of cultural critique.[4]

This revisionism has, for better or for worse, become well established in the United States and, in the wake of multiculturalism, somewhat formulaic and even facile (see Kyung-jin Lee). Finding the Filipino in American culture is not simply a matter of meticulously cataloging as many examples of Filipinos as possible but more a matter of appreciating the how traces of difference come into existence and go out of visibility in

American culture. A small but growing corps of scholars have devoted their energies to combing through archives precisely for these eruptions of Filipinos in American culture. The actual abundance of material in American discourse about the Philippines, even prior to the events of the war in the Pacific, does not mitigate claims of US amnesia about its colonization project in the Philippines. Rather, this abundance makes that amnesia all the more amazing. A Filipino in *Double Indemnity* is not quite the same thing as, say, a parse on *The Pequod*. The fact of a racially and ethnically diverse labor force, culled from every corner of the globe and redefining notions of gendering and public and private, is an important feature of US history. The specificity of Filipino difference in US culture is as exceptional as American exceptionalism. That is, the diversity of differences that American capitalism put to work, ideologically as well as in terms of political economy, requires an equally diverse range of ways of apprehending their historically situated significances. The modifier "boonie" for a type of hat that appeals to new US army recruits is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to recovering the history of United States imperialism.

The "boonie" for this essay is a Filipino American houseboy, specifically the one in *Double Indemnity*. He is certainly not the only houseboy to appear and disappear in American literary history. Yet his placement and displacement is crucial, both for the supreme canonicity of Wilder's film in cinematic history as well as for the reasons why *Double Indemnity* is such an interesting representation. By examining his appearance in the novel and his disappearance from the 1944 film adaptation we can speculate on the ways in which something undeniably visible in American history can vanish from American culture. I argue that we can begin to discern a new formation of the long-cherished myth of American isolationism that was particularly ascendant in the era of Cain's novel and in remission in the violent years that saw the production and initial distribution of that novel as a film. Under that isolationism, American culture seeks to maintain the modern world order while preserving the sanctity of the domestic. A necessary casualty of that blend of isolationism and internationalism in "the American century" was an unnamed Filipino American houseboy and the prickly histories for which an ethnically-labeled domestic stands. While "Filipino" certainly emerges in non-literary discourses with predictable frequency, the term in mainstream American literature of the pre-WWII era is less common and often quite curious. For example, the first paragraph of Carson McCullers's 1941 novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye* contains a fascinating juxtaposition of "Filipino": "The participant of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse" (3). (Thanks to Alfred McCoy for calling my attention to this work.)

The recovering of this unnamed Filipino American houseboy owes a debt to the

revisionism of the past quarter century or more. A small and disposable detail like this Filipino American houseboy becomes somewhat less small and less disposable when reflected in postcolonial eyes. This small detail takes on new significance to a future that is discovering newly usable pasts. Such pasts can then be considered, in the terms of Raymond Williams, "emergent," "new formations" that tilt at the dominant. In postcolonial studies, such lost-and-found figures have been dubbed "subaltern." The discovery and activation of these lost pieces of the past have ushered in a new age of cultural criticism that has been rereading the classics for both their hegemonic and counter hegemonic capabilities. Edward Said has called this form of reading "contrapuntal," a form of reading that accounts for multiple histories and interests in an effort "to formulate an alternative both to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility" (12). In our nominally postcolonial age, we can now readily appreciate moments when the postcolonial was emergent in the face of colonialism's then-dominant status. A famous anecdotal instance of this is when a reporter asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought of "Western civilization," he famously remarked, "I think it would be a good idea." Gandhi's response is an example of the ways in which postcolonialism erupts as humor that is at once jarring and urbane. The reporter, presumably looking for a response that takes as a given the existence of Western civilization, receives instead a witty reply that casts Western Civilization as a dream deferred. The reporter, and the Western Civilization of which she is a product and producer, are both enlightened and delighted at this wordplay. Gandhi's unexpected response has a dry cleverness worthy of a moment from Oscar Wilde. Gandhi demonstrates a virtuoso performance of British humor, with its long tradition of cool irony that mocks propriety, particularly easy to do in the Victorian era. Yet Gandhi's comment marks a break from the witty tropes of Wilde or of Gilbert and Sullivan. It took, and perhaps had to take, someone like Gandhi, with his elite education in English law at Oxford, to declare that there is no Western civilization and, further, to have such a declaration be funny, devastating, and true. The history of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonialism is filled with moments like this, moments that dramatize the displacement of the authority of the West and the playful seizure of that authority by those formerly unable to represent themselves, not to mention represent "Western Civilization" as such.

Millions and millions of viewers probably know Gandhi's droll and pointed sound byte from its staging in *Gandhi*, Richard Attenborough's multiple Academy –Award-winning biographical film from 1982.19 By 1982 if not long before, the joke is less jarring perhaps but still clever and funny. Late 20th-century viewers could imagine how Gandhi's reply might have felt to early 20th-century audiences, back then in the waning days of

colonialism's legitimacy. Indeed, that sense of times past and time passed is a particular pleasure of period pictures; we apprehend how characters are both of their moment in some ways as well as prescient of our own in others. This presentism of moviegoers is not only hard to avoid, it is relied upon for dramatic effect. The characters do not know how history turned out, but we do. We watch them live their lives in ignorance of developments they necessarily cannot know. In this instance, anticolonialism seemed controversial in the 1930s, but less so today. Gandhi helps us to mind the gap of time between colonialism and what came after. And so the global emergence of anticolonial consciousness is effectively packaged for consumption. The irony then is that such packaging may be the ushering-in of the next imperialism.

Grasping imperialism has become a fixture in the teaching and study of culture texts. Reading for imperialism in canonical literature has become a common and institutionalized practice in the past two decades or more in the United States. In the wake of such transformative reading methodologies, finding traces of imperialism in dominant culture is not as challenging as it once was; imperialism is what makes dominant culture the dominant culture. We have come to appreciate the constitutive role of Orientalism in making the West the West and we read monuments of Western civilization as symptomatic of the need of the West to cast an alterity to its modernity. In the wake of this institutionalization, it is useful to map a genealogy of this method and remember that, in the US academy, postcolonial criticism emerged as an interested revisionist project seeking to read for empire in places where one might not have expected it to turn up. The result is what Gayatri Spivak referred to as an "anthropology of the west" (Spivak 1991). In such a field of study, the task is to turn a critical gaze on an eroding center, to resituate major texts along neglected and/or unformulated historical trajectories. This project has found institutional legitimacy in literary and cultural studies through such scholarship as, say, Spivak's reading of Bertha Mason and Jamaica in *Jane Eyre* (in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism") or Edward Said's reading of Antigua and slavery in *Mansfield Park* (80-97), and even Fredric Jameson's reading of modernism and imperialism in *Howards End*. Readings like Said's and Spivak's showed how any understanding of English culture in the 19th century must come to terms with the dialectical relationship of the cultural and the material and with the ways in which this literature, as Said put it, "synchronizes domestic with international authority" (87).

Not surprisingly, the anthropologists undertaking this task often, but of course not always, occupy the subject position of the formerly colonized. Post-colonial critics look at canonical texts—many of which contain only incidental depictions of colonies and

colonial subjects—to see how such cultural monuments are symptomatic of the ideological demands of imperialism at a given historical moment. The houseboy in *Double Indemnity* is clearly an instance of incidental reference to empire rather than overt and putatively mimetic renderings of colonial reality, like, say, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Kipling's "The White Man's Burden," both from 1899.

I return yet again to Spivak who provocatively declared:

> It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious 'facts' continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth century British literature. This itself attests to the continuous success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed onto more modern forms. (261)

Keeping this in mind, we have come to better recognize what Said called "those tendencies—whether in narrative, political theory, or pictorial technique—that enabled, encouraged, and otherwise assured the West's readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire" (80). Jameson also argued that in era of high modernism, colonial reality was real but culturally unintelligible and this unintelligibility was what fueled the desire for the formalism characteristic of modernism: "This new and historically original problem in what is itself a new kind of content now constitutes the situation and the problem and the dilemma, the formal contradiction, that modernism seeks to solve; or better still, it is only that new kind of art which reflexively perceives this problem and lives this formal dilemma that can be called modernism in the first place" (51).

With this methodology we now read for the immanence of empire in any major text, from *The Tempest* as the ur-narrative of New World colonialism, by scholars ranging from Roberto Retamar to Ronald Takaki, to the represention of British overseas campaigns in Tennyson's "The Idylls of the King" (see Kiernan, qtd. in Said 105) to the fascinating dynamics of race, gender, and consumer culture in twentieth century British soap advertisements (McClintock 207-31). In furthering these critiques of empire, scholars have continually managed to bring fresh insights that reinvigorate the urgency of the act of reading representations within our own empire formations today. (This is what historian William Appleman Williams called "empire as a way of life.") Through such interpretive work the structural features of empire have been explicated as structural features. We

can then formulate critical elaborations of the terms of so-called postcoloniality as well as critiques of persistent neocolonialism, for example, Lisa Lowe's nuanced discussion of the heterogeneity of readings of *A Passage to India* elaborates the workings of literary criticism as a medium of orientalism (102-35).

We are now in an age of the United States and its imperial canon on which the sun never sets. But this canon is not Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne as much as it is Eminem, Tiger Woods, and, as always, Hollywood. In light of such work on the British canon, reading the United States as the empire *du jour*—that is, examining an empire in vivo instead of in vitro—through rereading the American canon means reading the new imperialism.

What is that new imperialism? In critical American Studies as well as in popular consciousness, a growing body of commentary—including my own—focuses on the informality of United States imperialism. The new globalization displaced a declining colonization, a practice of dubious legitimacy and questionable profitability. In the wake of such banner lowering events as the early-1990s closing of US military bases in the Philippines and the late-1990s handover of the Panama Canal to Panama, various turn-of-the-century chapters of America's colonizing adventures seemed to be coming to a close as the next turn of the century approached. Recent events since that turn have placed United States personnel in smoldering hotspots, tragically proving that reports of the waning of territorially-defined and militarily controlled cartographies of empire have been exaggerated. In what may then seem to be a retromove, I turn to a canonical American text manifesting the symptoms of both the dominant territorial colonialism and the emergent informal formation: James M. Cain's 1936 novella *Double Indemnity*.

FILIPINO AMERICAN = "BEATING CLARK GABLE TO IT"

We arrive finally at the detail at the center of this essay: the appearance and disappearance of a Filipino immigrant houseboy. Bakhtin remarked that "servants are the most privileged witnesses of private life." This observation seems quite apt in the case of the Filipino American houseboy in *Double Indemnity*.

As he makes his careful preparations before murdering his lover's husband, Walter Huff, the protagonist and narrator of James M. Cain's 1936 novella *Double Indemnity*, offers the following observation about "the Filipino":

I got home around six and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner… I had hardly

> finished my coffee when he had everything washed up, and he changed to his cream-colored pants, white shoes and stockings, a brown coat, and white shirt open at the neck, ready to go out with the girl. It used to be that what a Hollywood actor wore on Monday a Filipino houseboy wore on Tuesday, but now, if you ask me, it's the other way around, and the boy from Manila beats Clark Gable to it.

In this brief and passing observation we can read for the complex set of conditions we have come to call globalization, or the social, cultural, political, and economic alignment of the modern world in the American century. We see the spread of American consumerist culture, as evidenced by the influence that a Hollywood actor has on the sartorial habits of Filipino American houseboys. The quest for new consumer markets for United States manufactures—what turn-of-the-century pundit Matthew Frye Jacobson dubbed "the terrible surplus" —has been an engine of expansionist, capitalist development. Even in 1936, this sort of influence is so obvious that Huff finds it necessary to use the "used to be" tense when discussing the global influence of American media consumer culture.

Along with these consumer markets go labor markets. From the Cain passage we see a manifestation of the migration of cheapened labor from sites of relative underdevelopment to overdevelopment, as embodied by the fact of a Filipino American houseboy working in 1930s Los Angeles. It should be noted that Huff is not wealthy; indeed he is about to commit murder for money (gotten through insurance fraud) as well as for lust (gotten through his coupling with his accomplice, Mrs. Phyllis Dietrichson). Despite Huff's fairly humble occupation as an insurance salesman, he can readily afford the reproductive labor provided by an immigrant Filipino American.

Huff is quite explicitly the master of his servant in professional terms, but he also prides himself on being able to predict his servant's desires. That is, he delays giving the houseboy his paycheck by two days, thereby ensuring that his stylish manservant will manage his time is such a way that would allow him to hotfoot it to a dancehall the evening he finally gets compensated for his labor.

> I got home around six, and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner. I had seen to that. This was June 3, and I should have paid him on the first, but I pretended I had forgotten to go to the bank, and put him off. Today, though, I had stopped at the house for lunch, and paid him. That meant that when night came he could hardly wait to go out and spend it. I said O.K., he could serve dinner, and he had the soup in the table before I even got washed up. I ate, as well as I could. He gave me steak,

> mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots, with fruit cup for dessert. I was so nervous I could hardly chew, but I got it all down somehow.

Yet also in this 1936 representation of the consumerist tastes of a racialized immigrant domestic laborer, we see an extrapolation from a waning structure in which the United States sets trends to an emergent and somewhat playful inversion of that authority. That is, Clark Gable, who famously caused the sales of undershirts to plummet from his not wearing one in *It Happened One Night* (1934), now follows in the fashionable footsteps of "the boy from Manila." The joke is that it is somewhat absurd that a megastar like Clark Gable would take his cue from a domestic on his day off. And yet, Huff's observation of mainstream American culture leads him to imagine the ludic possibility of clairvoyant Filipinos anticipating and determining the length of hemlines in the coming season, of the mimic becoming the master.

The figure as this globally influential "boy from Manila" seems to exceed Homi Bhabha's ideas of subversive colonial mimicry and even Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulacra," or a copy without an original. That is, Huff positions the Filipino American houseboy as taking the colonial project to a logical conclusion: those who imitate have somehow become the imitated. The houseboy is not merely a bad copy who shows the illegitimacy of the colonial model. Nor is he a pure entity unsullied by the taint of colonialism. He has become an instrument of a new kind of imperialism, capable of sublating itself through a successful transferal of cultural authority from those who have historically civilized to those who received that civilization.

Double Indemnity is a canonical text that provides an instance of incidental US colonial reality in the curious figure of Walter's Filipino American houseboy, a character from the novel who did not make it to the big screen.[5] Huff tells us of this character in chapter two: "Daytime, I keep a Filipino house boy, but he don't sleep there" (378). Huff offers what seems to be excessive description of his houseboy. That is, he mentions that his houseboy does not board with him; the houseboy does his labor without requiring shared living space, as would the domestic staff of, say, an English manor house of that same period. But, as we have seen from the passage analyzed earlier in this essay, the house boy is more than just window-dressing that gives Cain's story of depression-era Southern California a regional and period flavor. This Filipino American houseboy comes to stand in as a mechanism of surveillance, both watching and being watched. The morning after the murder Walter says, "I gulped down some orange juice and coffee, and then went up in the bedroom with the paper. I was afraid to open it in front of the Filipino" (417).

In the 1930s, especially in California, it was considered chic to have a Filipino American houseboy. Even an insurance salesman with questionable grammar can keep one. By the 1930s, as many as a third of all Filipinos in the United States and half of all Filipinas were employed in some form of domestic service (Amott and Matthei). It is therefore not particularly remarkable to have such a character in a novel. What is more remarkable is this character's removal for the film eight years later.

Both the 1944 film and the 1936 novel emerged during the commonwealth period of the Philippines. The Tydings-McDuffie Act, a.k.a. the *Philippine Independence Act*, was passed in 1934 stipulating a ten-year commonwealth period, thereby also reclassifying Filipinos as aliens to the US and making them ineligible for New Deal programs. In 1935 Congress passed the ineffectual *Repatriation Act* which provided free transportation for Filipinos back to the Philippines, that is, on condition that they waive their right to reenter the US. Approximately two thousand Filipinos left under this act (see Fujita-Rony; and Ngai). The Filipino American houseboy, who lives not with Huff, occupies a new niche of labor that eschews old world class structures while maintaining an affordable price for reproductive labor. In the film, the Filipino houseboy becomes Charlie, "a colored attendant in coveralls and rubber boots" who is the primary audience for Neff's deceptive carrying-on of his usual routine. Neff, in his recorded audio memo to Keyes, calls this "another item to establish my alibi." Charlie is someone who is strategically privy to Neff's participation in the burgeoning car culture shaping the geography of Southern California but he is not an insider to Huff's domestic sphere as a houseboy of any stripe would be. In either case, Neff counts on the legal subjectivity of a service worker, both of whom are racially marked, for possible witness testimony.

The absence of the Filipino American houseboy may even be more surprising because the film was made and released in 1944. That is, *Double Indemnity* is a war-time picture, despite technically taking place in the late 1930s. In 1944, Douglas MacArthur had yet to return to the Philippines after the Japanese had effectively occupied the US colony in early 1942; the atrocities of the Bataan Death March had made headlines (although the "great raid" of Cabanatuan had not yet been mounted).[6] Suffice it to say, from the time of the printing of the novel in serial form in February and March of 1936 to the release of the film in early September of 1944, the fate of the relationship of the United States and its former possession had become a considerably unresolved issue. One might then speculate: Would representing Huff's prewar Filipino servant have been a sensitive point to an America that had lost and not yet recovered its only benevolently assimilated colony? Was America not in the mood to see a reminder of what it had lost? Short of asking Billy Wilder

for an explanation, the exact reasons for this incidental excision from the film are basically unknowable. Besides, Cain readily—and rightly—acknowledged that the film improved on his novel, especially the implausible double-suicide ending (see Schickel).

AN INSIDE JOB IN AN INTERNATIONAL FRAME

Rather than seeking to establish a simplistic certainty about what caused these content decisions, we can more profitably ask, What function does this Filipino, and his unceremonious omission, serve in the workings of this major American cultural representation? What might *Double Indemnity* tell us about the United States as empire? I suggest that it instantiates what Said described as "those tendencies … that enabled, encouraged, and otherwise assured the West's readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of empire" (Said 80). Yet the meaning of empire was undergoing change since the days of the British East India Company and image of Cecil Rhodes straddling Africa. Coming to terms with empire today demands an understanding of the cultural and material ascendancy of American culture over British culture. With the shifting nature of the global economic order and its continual ideological revisions of the rationale for its virtual totality, the project of reading the United States as empire must not simply be a wholesale transposition of a British model.

A host of commentators, from Lenin and Hobson, to Hardt and Negri, have characterized the ascendance of a new imperialism as the rise of a new form of capitalism, based around finance and informality rather than state-sponsored bureaucracies. Essentially, the American system of world domination emerged as faster and more efficient, due much in part to developments in telecommunications technology, especially the zippy flow of electronically rendered capital. The displacement of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism of the British dominated world by the international division of labor of the American-dominated globe is not least an economic shift. This economic shifting has been described by "world systems" theorist Giovanni Arrighi in *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* in which he outlines the past 700 years or so to explain capitalism's domination of the world. His basic thesis in a nutshell is as follows:

> The strategies and structures of capital accumulation that have shaped our times first came into existence in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. They originated in a new internalization of costs within the economizing logic of capitalist enterprise. Just as the Dutch regime had taken world-scale processes of capital accumulation

> one step further than the Genoese by internalizing protection costs, and the British regime had taken them a step further than the Dutch by internalizing production costs, so the US regime has done the same in relation to the British by internalizing transaction costs. (239)

Basically, with these respective internalizations of protection, production, and finally transaction costs, the result is a faster and more efficient global economy, a faster and more efficient chain from "primary production" to "final consumption."

What then might be the cultural ramifications of notions of internalization and the shift from so-called "economies of size" to so-called "economies of speed"? The shrinking of the world under internalizing global capitalism can either valiantly produce a more democratic order of resource redistribution or, in failing to realize that order, vividly reveal the coexistence of oppression and exploitation on one hand and opulence and ignorance on the other. Just as consumerist individuals place certain demands on an economy to accelerate, this new economy places certain demands on the individuals who comprise this social formation. What may seem like a world of new possibilities—a global village, let's say—is also a world of new and improved disciplinary and surveillance structures. In this regard, Michel Foucault's ideas around "discipline" and "the disciplinary society" in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* are particularly helpful at illuminating the stakes of these formations of power. Most notably, we can see how his notion of "panopticism" articulates how mass culture emerges as a mechanism for effecting new forms of internalization. These internalizations are not so much the related phenomena of the West's internalization of world territory (up to 85% Western-controlled in 1914) or the internalization of costs (protection, production, transaction), but of the individual's internalization of regulatory structures, including his own servants. I argue that these regulatory structures enable, encourage, and otherwise assure the US's readiness to assume and enjoy the experience of a new kind of empire cautiously but unmistakably built on the decline of the old. In other words we can recognize the emergence to dominance of the new cultural formation in which we are now living.

The medium for US cultural imperialist disciplining was and still is American mass media. Yet to simply catalogue a taxonomy of "positive" and "negative" images is to fall short of more fundamental issues of how film operates as what Foucault calls a "disciplinary mechanism: a functional mechanism that must improve the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come" (209).

Double Indemnity is then a curious example of a representation that is difficult and categorize and therefore both a problem and an asset for apprehending US imperialism. The film's status as a canonical film noir may then be important to consider. Film noir was not even named until some time after World War II. It was never really a hugely successful genre commercially, if indeed we can call it a genre. Film noir is certainly a style, of lighting, of themes— "a distinctive and exciting visual style, an unusual narrative complexity, a generally more critical and subversive view of American ideology than the norm" (Walker, qtd. in Bordwell and Thompson 8) —of stock characters— "focus on a lone, often introverted hero" – and surely, of mood. Critics have found it difficult to define film noir because it is not limited to a list of constitutive elements or a predictable set of possible narrative emplotments, like, say, a western or a musical or a romantic comedy. I want to suggest that mood is the characteristic effect of a recognizably noir movie. The discursive slipperiness of mood is what produces the particularly disciplined subjects of US imperialism, subjects that are not simply in a manichean relationship of colonizer and colonized. Modern institutions do not codify power so simply. "Panopticism," named for the Panopticon, the ideal prison envisioned by Jeremy Bentham and whose major effect were described by Foucault

> to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (201)

The modern institution that is the overt obsession of *Double Indemnity* is insurance, while the implicit institution is film itself. Similar to the ideological apparatuses of past empires, such as the Catholic Church in Spanish colonialism (see Rafael), or British educational system in British imperialism (see Viswanathan), modern insurance provides a model as a defining institution of United States imperialism. While the cinema has enjoyed the status as the medium par excellence of cultural imperialism, film and insurance employ similar "discipline-mechanisms" and these mechanisms are brilliantly dramatized in *Double Indemnity*. Insurance is an industry that orders the world by managing risk; the discourse of insurance prescripts narratives. Insurance narratives became somewhat oddly

popular through Cain. When *Double Indemnity* was written serialized in *Liberty* magazine in 1936, it caused the circulation of the magazine to increase by some eight million subscribers as Cain was already famous for his controversial 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, another story about a husband killed by his wife and her lover for insurance money. After the immense popularity of *Postman*, Cain, urged by some of the insurance people he had consulted while writing the earlier work, decided to explore further the possibilities for plots involving insurance companies. "With company money at stake, insurance claims investigators [can be] more implacable than the police in pursuing suspicious deaths" (Schickel 22).

The mechanisms of policing and surveillance no longer are the exclusive responsibility of the state, nor is the state necessarily the most feared watcher. This shift from overt state power to privatized risk management is an allegory of putatively laissez-faire US neocolonialism versus increasingly oppressive British imperialism with all its cumbersome administrative apparatuses. Insurance provides a material practice and a metaphor for these structures as the internalization of protection, production, and transactions requires security, stability, and totality. The layout of the Pacific All-Risk Insurance company bears considerable resemblance to a panopticon and this opening image sets up a mood of surveillance that disciplines the protagonist. The original shooting script describes the layout of the office that does indeed appear in the film:

> Note for set-designer: Our Insurance Company occupies the entire eleventh and twelfth floors of the building. On the twelfth floors are the executive offices and claims and sales departments. These all open off a balcony which runs all the way around. From the balcony you see the eleventh floor below … Two colored women are cleaning the offices. One is dry-mopping the floor, the other is moving chairs back into position, etc. A colored man is emptying waste baskets into a big square box. He shuffles a little dance step as he moves, and hums a little tune. (Meyer 9)

With the efficacy and tenacity of insurance in *Double Indemnity*, there is an absence of the repressive state apparatus. Despite Walter's death coming at the hands of his co-conspirator instead of the gas chamber, we cannot go so far as to say that the state is moot in *Double Indemnity*. However, the representation of overt state power is removed; its display is somehow superfluous.

I conclude with a return to the description of the Filipino American houseboy to grasp his disappearance. The night of the murder, Walter needs to get the house boy out

early so he withholds his wages for a couple of days thereby making his servant especially eager to go out and spend his meager earnings:

> I got home around six, and the Filipino was all ready to serve dinner. I had seen to that. This was June 3, and I should have paid him on the first, but I pretended I had forgotten to go to the bank, and put him off. Today, though, I had stopped at the house for lunch, and paid him. That meant that when night came he could hardly wait to go out and spend it. I said OK, he could serve dinner, and he had the soup in the table before I even got washed up. I ate, as well as I could. He gave me steak, mashed potatoes, peas, and carrots, with fruit cup for dessert. I was so nervous I could hardly chew, but I got it all down somehow. I had hardly finished my coffee when he had everything washed up, and he changed to his cream-colored pants, white shoes and stockings, a brown coat, and white shirt open at the neck, ready to go out with the girl. It used to be that what a Hollywood actor wore on Monday a Filipino house boy wore on Tuesday, but now, if you ask me, it's the other way around, and the boy from Manila beats Clark Gable to it. He left around a quarter to seven. When he came up to ask if there way anything else for him to do, I was taking off my clothes getting ready to go to bed. I told him I was going to lie there and do a little work. (138-9)

Walter's contention that things are now "the other way around" is both an acknowledgement of the success of cultural imperialism as well as his own sense that the gaze has not simply reversed but been pluralized. Walter's guide for measuring this reversal is Hollywood and its engendering of consumerism and surveillance. The witness he had so carefully set up is at risk of seeing more than Walter can control. In the passage cited earlier, Walter is worried that his act of reading the morning newspaper will betray his guilt: "I gulped down some orange juice and coffee, and then went up to the bedroom with the paper. I was afraid to open it in front of the Filipino" (153). Walter's prior relationship to "the Filipino" deliberately made him a visible object whose movement could be witnessed in legal testimony. But now Walter has become so visible to someone who "beats Clark Gable to it" that he, an influential archetype of the "solitary introverted hero" of film noir, feels so much paranoiac anxiety that after the murder he must retreat to his bedroom, away from the domestic in the kitchen, to escape the knowing gaze of his now authoritative house boy. Through a panopticism that allows the authority of observation to "even [the master's own] servant" (Foucault 202), there opens up a space for

the formerly voiceless to enter the scene. Yet, when the novella becomes the movie, gone is this ambivalently empowering moment that gives "the Filipino" an authority in American culture that the Clark Gables and Walter Neffs can no longer anticipate and control.

NOTES

1 A rather bloated catalog of books, some scholarly and some popular, emerged in the 1990s and especially the 1980s, to address these cultural transformations. See, for example, Henry Louis Gates. *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.

2 Jeffrey Meyers notes that Wilder may have exaggerated the sum as Paramount's records show only $4,700 budgeted for the elaborate set (xiv).

3 While the venerable Oxford English Dictionary is built on historical principles because it traces the earliest known appearances of any given word as well as its significant deviations, conventional dictionaries like Webster's are not.

4 See Kristin Hoganson's "Cosmopolitan Domesticity," in which she analyzes the ways in which well-to-do American homes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries used the space of the home as an arena for demonstrating worldly acquisition. Perhaps the two main theorists of everyday life are Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. See also Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*.

5 Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction* begins with very insightful readings of early mass culture representations of Asian Americans. See also Robert Lee, *Orientals*.

6 The Cabanatuan raid took place in early 1945. MacArthur's drive began in October 1944, Manila was recaptured February 1945, and the rest of the Philippines was effectively reoccupied by the US by July 1945.

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SIGNS, MEANING, INTERPRETATION: C. S. PEIRCE'S CRITIQUE OF DECONSTRUCTION AND POST-STRUCTURALISM

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Abstract
From the perspective of Peircian semiotics, this paper presents a prolegomenon of "a science of pragmaticist aesthetics." Following the fundamental epistemological categories of C. S. Pierce, San Juan reads Michael's Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost as unraveling the anatomy of terror in Sri Lanka. Such a reading, for San Juan, "elicit signs of whether we, and others in the collaborative enterprise, embody," quoting Pierce, "an intelligence capable of learning by experience."

Keywords
Anil's Ghost, terrorism, triadic relations, semiotics

About the Author
E. San Juan, Jr. was recently Visiting Professor of Literature and Cultural studies at National Tsing Hua University and lectured in seven universities in Taiwan from November to December 2004. He served as the 2003 Fulbright Professor of American Studies in Belgium (Leuven, Antwerp). He was previously a Fellow of the Center for the Humanities and Visiting Professor of English, Wesleyan University, and Chair of the Department of Comparative American Cultures, Washington State University (1998-2001); 1993 Fellow at the Institute for the Advanced Study of the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, Scotland; and 1995 Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Culture and Society, Ohio. He received his AM and PhD from Harvard University. His numerous critical and creative works have been translated into Russian, German, Spanish, Italian, French, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages.

> Now thought is of the nature of a sign. In that case, then, if we can find out the right method of thinking and can follow it out—the right method of transforming signs—then truth can be nothing more nor less than the last result to which the following out of this method would ultimately carry us.
>
> — Charles Sanders Peirce

Despite 9/11, "United We Stand," and the USA Patriot Act, it seems that we are still afflicted by logocentrism and essentializing metanarratives. Decades of inoculation by deconstructive serums—first introduced by Jacques Derrida's 1966 lecture at Johns Hopkins University entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"—have failed to immunize us, readers and scholars, from lusting for truth,

presence, or origin far removed "from freeplay and from the order of the sign" (249). The order of the sign instructs us, following Saussure's dictum, that the relation between the signifier (word), its referent (thing or idea) and its signified (meaning) is arbitrary (not in the sense that words mean just anything you decide it means). There is no natural resemblance between sound-image, referent, and idea; the link between signifier and signified is based on alterable social convention. Saussure taught us that the meaning or value of a sign in any language results from its difference from all the other signs in that language. What is important is not history (diachrony), nor reality (the referent), but the system of differential relations among signs (synchrony). Such differential relations are embodied in the spacing and ambiguity of writing as material practice or process, in contrast to speech (which Saussure privileged) and its single, self-identical intention. Barbara Johnson glosses Derrida's valorization of writing as the euphoric "free play" celebrated earlier: "When one writes, one writes more than (or less than, or other than) one thinks. The reader's task is to read what is written rather than simply attempt to intuit what might have been meant" (46).

Now there is general agreement that "free play" does not sanction anarchy or "anything goes," although Derrida's invocation of Nietzsche and the end of humanism tends to inspire the abolition of boundaries and rules. What is often stressed is that reading, re-presenting, depends on the historical and social contexts in which language is used. However, such contexts are always changeable and changing. Derrida contends that "There is no meaning outside of context, but no context permits saturation" ("Structure" 81). Derrida assumes that there is an infinite number of contexts for any utterance; this iterability of discourse is possible because the code underlying convention is slippery or unknown, hence meaning is undecidable. Since contexts are multiple, heterogeneous and fluid, we cannot fix on a single guaranteed meaning for any text; all such attempts to make sense presuppose an act of interpretation, an operation of construal—in short, ceaseless multiplication of significations. The signifying chain never ends. From another angle, Paul de Man inflects this undecidability by his theory of criticism as deconstructive reading. He argues that any text generates an aporia from the conflict between its decodable rule-oriented grammar and its rhetorical potential that "suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (467). Still, there is implicit here, as in Derrida, the assumption that on one side, there is the objective world of fixed objects and on the other, the mind or intuitive sensibility that constructs sense and meanings.

A FATEFUL INTERVENTION

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce formulated a theory of signs that ingeniously resolved the old Cartesian dualism of subject and object. Paralleling subsequent developments in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) and dialectical Marxism (Lukacs, Gramsci), Peirce's logic helped clear up the traditional disputes concerning indeterminacy, intention, reference, agency, interpretive validity, etc.

On the matter of hermeneutics, we are not proposing here a return to the formalist view of an autonomous text relying on authorial intention. Nor do we envisage a recuperation of the legible/readable text based on the hermeneutic circle replete with multiple if contradictory significations (Gadamer, Ricoeur). Saussure is of course not the "culprit" responsible for legitimizing modes of misreading or misprision as heuristic if not axiomatic techniques of exegesis. Even when one begins to focus on Saussure's linguistics, or its distortion, as the single source for authorizing free-floating interpretations, one is immediately disabused. The zealous exponent of deconstruction, Jonathan Culler, has named Peirce as an accomplice in the oscillation or drift/deferral/slippage of signifiers and signifieds:

> There are no final meanings that arrest the movement of signification. Peirce makes this structure of deferral and referral an aspect of his definition: a sign is "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself [sic] refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*…. If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least." (188)

Derrida tellingly omitted Peirce's qualification before the last sentence in the quote: "No doubt, intelligent consciousness must enter into the series" (Peirce, *Peirce on Signs* 239). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida enlists Peirce in support of his scheme of destroying the "transcendental signified," and with it, ontotheology and the metaphysics of presence, on account of Peirce's view that the represented is "always already" a representamen, a palimpsest or fabric of traces (50).

Let us rehearse again Peirce's inaugural definition that he refined with significant nuances over the years. For Peirce, the sign or representamen is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity." The representamen provides the occasion for linkage or ground for connecting object and sign. It does so by addressing somebody, "that is, creates in the mind of someone an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more

developed sign" (*Philosophical Writings* 99) which is called the interpretant or the effect that the sign produces (more precisely, a moment in the evolving consensus of a community of interpreters): "The triadic relation is *genuine*, that is, its three members are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations. That is the reason the Interpretant, or Third, cannot stand in a mere dyadic relation to the Object, but must stand in such a relation to it as the Representamen itself does" (100). In other words, the interpretant determines how the sign represents the object and can be regarded as the meaning of the sign (Ducrot, and Todorov 85). Eventually the sequence of interpretants glossing other interpretants leads to an "ultimate logical interpretant," which is equivalent to "a change of habit of conduct" (Hilpinen 567). In effect, the intervention of the interpretant (divisible into emotional, energetic, and logical; Short 107) makes impossible what postmodernist critics call the reified binary closure of signifier/signified, a syndrome resolved in favor of fetishizing "*differance*" and "dissemination."

For Peirce, "the word or sign that man uses *is* the man himself," hence "expression and thought are one," and "every thought is a sign" (*Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings* 381; Innis 2; compare Hjelmslev's theory qtd. in Hasan). Peirce's concept of semiosis is not the unwarranted extravaganza posited by Derrida because there is in it a continual reference to the object of the representamen/signifier existing in a world outside consciousness, a world manifested in the phenomena of experience mediated by signs. This referent is not a static entity but a dynamic object, "an ever-developing cumulative definition of it, to be distinguished from the immediate object conjured up in any individual signification" (Potts 19; see also Eco "Unlimited Semeiosis"). Further, the exigencies of practical life, as well as the criteria of logical economy and "concrete reasonableness" (Thompson 255; Apel 89) circumscribe the actualization of the endless development of sign-production. While the meaning of a sign is "altogether virtual," the fully articulated meaning inheres in the habits of interpretation, the capacities and dispositions these habits are calculated to produce; such habits are assessed in terms of whether it leads to the "entire general intended interpretant" which, for Pierce, gives "command of a whole range of a sign's possible interpretations" (Gallie 130) resulting from the use of a more adequate and systematized body of information. Semiosis is thus rendered concretely determinate by the goal of "concrete reasonableness"; the latter phrase refers to the logically controlled use of signs in purposive thinking, with relevance to real problems of adaptation and adjustment of humans to their sociohistorical environment.

SYNOPTIC OVERVIEW

Peirce's semiotics is thus a crucial rectification of Saussure's semantics of differential values. Peirce's realism subtends the objective persistence of a social order or civilization, a continuum, "the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis," to use Eco's words (*Semiotics* 45), which is problematized by post-structuralist deconstruction. For Peirce, a sign is anything—from pictures, words, signals, microscopes, legislative representatives, musical concertos, their performances, etc.—which stands for something else. Peirce emphasizes that "signs are real" bearing formal characteristics: "anything which is related to a Second thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality in such a way as to bring a Third Thing, its *Interpretant,* into relation with the same object." There are four requirements, three of which depend on Peirce's categories: the sign, like everything else, has some form or ground of intelligibility (Firstness); the sign stands in relation to something (Secondness), and the sign is comprehended or translated by something else (Thirdness). I stress the fourth requirement stipulated by Peirce: "The whole purpose of a sign is that it should be interpreted in another sign and its whole purpose lies in the special character which it imparts to its interpretant. When a sign determines an interpretant of itself in another sign, it produces an effect external to itself" (*Collected Papers* 191). Given the dynamic relation between the three constituents of the sign (sign, object, interpretant), the sign's power resides in its efficacy to represent something to a collectivity of inquirers, thus establishing intelligibility.

We can now define Peirce's semiosis as the triadic interaction of sign, object and interpretant, together with their ramifying combinations. It constitutes language-games (Wittgenstein) and frames of intelligibility. Semiosis is the condition for a community of inquirers who use signs for communication: "The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an increase in knowledge" (Peirce, *Peirce on Signs* 82). Peirce also posits the existence of "that mind into which the minds of utterer and interpreter have to be fused in order that any communication should take place. This mind may be called *commens.* It consists in all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter, at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function" (*Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings* 406). Semiosis testifies not only to the social principle in thinking (logic) but to the continuity of the universe which Peirce called "synechism."

It is clear then that Peirce's semiotics differs from Saussure's and kindred theories founded on the dyadic or binary pair "sign/signifier." Peirce's is not based on the signifier but on the proposition—the triadic relation that produces meaning. The interpretant is

not the signified but the act or process of signification, the experience of intelligibility that unifies consciousness and produces comprehension. This is the reason why Leroy Searle contends that "Peirce's account of the sign offers a very powerful way by which to represent and analyze literature as argument, always concerned with and embedded in a real historical context, aware of consequences, without becoming systematically entangled in linguistic issues that are always indeterminate when considered apart from pragmatics" (560).

ANATOMY OF CONFIGURATIONS

Before exploring the idea of literature as argument, let us apply the Peircean heuristic organon to two signs of the times: "terror" and "terrorism." As everyone knows, this is a domain of often rancorous debate where massive interests and motives collide, inaccessible to rational resolution by courts or bombs (other terms that provoke contestation are "collateral damage," "preemptive war," "clash of civilizations," etc.). We need to chart the locus of their varying interpretants and map their shifting resonance in diverse usages.

Noam Chomsky, the indefatigable "gadfly" of the Establishment, has traced the genealogy of those contested terms. He points out that the US government's war against terrorism did not begin with post-9/11, but with the administration of President Reagan and Secretary of State Alexander Haig who officially declared such a war against terrorism as the core of US foreign policy ("United States" 4). Chomsky adds that the US responded to the plague spread by "depraved opponents of civilization"—non-western barbarians, agents of the Soviet "evil empire"—"by creating its own extraordinary international terrorist network, unprecedented in scale, which carried out massive atrocities all over the world."

What is the object to which the sign "terrorism" refers? Chomsky cites the US army manual's definition: "terror is the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain political or religious ideological goals through intimidation, coercion or instilling fear" (*9-11* 6). So here, the sign stands for the object/idea in the definition, but the interpretant is Chomsky's questioning of the ostensible neutrality of the definition. We are interested in the ground connecting representamen and object. Who is using terror, converting it into terrorism? The ground connecting the phenomenon/object and the sign produces the dynamical interpretant or translation into other signs that Chomsky presents, namely, his demonstration that the signifier "terrorism" can be deployed with

a value contingent on the user's purpose. For example, when the UN General Assembly in December 1987 passed a strong resolution against terrorism, the US and Israel voted against it because it contained one paragraph that says that nothing in it infringes on the rights of people struggling against racist and colonialist regimes or foreign military occupation. In effect, the UN use of terrorism excludes the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation, the Nicaraguans' resistance against US aggression, and the black South Africans fighting against the apartheid regime supported by the US We have not reached the final interpretant here, properly the meaning of the sign "terrorism," which Chomsky inflects further by naming the US, as, in the world's eyes, "a leading terrorist state" (*9-11* 23).

In general, Peirce's pragmaticist maxim follows the triadic process: the meaning of an idea lies in its consequence or effect, what it would lead to. Meaning is discovered in the itinerary of a thought experiment: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we might conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (*Collected Papers* 402). Put another way, meaning resides in the conceivable consequence of an abduction (inference or guessing) that we are considering. It is not the consequences of the logic of abduction, it is what we think them to be; hence, meaning is virtual, arising from the transformation and interpretation of signs. In this regard, Peirce underscores the rule for the admissibility of hypothesis: every idea involves "a conception of conceivable practical effects" (196).

A historical genealogy of the terms "terror" and "terrorism" might help us shed light on the vicissitudes of meaning embroiled in social antagonisms. The English word derives from the Latin root "terrere," "to frighten" and the nominal root "terror" glossed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as "intense fear, fright or dread' and "the action or quality of causing [such] dread; terribleness; a thing or person that excites terror" ("Terror"). Aside from its occurrence in the Bible and in Gothic novels of terror, we find its first negative use in 1788 by Gibbon: "The ferocious Bedoweens, the terror of the desert" (Mesnard y Mendez 110). The object here are those non-western barbarians who fed the vampiric Orientalism of the colonial empires. The political ground in this semiotic chain came with the French revolution and the Jacobin's "Reign of Terror" which the OED designated as "the period...when the ruling faction remorselessly shed the blood of persons of both sexes and of all ages and conditions whom they regarded as obnoxious."

The word "terrorism" is extrapolated from the French, used in England (circa late 18th century) as a label to classify the policy of systematic intimidation by the government

apparatus in revolutionary France. The translation of this usage resonates today when the ground for varying interpretants shifts. In the recent past, the English charge of terrorism was placed on Irish insurgents, and later on Nelson Mandela's African National Congress. Meanwhile, the lexeme "terror" has been combined with other signs, for example, "terror-bombing"(such as the bombing of Guernica and Hitler's bombing of Rotterdam.), defined by the OED as "intensive and indiscriminate bombing designed to frighten a country into surrender." In February 1945, *Time* identified it as US and British policy: "Terror bombing of German cities was deliberate military policy" (Mesnard y Mendez 111). This techno-scientific form of mass-killing originated from the Italian, Spanish, French, and British imperial responses to colonial uprisings between two world wars. It persists in subsequent US and allied campaigns from Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo, Hiroshima, then to Hanoi, the Gulf War, Serbia, and the "awe and shock" of the recent Iraq invasion. Here, of course, the interpretant of "terrorism" is grounded on the task of assigning the practice to the historical actors or agents—a hermeneutic process captured by conservative English historian Harold Nicolson as he wrote in his diary for 1986: "When people rise against foreign oppression, they are hailed as patriots and heroes; but the Greeks whom we are shooting and hanging on Cyprus are dismissed as terrorists. What cant!" (Mesnard Y Mendez 111).

At this juncture, we may ask if we are able to grasp fully what is meant by the Bush administration's "war on terrorism"? "Terror" as a quality or action has become personified into "terrorism." The signifiers have changed with the objects, but what about the interpretants and the grounds for linking sign and object? Obviously they have changed too since meaning is a triadic interanimation of the three categories (sign/object/interpretant). The Establishment (media, government) now uses "terrorism" because any "ism" sounds foreign, ideological, non- or un-American. If terrorism implies political killing of civilians, it is something that they, aliens, do and not us, nor the state. Terrorism acquires a transcendentally evil or satanic power. It does not designate a group of people who have certain views, reasons and purposes; hence, terrorists are people who draw their identity and rationale from the sinister occult essence of "terrorism." The slogan of "war on terrorism" of course is designed to rally citizens to support whatever military actions may be proclaimed as "anti-terrorist" or against the targeted criminals, outlaws, and the amorphous Others stigmatized by official decree. Its authority is derived from the state's theological pretense at global omniscience (for a sharp critical analysis of the "metaphysics of terrorism," see Badiou 2002). What is more revealing is that under the USA Patriot Act, which implements the general State policy of the war against terrorism, domestic terrorists have now been included: "The second category of domestic terrorists, left-wing groups,

generally profess a revolutionary socialist doctrine and view themselves as protectors of the people against the 'dehumanizing effects' of capitalism and imperialism" (Federal Bureau).

To remedy these biased construals, Mesnard y Mendez expands the object of the signifier "terrorism" to include State terrorism side by side with contemporary forms of non-State terrorism: religious group terrorism (as between Hindus and Muslims in India, Buddhists and Hindus in Sri Lanka, Muslims and Christians in Indonesia) and political group terrorism.

I want to enter a parenthesis here for further clarification. The occurrence of state terrorism may be succinctly illustrated by quoting the proponents of a war of "shock and awe"—memorable words used by Secretary Rumsfeld as he threatened Saddam Hussein on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq—this time, however, the alien barbarians are the Japanese during World War II:

> Theoretically, the magnitude of Shock and Awe Rapid Dominance seeks to impose (in extreme cases)...the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese…. The impact of those weapons was sufficient to transform both the mindset of the average Japanese citizen and the outlook of the leadership through this condition of Shock and Awe. The Japanese simply could not comprehend the destructive power carried by a single airplane. This incomprehension produced a state of awe (Ullman and Wade 106).

The strategy of "shock and awe" seems to mobilize the iconic and indexical function of weapons as signs, except that the Japanese—before they could call their hermeneutic wizards—immediately succumbed to catatonic paralysis!

RECTIFICATION OF NAMES

We can sum up this semantic labor by revising the conventional definition of terms. In addition to the definition of *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* of "terrorism" as "the use of terrorizing methods of governing or resisting a government," Mesnard y Mendez suggests this final interpretant which takes into account the range of historical examples noted earlier: "terrorism is a strategy that consists in pursuing political power

by striking dread into the civilian population through exemplary killings among them. It follows that terrorism is a matter of influencing through huge bodily harm the collective imagination by transfer contagion: an exasperated form of psychophysical warfare grafted onto techniques of economic and political propaganda in the media" (117). The object of the signifier "terrorism" is still the violence found in all the other instances, but the interpretant focuses on the agent or group who commits or threatens to use it for gaining or promoting political power by coercing a population. In this context, the interpretant also adds the qualification that the killing is selective and instrumentally chosen. The ground for this interpretant is a kind of basic semantic hygience: to stop "this morally indefensible and politically unachievable 'war on terrorism,' while intensifying the struggle against terrorism on all sides by political and nonmurderous means" (121). The meaning arrived at here aims to distill the nuances of the genealogy without renouncing responsibility, that is, without shirking the conception of effects that follow from choosing particular grounds of determinate interpretants. Inquiry such as we have engaged in here, prompted by what Peirce calls the Firstness of new qualities and the Secondness of experienced reaction and brute actuality, functions in the direction of attempting to break entrenched habits and usher a more comprehensive, historically informed intelligibility, a step toward "concrete reasonableness," relative to current social urgencies and long-term needs.

Peirce's semiotic proceeds by a logic of hypothesis, testing by induction, and its implication in belief-formation. I can only sketch here the outline of this logic in operation. The search for meaning is a matter of formulating a synthetic inference, by abduction, in real-life situations. What do we think of the consequences or effects of choosing a certain ground for our interpretants, pressured by our needs and desires? We are far removed here from the epistemological skepticism of Locke and the dualistic idealism of Descartes. Unlike the ideas perceived introspectively in Descartes' mind, whose meaning is intuited or immediately known, the meaning of a sign, although a thought (Thirdness as mediation), is not self-evident. We have to interpret the sign by a subsequent thought or action to know what it means. For example, the crashing of the planes on the twin towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, may be a strange, non-customary happening. But upon translating that Firstness (apprehension of qualities) into Secondness (indexical), an interpretant emerges: the perception is interpreted either by a translation into "accidental tragedy" or "deliberate act of terror." Ideas are not immediately, intuitively known or experienced; their meanings can be grasped by a process of inference. The thoughts we have (interpretants) spring from the triadic relation: an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining object. Peirce asserts that "Only by external facts can thought be

known at all … all thought, therefore, must necessarily be in signs" (*Peirce on Signs* 49). Thinking is an interpretive process, a sequence of translation and transcoding.

One might pose the following questions: If objects are signs that suffuse the universe, what is there left that is not a sign? What of the somebody, the observer or interpreter of the cycle of sign-actions? Peirce answered that "the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself....my language is the sum total of myself, for the man is the thought" (Sebeok 41). The self is manifested in a sign relation; the known universe is constituted in thought which is equivalent to the triadic sign-action. From the perspective of Peirce's semiotic realism, the world may be said to be accurately represented by thoughts/signs, thought grasped here as bodily feeling or action. If thinking is behavior or action, just as historical as everyday activities, then it is not an absolute free process unconstrained by natural forces that determine other kinds of human activity.

We have already remarked that for Peirce thoughts are not immediately perceived in a soul, mind or self; thought—the Cartesian *cogito*—is a relation of signs possessing material properties, as brain process. The "I" itself is a sign entailing the triadic constituents of signification. However, the universe cannot be reduced to simple mechanical forces (Secondness) derived from sheer thisness (Firstness), a pattern of action and reaction. Knowledge of the universe springs from Thirdness (mediation; law), the intelligence found in semiosis, in the production of meaning: the representation of one object to a second by a third. Intelligence then is not immediate spontaneous knowledge of ideas in the mind or soul, nor a dyadic relation between objects. It is an objective interpretive relation.

Peirce was a realist, not an idealist, who believed that universals and other relations are real. Truth hinges on the real understood as something that cannot be changed and stands outside (though partially known) human inquiry. He insisted on the reality of universals and of all relations, specifically the relation of representation. He opposed nominalism as the view that consciousness (percepts) is not the real thing but only the sign of the thing. Peirce held to the view that "Reals are signs." In contrast, deconstruction and post-structuralist theory generally subscribe to a nominalism that questions objective reality, general laws. Nominalists reduce reality to individual facts, decentering phenomena into dyadic relations artificially fashioned by subjective will or textual fiat. Early in life Peirce reflected that "just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us" (*Peirce on Signs* 11). In old age, Peirce advised William James that "one must not take a nominalistic view of Thought as if it were something that a man had in his consciousness.... It is we that are in it, rather than it is any of us" (*Collected Papers* 189).

ARTIFICE OF COMPREHENSION

We now come to appreciate the strength of Peirce's semiotics as a speculative instrument for understanding the dynamics of representation and its role in knowledge-production. Its value may be demonstrated in the analysis of thought, not the analysis of verbal language (the arbitrary machine of *differance* made paradigmatic by the Saussure-oriented postmodernists). Thought is taken here to be the signifying process of inference, the methodology of meaning-production. The meaning of the sign is not always and necessarily arbitrary because it depends on the thought that interprets it; numerous interpretants predicate real relations between signs and their objects, as in the case of indices (for example, weathercocks). Nor is it correct to assume that conventional symbols (such as a red stop sign) are arbitrarily interpreted; the interpretant has to translate it correctly, or expose herself to real risks. In short, be warned that reading/understanding entails real sometimes deadly consequences. In this connection, James Hoopes offers this insight in his Introduction to *Peirce on Signs*: "Peirce's semiotic therefore allows for realistic recognition that human life and society are to a significant degree a matter not only of freedom but also of constraint, a matter of people being shoved this way or that by bullets and ballots, a surplus or shortage of land, the rise and fall of technologies and industries, and so on. On the other hand, Peirce's monism and semiotic realism allow for some freedom or, rather, a role for thought. By explaining how thought is action, Peirce's semiotic makes it possible to understand why thinking, language, and culture are *real* historical forces" (12). Again, here, the goal of "concrete reasonableness" compels the thinker to judge not individual thoughts but habits of argument, habits of forming intelligible and appropriate responses to signs, bearing in mind that what enables the intelligibility or meaningfulness of signs are the consequences, effects, and future experiences that they produce.

This is where the old traditional problem of mind-body dualism, the antithesis of consciousness and objective reality, may be fully elucidated if not converted to propaedeutic use. We confront the perennial themes of classic philosophical controversies. In Peirce's philosophy, intellectual activity as real action produces effects under determinate conditions. Social institutions (governments, corporations, media, cultural practices) can be understood as thought unfolded in a process of sign interpretation, the result of a process of multiple intelligences—in short, semiotic syntheses of the thoughts of groups and communities. Society can then be comprehended as a collective human process that subsumes any focus on the local or particular. Unlike the postmodern nominalists, Peirce's approach allows the study of society, culture and history to become an objective

science not in the narrow mechanistic or positivist sense but in a genuinely dialectical mode where human rational agency participates in the discovery of truth in historically specific situations. Dialectical also because thought or intelligence demonstrates its real creative force not in absolute "free play," in undecidable cyborg self-fashioning divorced from history and nature, but within the constraints of the real world in which we live (the universe of Thirdness) and the reciprocally interactive logic of necessity and chance.

TOWARD A PRAGMATICIST AESTHETICS

Richard Shusterman has propounded a "pragmatist aesthetics" based primarily on John Dewey's instrumentalism. Here I can only initiate a prolegomenon for a "science" of pragmaticist aesthetics based on Peirce's logic of sign-production as described earlier.

From the perspective of Peircean semiotics, how do we read a literary work, a text like Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* which renders with lyrical realism the anatomy of terror in Sri Lanka? Before sketching an approach, let me summarize the fundamental categories of Peirce's epistemology. Here we confront the problem of how knowledge can be acquired from representation, more precisely, how artistic truth can be derived from glossing the modalities of representation through the triadic sign.

Before commenting on the novel, I want to sketch the background for understanding the literary text as a semiotic phenomenon possessing iconic, indexical and symbolic properties. Kant demonstrated that the faculty of understanding deploys a priori concepts to produce the unity of a manifold of sensuous impressions. This is accomplished through a transcendental deduction. Peirce begins with a pure act of attention that generates universal concepts as "the present, in general," as well as the consciousness of some "It," analogous to Aristotle's substance or what Greek metaphysics designated as "logos." This "It" is prior to any act of comparison and discrimination, functioning as the subject to which any and all predicates apply. This "It" can be grasped through impressions that present it when they are reduced to the unity of a proposition which requires the logical and grammatical function of the copula (the copula translates to "either actually is or would be"). "Being implies an indefinite determinability of the predicate," as in the observation that a stove may be black, iron, heavy, hot, in the corner, and so on. Cognition is thus based on predication (being, in contrast to substance which is not the Kantian "noumenon"). We cannot collapse being (predication) and substance; there is no essence behind appearance: "The thing in itself is precisely what we do see, and since it is substance, its reality is not ever in question, only its intelligibility: we bring it into being by

understanding in some light" (Leroy 561).

There is thus no need for a Kantian transcendental analysis or a hierarchical Hegelian dialectic in Peirce's theory. The quality abstracted from an "It" retains its character in any occurrence and preprares the way for the explanation of a truth claim. In the proposition "The stove is black," the quality (Firstness) abstracted or prescinded from the stove as the precise respect in which the experience is available to thought. Peirce points out two distinct moments in this experience: first, reference to a "ground,"as in the focus on color rather than weight or temperature of the stove. Second, the reference to a "correlate," whereby the specific quality (say, "black") is abstractable so as to be applicable to other things, such as black shoes, black pots, comparable to what is seen in the stove. What this demonstrates is that our capacity to make comparisons needs, in addition to the related thing, the ground and the correlate, a "mediating representation" or "interpretant" that can be addressed to someone (including ourselves). This mode of analysis lays the foundation for Peirce's theory of pragmaticism as an epistemology and ontology: Firstness signifies quality, a feeling, a possibility. Secondness signifies an individual apprehended as a resistance to and interaction with its environment, embodying a possibility as actuality. Thirdness refers to a general term a rule, a law or a "habit" that correspoends to the fallible but determinate knowledge of a regularity or principle (*Collected Papers* 264-69).

Applying this triad of categories, signs or representations are divided into icon, index and symbol. Icon is a sign based on resemblance to its object, possessing some character contained in or expressed by an instance of the icon. Index is a sign based on correspondence to fact, some existential relation into which the instance enters (for the indexical sign in cinema, see Wollen). Symbol is a sign of generality which is connected not only to the ground and object but also to the interpretant. Symbol as a sign function assumes both quality (in reference to a ground) and the existential relations of a particular object or situation; symbol is also specific in referring to an interpretant, a cognitive moment, determined by Firstness and Secondness but not limited to either. Meaning derives from representations that involve the triadic categories, not any binary relation between signifier and signified.

Peirce's pragmaticism elaborates the consequences that follow from a "first" being accessible by reference to a ground; thus, we are instructed to pay attention to what specific aspect of a phenomenon we are noticing or representing. Reasoning by inferences does not allow unlimited "free play," following Peirce's reminder: "The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct that, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance

of the symbol" (*Collected Papers* 438). Meaning is not infinitely deferred but is conceived as a continuous process of inference or reasoning in communities of inquiry. While the heterogeneity of circumstances and desires influence these communities, the mode of rational inquiry implies a normative ethics and aesthetics to be scientific. Belief arises from the process of inquiry and experiment that should be pursued freely without the threat of heresy from the gatekeepers of orthodoxy—since beliefs are always tested and proved/disproved, as a commitment to a "concretely reasonable" world.

The categories lead to Peirce's three trichotomies that refine his definition of signs. In the first division, a sign is, for the interpretant, either a qualisign, a sinsign or a legisign, depending upon whether it is a quality, an actual object, or a law. In the second trichotomy, the ground of the relation constitutes signs to be icons, by reason of similarity, indices by reason of an existential connection, and symbols by reason of the habit of association, thus showing regularity and law. In the third trichotomy, the object of the sign is, for the interpretant, considered a rheme (qualitative possibility), a dicisign (actual existence), or an argument (law, representing the object in its character of sign).This table illustrates the triadic relations in terms of the categories (after Sheriff *The Fate* 67):

Phenomenological or formal categories		*Ontological or material categories*		
Firstness	A sign is:	a quality as sign QUALISIGN	an "actual existent" or event SINSIGN	general law; conventional LEGISIGN
Secondness	A sign *relates* to its object in having:	some quality of object it denotes ICON	an existential relation affected by object INDEX	some relation to interpretant SYMBOL
Thirdness	A sign's interpretant *represents* it (sign) as a sign of:	qualitative "possibility"; possible object RHEME	"fact"; actual existence of object DICENT SIGN	"reason"; sign of a law ARGUMENT

Table 1: Peirce's Triadic Relations

Now, from the perspective of Peirce's semiotics, every art-object is an icon (Firstness) whose aesthetic value resides in the harmony of its intrinsic qualities. The interpretant of the art/icon is a feeling or complex of emotions, the subjective correlative of the objective properties embodied in the art-work. E. F. Kaelin argues that the aesthetic sign is a rhematic iconic qualisign, "a quality, or a work of art under the aspect of its qualitative wholeness, serving as a sign of a distinct qualitative possibility by virtue of a similarity between the two" (226). In John Sheriff's view, literary art is "a representamen of possibility experienced as Rhematic Symbol" (*The Fate* 78). A novel, poem or story presents us with signs of immediate consciousness, feelings, qualities, rhemes, in instants of time, as we read without sustained reflection or analysis. However, while the interpretant of an art-object are signs of ontological Firstness (Rheme), separated phenomenal elements which are merely potential, this aesthetic experience becomes an object of reflection, inference, thought. The interpretant (Rheme) becomes a new representamen that determines a new interpretant (another Rheme, Proposition or Argument). So the reader undergoes the experience of immediate consciousness in the first moment, then transforms this sign-process into a new sign, and so on.

Given the dynamic nature of signs constituting a literary text, the text as we read will continue to generate a series of interpretants within specific parameters, frames of intelligibility, or "language-games." A sentence in a text such as "Cain killed Abel" can be read as a Rheme or Proposition depending on what ground the sign relates to its interpretant. The sentence may have the form of a proposition, but they do not refer to facts or actual existents; they function as signs of immediate consciousness registering aspects of the "It," the knowable reality subtending experience. They are, as Peirce asserts, "symbols for a level of reality which cannot be reached in any other way … So the poet in our days—and the true poet is the true prophet—personifies everything, not rhetorically but in his own feelings. He tells us that he feels an affinity for nature, and loves the stone or the drop of water" (*Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings* 13). Art is then not just a set of formal properties separated from the real; experience is broader than the signs in our conscious thought, an experience in the world of signs whose complex apprehension or transcription of reality is made more accessible by artistic mediation.

In reading a literary text, we move from Rheme (Firstness) to Dicent Sign (Secondness) and Argument (Thirdness). We can reason and argue on the basis of interpretants that translate the rhematic symbol, even though, following Peirce's doctrine of fallibilism, we cannot arrive at "absolute certainty concerning questions of fact" (*Collected Papers* 149). While there are no rules or objective standards to determine the grounds for

choosing interpretants, the practice of reading/interpretation is not wholly subjective, relativist or nominalist. Why we choose a certain framework, paradigm or language-game can be explained by prior choices and commitments that can be rationally examined and evaluated. Questioning and analysis, at some point, must come to an end for us to act on certain beliefs "and begin from there as rational human beings" (Sheriff *The Fate* 94).

For Peirce, the terminal goal of semiosis is the emergence of "concrete reasonableness" and its embodiment in a community of inquirers open to the impact of experience, the intractable factuality of an objective world, the historicity of life, and the influence of traditions. This follows from Peirce's insight that the ultimate foundation of meaning is not found in arbitrary conventions but in the rectifiable process of interpretation. Such process leads to the shaping of general habits and the correction and improvement of traditions based on a "critical common-sensism" (Rochberg-Halton 50).

NARRATIVE AS ARGUMENT AND SYMBOL

Let us turn now to *Anil's Ghost* with Peirce's experimental optic. Ondaatje's novel centers on the pursuit of truth—the structure and totality of social conditions and personal relationships in their spatiotemporal unfolding. The fable deals with the search for the identity of victims of state or collective terrorism, a quest that also uncovers the history (archaeology, genealogy) of the protagonists in the national crisis of Sri Lanka. Individual identities have so far been muddled or truncated by global and national disasters. What can be salvaged and identified? Can the ruined Buddha be restored? Yes, as the concluding section shows by describing Ananda Udugama's performance of an ancient ritual of restoration. The focalization of this fable in the *mise en scene* or actual plot translates rheme and dicent sign to argument, the realm of legisign and symbol. One interpretant of the whole novel's point is that truth can be discovered by sacrifice and dissolution of identity in the cultural complex which survives through ordeals of civil war and internecine conflict. That, I think, is a central thematic argument of the narrative.

Anil Tissera, the western-trained forensic scientist sent by the UN to investigate human rights abuses, becomes involved with (among others) two brothers, Sarath Diyasena, an archaeologist, and his brother Gamini, a doctor treating the victims of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Anil has been away for fifteen years, tied to her birthplace less by memory than by a passion to help and serve a larger good. Both brothers know first-hand the violence of torture, cruel murders, and other humiliations. But there are also tensions and disparities between them, conflicts emblematic of the larger ethnic and class war

raging around them. Towards the end of the novel, the anonymous skeleton of a victim that Anil and Sarath had recovered is identified as Ruwan Kumara, a rebel sympathizer. The novel does not end there; after presenting their findings before a government panel, and before the episode when Gamini confronts the corpse of his brother, a victim of official treachery and revenge, we have a short scene where the two brothers succeed in talking comfortably to each other "because of her presence. So it had seemed to her." The point of view in this passage, that of the expatriate Anil, allows her a synthesizing angle or vantage point from which to make sense of her own detached but also involved relation to what is going on in her once beloved homeland, to her past as well as to her future:

> It was *their* conversation about the war in their country and what each of them had done during it and what each would not do. They were, in retrospect, closer than they imagined.
>
> If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life? Would she talk to intimates about them, the two Colombo brothers? And she in some way like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other's worlds? Wherever she might be, would she think of them? Consider the strange middle-class pair who were born into one world and in mid-life stepped waist-deep into another?
>
> At one point that night, she remembered, they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. 'But I could never leave here,' Gamini had whispered.
>
> "American movies, English books—remember how they all end?" Gamini asked that night. "The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit." (Ondaatje 285-6)

Some readers have applied Gamini's sardonic remarks on the novel itself. This choice of an interpretant is grounded on the expectation that postmodern artists are more self-conscious and reflexive. But this is to dismiss the framing angle of Anil, the vehicle

through which Gamini's voice is registered, preventing it from being a utopian free-flowing signifier. There is some ambiguity as to whom Gamini is directing his utterance, to his brother or to Anil; the combination "American movies, English books," a complex quasi-indexical dicent sign for Western consumer voyeurism, metonymically implicates Anil and her European sponsor. The whole scene, however, may be taken as symbolic of the novel's attempt to construct a community, beginning with the restoration of ties between the brothers up to the problematic reinscription of Anil's visit into her own life-history as an uprooted Sri Lankan, into the disrupted lives of her compatriots. We are faced with examining the novel as a legisign of the artist's (including Ananda Udugama) endeavor to oppose the terror of isolation and separation, alienation, ethnic exclusion, demonization of any person as "terrorist," and, last but not least, anonymous disappearance/death.

What needs underscoring here is the rheme of speculation, that feeling of quasi-nostalgia and regret, that Anil is experiencing as she muses what it would be like to be already distant and removed from the scene. It is a moment of suspension that we are witnessing here, the interpretant of these signs rendering Anil listening (playing the addressee) to words exchanged between the brothers. Sarath is not quoted, but Gamini is given the last words about his love for his country, and how Western visitors claiming to be experts only reveal their stupidity and arrogance. Or is that depiction of the scene from Hollywood movies and pulp fiction simply a critique of cultural taste and artifacts, not of the societies that nourish and consume them? If we have to choose a ground that will take into account as much of the expressive and referential properties of the text, I would say that the semiotic ground has to center-stage Anil's role, her recording sensibility, and her own "take" on the fraught relationship of the brothers. My view is that the ground of our interpretation needs to connect this scene with what comes after, as well as what has happened already up to this point. In that expanded horizon, Anil's mediation here prepares for Gamini's reception of his brother's body in the morgue in the next section, and her disappearance from the novel.

INTERMINABLE INQUIRY

A concluding remark may return us to the quest for knowledge and truth via representation. What then is the rationale for structuring of the narrative in this specific manner? Numerous reviews and commentaries have converged on the judgment that the novel does not explicitly choose any side. One writer observes that Ondaatje "ensures that no side emerges unstained: the government, the Tamil separatists, or the insurgents

to the south" (Singh); another commends the author when he "reveals the depths of his homeland's adversity with a scientist's distance" (Barnett). Another thinks that the author "has no clear political position … and appeals to conscience only by depicting he extremes of fear and violence that war engenders" (Champeon). These opinions diverge from signs of partisanship which are ignored for the sake of endorsing a putative neutrality, for example: "Yet the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale" (Ondaatje11). Consider also Gamini's psychic condition as he examines his brother's lifeless body after he discovered the shattered hands: "He had seen cases where every tooth had been removed, the nose cut apart, the eyes humiliated with liquids, the ears entered. He had been, as he ran down the hospital hallway, most frightened of seeing his brother's face. It was the face they went for in some cases. They could in their hideous skills sniff out vanity" (289-90). Here, the signs of "terror," "terrorism," and their cognates find their charged sensory manifestations in these rhematic symbols and their interpretants.

We can of course allude further to numerous historical and documentary accounts of the situation in Sri Lanka in the mid-1980 to early 1990s, the time period circumscribing the events of the novel. We can consult an early commentary such as *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After* (1984) by L. Piyadasa to test the truth-claims of propositions enunciated in the narrative. While a 1987 peace accord was signed granting regional autonomy to the embattled Tamils, the rebellion continued and worsened because the Tamil nationalists were excluded by both the Indian and Sri Lankan governments (Gurr 301). By 1998, an estimated 50,000 persons have died since the war began in the eighties (Instituto del Tercer Mundo 521).

The relevant context for understanding the art-work can be enlarged and offered for inspection. The final interpretant—in Peirce's view, "the effect the Sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances [history, artistic techniques, biography, and other contextual information] should permit it to work out its full effect" (*Collected Papers* 413; see also Fitzgerald 124-25)—would deploy such information provided by historical accounts as elements of the hermeneutic circle or horizon to help us appraise the cogency of all the "possibles" rendered in the narrative.

We can indeed anticipate a range of possible meanings/interpretants we can formulate for this particular scene, or for any other pivotal episode, as a representamen in a sequence of representamens, and for the novel as a whole. As I have argued, however, that range can not be infinite nor arbitrary since the over-all principle of "concrete reasonableness" (the logic of abduction) imposes a provisional end to this phase of the

inquiry. The knowable reality which the art of the novel strives to represent is not an indeterminable, mysterious "something"; to the extent that the representation exhibits the "power to live down all opposition," the interpretant can grasp the "true character of the object... The very entelechy of being lies in being representable," Peirce insists; indeed, "a symbol is an embryonic reality endowed with power of growth into the very truth, the very entelechy of reality" mediated through the community of interpreters (*The New Elements of Mathematics* 262).

Knowledge and reality, "cognizability" and being, are synonymous terms for Pierce (*Collected Papers* 257). His critique of meaning ultimately directs us to fix our attention on the habits of thinking and action precipitated by our act of reading, effects with practical bearings in everyday life. Perceptions and habits of inference generating knowledge/truth always take place within the domain of semiotic representation (Habermas 98; see also Moore and Robin). Aesthetics, for Peirce, is nothing else but "the theory of the deliberate formation of such habits of feeling (i.e., of the ideal)" which he also called "the play of Musement" after Schiller's *Spieltrieb* (Brent 53; Feibleman 392). Reading *Anil's Ghost* and analyzing the repertoire of interpretants of politically loaded terms such as "terrorism" may be said to constitute those significant practices that challenge not only our hermeneutic skills and capabilities of construing perceptions and translating perceptual judgments; they also elicit signs of whether we, and others in the collaborative enterprise, embody what Peirce calls "an intelligence capable of learning by experience" (*Philosophical Writings* 98; see Sheriff *Charles Peirce's Guess*).

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ADDENDUM TO "SIGNS, MEANING, INTERPRETATION: C. S. PEIRCE'S CRITIQUE OF DECONSTRUCTION AND POST-STRUCTURALISM" BY E. SAN JUAN, JR.

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Abstract
This paper—a rejoinder to the work of E. San Juan, Jr. titled "Signs, Meaning, Interpretation: C. S. Peirce's Critique of Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism"—discusses, complements, and puts in a broader frame San Juan's essay. After showing the distinction between Peirce's interpretive semiotics and de Saussure's structural semiotics, the terminological debate surrounding "semiotic" and its cognates is briefly illustrated. Because interpretive semiotics requires heroic exegetic efforts, San Juan is praised for taking up the challenge of making sense of Peirce, a thinker definitely ahead of his time—and probably of ours as well. However, San Juan is criticized for merely juxtaposing—as opposed to applying—an admirable and comprehensive reconstruction of Peirce's theory of sign to political and literary considerations. Finally, a section updates San Juan's attempt to locate Peirce's philosophy relative to the realist-nominalist divide arguing that his dazzling metaphysics overcomes the distinction.

About the Author
Ubaldo Stecconi received a degree in Translation from the University of Trieste, Italy and a PhD in Comparative Literature from University College London. After teaching translation theory and practice in Italy, the Philippines, and the United States for 14 years, in early 2001 he joined the European Commission in Brussels. Stecconi's publications include three translated books, about 25 academic papers on translation theory and semiotics, and a dozen literary articles and interviews. He has recently co–authored in his native Italian an academic textbook on translation called *Manuale di traduzione* (2007). The nexus between translation research and the theory of signs of C. S. Peirce has been his main research interest for over a decade.

"Signs, Meaning, Interpretation" is a comprehensive primer of the semiotics of C. S. Peirce (1839–1914) with appended literary applications. I need to specify from the start—as San Juan also did—that Peirce is the founder of one of the two main contemporary theories of signs, often referred to as "interpretive semiotics" and followed by Morris, Sebeok, Eco, and others. The other is the tradition initiated by the Swiss father of contemporary linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure and followed by Lotman, Barthes, Greimas, and others. The distinction between the two traditions is not clear-cut. A quick characterization would be as follows: Peirce focused on sign interpretation and on how a culture produces and gives currency to signs. Saussure focused on the structural aspects of sign systems and signification. A terminological difficulty contributes to blurring the boundaries, because authors on both camps make a liberal use of the term "semiotics." Greimas, for instance, called his structural theory "generative semiotics"—at least this is the phrase that appears

in the publications in English of this Lithuanian–born scholar whose main international language was French. Interpretive semioticians sometimes complain against what they regard as undue appropriation by their structuralist colleagues. Because Saussure hinted at the development of a discipline called *sémiologie*, they would like the authors who refer to him to leave the term "semiotics" alone and use something like "semiology." Another way they would have to solve this problem would be to discard "semiotics" altogether for being irretrievably ambiguous and adopt a more technical "semeiotics." This seems to be justified by Peirce's own usage, for instance:

> The speculative rhetoric that we are speaking of is a branch of the analytical study of the essential conditions to which all signs are subject,—a science named semeiotics, though identified by many thinkers with logic. (*The Essential Peirce* 2:327)[1]

The problem here lies in the fact that Peirce himself used a variety of terms to refer to the discipline that he was trying to establish, including "semeiotic," "semiotic," "semeiotics," and even "semeotic." Tellingly, "semiotics" never appears once in the *Collected Papers*. This has been a recurring issue in the Peirce research community. Nöth, for instance, calls Peirce's terminological practices "idiosyncratic and changing" (42) and Liszka complains of Peirce's "annoying habit of neologizing" (Introduction ix). What to do? Although the court is still out in my inner forum, I would tend to adopt a tolerant attitude and let everyone use the terms they like, as long as positions are made clear by other means. As a provisional solution, then, I will use "semiotics," "semiosis," etc. in the present notes because they have currency even among the non-specialists; and when I do I will refer only to Peirce's tradition.

Let me close the terminological aside and return to San Juan's primer. The essay is admirable because it covers in a few short pages practically all the important element of Peirce's semiotic architecture. Exegeses of this kind abound in semiotic literature, and for a reason. Peirce's genius—apart from terminological issues—came at the price of sometimes contradictory positions, impossibly dense prose, and obscure lines of argument—as the quotations included in the essay amply testify. It is very hard indeed to become familiar with interpretive semiotics. Although I can adduce only anecdotal evidence, it would be fair to say that it takes several years of dedicated study to make enough sense of the primary and secondary literature. Peirce was a decidedly unconventional and original thinker; although he died in 1914, some claim he was the first post–modern philosopher (see Deely 28-50; and *passim*). It is clear that his thought was decades ahead of his time; it

is possible that its full import is still ahead of ours. To make matters worse, Peirce rarely made an effort to make himself understood. Even his friend and fellow philosopher William James once described the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1903 as "flashes of brilliant insight relieved against Cimmerian darkness." (*The Collected Papers* 5.1). As a result, much of Peirce's scholarship is an attempt to clarify and reconstruct his mass of writings. It is a huge task, because these were produced over sixty years of single-minded work, are believed to fill thirty volumes, and deal with a vast array of disciplines. In sum, understanding Peirce is like climbing the North Face of Mount Everest: you know it is going to be very hard; but if you can make it, the reward is enormous. Why there are not more scholars who decide to embark in the enterprise is a bit of a mystery. It seems to me that few are willing to invest so much time and energy for what remains an uncertain result. Perhaps today's typical academic simply cannot afford to adopt a "high-risk, high-stakes" strategy, and I am happy to see that San Juan decided to run the risk.

To make matters worse, not enough of Peirce's immense and chaotic production is available in anything better than manuscript form. Apart from two bibliographies of primary literature (Ketner et al.; Robin), the editions of Peirce's writings that have appeared so far are all partial (see the list appended to the References). Peirce editions were born under an unlucky star with the first and still most quoted source, the *Collected Papers*. Although Peirce was a fairly respected figure in America's intellectual circles, Harvard University did not assign exactly the best team to work on them when they received his papers upon his death. As a result, the *Collected Papers* leave a lot to be desired. The eight volumes try to impose their own structure on the immense mass of material. The final result is a compilation of fragments, long and short, re–assembled in a somewhat arbitrary fashion. In spite of the growing Peirce interest over the past few years, things have not improved much on the editorial front. To my knowledge, the latest attempt to a complete standard edition is the one carried out by the Peirce Edition Project (*Writings of Charles S. Peirce*), which seems to have gone out of steam (or funds). The best outcome of that project to date is a finely edited and selected collection in two volumes (*The Essential Peirce*), which I would recommend to the curious reader. Unfortunately, the lack of a reliable and comprehensive edition has encouraged the development of a dubious scholarly attitude based on a partial and fragmentary knowledge and characterized by a treatment of the primary literature that does not always conform to the best standards. It is easy to make Peirce say many different things, and some scholars take unfair advantage of this fact to enlist him among the authorities of their own arguments. San Juan hints at the possibility that even Culler and Derrida may have found it difficult to resist the temptation. I would

like to illustrate this attitude citing the example of a translation scholar.

Douglas Robinson patterned the central chapters of one of his books (Robinson 1997) after Peirce's abduction, induction and deduction series which—as San Juan illustrated—sits close to the core of his logic of scientific discovery. His rationale was as follows:

> One useful way of mapping the connections between experience and habit onto the process of translation is through the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1857–1913), the American philosopher and founder of semiotics." (96–7)[2]

Robinson argues that if translating is a problem–solving exercise, induction and deduction are not enough; hypothetical reasoning or "abduction" is also required. For certain problems, translators need to literally *guess* their solutions. This is in line with interpretive semiotics and vindicates the creative side of translating. However, the experiential account Robinson gives does not agree with Peirce's. Robinson writes:

> The translator approaches new texts, new jobs, new situations with an intuitive or *instinctive* readiness, a sense of her or his own knack for languages and translation that is increasingly, with experience, steeped in the automatisms of habit. Instinct and habit for Peirce were both, you will remember, a readiness to act; the only difference between them is that habit is directed by experience (104-5).

This is odd. There is a world of difference between our instinct and our habits—and experience has little to do with it. Peirce's main interest in instinct was related to our ability to form hypotheses and he often discussed our remarkable rate of success (*The Collected Papers* 2.86; and 7.220). As to habit—of which belief is one form—Peirce maintained that "the production of belief is the sole function of thought" (*The Collected Papers* 5.394). So, although hypotheses must be tested against experiential data, phenomenologically the passage between forming a hypothesis and forming deliberate habits is due to thought and to thought alone. Robinson seems to have surprising reservations about habits in general.

> As Peirce conceives the movement from instinct through experience to habit, habit is the end: instinct and experience are combined to create habit, and there it stops. (103-4)

This is evidence of a very serious misunderstanding. A short quotation will suffice to prove statements like this wrong: "[S]ince belief is a rule for action, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping–place, it is also a new starting–place for thought" (*The Collected Papers* 5.397). Robinson makes manifest what one can do if one decides to use Peirce rather than interpret him. This dubious strategy rests on two conditions: a limited knowledge of interpretive semiotics; and the willingness to manipulate Peirce to make him serve one's own research agenda.

At this point, I would hasten to add that San Juan does not belong to this class; in fact, it is perfectly clear from his essay that he makes an honest effort to understand and explain Peirce in Peirce's own terms.

The unusual difficulty required to become familiar with semiotics has had another curious effect on even the most intellectually honest scholars. After the epic struggle to conquer their semiotic tools, many arrive at the application stage in a state of exhaustion. The exegetic effort can sap the energies of the best conditioned scholar. Very often, authors are so content with making sense of their Peirce that—to all intents and purposes—they have no mental stamina left to make full use of their findings. I regret to say that San Juan is no exception. He merely juxtaposes his political and literary considerations to his admirable reflections on the nature of signs, knowledge and truth; and the juxtapositions are often not sufficiently motivated. I have the impression that he forces selected semiotic bits to dovetail with contemporary world politics and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* even when the pieces to be joined don't fit.

For instance, the essay opens with a brief reference to the dreadful post–9/11 world order and links it to two broad semiotic strains: deconstructionist "free play" and Peirce's sterner positions. This is commendable in principle; there will never be enough voices to denounce and condemn the so–called "war on terror" with the risk of pushing international law back to a barbaric might–is–right past. The effort to convert Peirce's triadic logic and his notion of habit into instruments that can help us understand and describe international politics is also commendable; but San Juan's attempt fails in practice. It must be said that it takes a lot of courage and imagination to establish a connection between Peirce's semiotics and politics. San Juan's arguments are lucid and do not seem to contradict any part of Peirce's philosophical architecture, but he does not manage to fill the immense gap that divides Peirce's preoccupations from the affairs of the world. Just think that among the crates of manuscripts he left, nobody could find a scrap of paper on which he mentioned the American civil war, which broke out when he was twenty-two. Also, San Juan's "pragmaticist aesthetics" considerations that close the essay gave me a similar

but fainter feeling of surprise. Peirce hardly ever abandoned his mathematical, logical and scientific mind. Although he was fond of the term "esthetic," he used it primarily as a logical category. Admittedly, it takes less of a stretch to have semiotics cover literature and the arts; in fact, it is not a coincidence that this final part of the essay includes many more references to other authors than the political portions.

A final consequence of the fact that Peirce's primary literature is a largely unexplored archipelago is the growing academic industry that made it its business to explore it. It would be interesting to trace back the prevailing interpretations of Peirce that this academic tribe have produced since—say—the mid–1950s, when a sustained interest first appeared. I suspect one could see a high degree of correspondence between the aspects of Peirce's multifarious interests that were made to stand out and the dominant cultural and intellectual preoccupations of the time. The preferred viewpoint on Peirce at any one time is determined by the prevailing intellectual winds. The latest turn of the weathervane points to a growing critique of deconstruction and, more generally, post–structuralism. Mounting the attack from semiotic quarters is a good idea, because Derrida and his followers selected few convenient portions of Peirce's *opus* to justify an interpretation that would include him into their genealogy—and their tricks are neatly revealed by San Juan. In effect, his essay is interesting above all in this respect. It is clear, as from the title, that the main polemical drive is directed against post–structuralist attempts to present Peirce as an idealist philosopher.

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One aspect in San Juan's essay which I found outdated is his treatment of the question whether Peirce's philosophy has an overall realist or nominalist tint. Again, it is not difficult to find passages in Peirce's writings to justify contrasting views. Sometimes he calls himself a Kantian, sometimes an Aristotelian. Sometimes an idealist, sometimes a scholastic realist. In one passage he even conflates the terms. In fact, Peirce struggled with this issue throughout his life. This is what Nathan Houser writes in the introduction to the first volume of the *The Essential Peirce*:

> Probably the most significant development in Peirce's intellectual life was the evolution of his thought from its quasi–nominalist and idealist beginnings to its broadly and strongly realist conclusion. (Introduction xxiv)

The realist debate is perhaps the backbone of Western philosophy since the pre–Socratics, so it is with great trepidation that I add the following sketchy notes. First of all, one should distinguish between nominalism and idealism. One way to do it is to place the two terms in opposition to realism and observe how they behave. The nominalism versus realism opposition can be traced back to Middle–Age philosophical debates; the opposition between idealism and realism is modern. The former was a debate on the reality of universals; the latter is a fully fledged ontological debate whose central question may be "does anything have a reality independent of what we think of it"? Apart from this distinction—which San Juan seems to overlook—the interpretation that I have found most convincing is that Peirce was neither a realist nor a nominalist. The genuinely amazing thing about his philosophy is precisely that it transcends both these dichotomies. I would like to offer a reconstruction of how he does it starting with a short quotation.

> The Final interpretant does not consist in the way in which any mind does act but in the way in which every mind would act. That is, it consists in a truth which might be expressed in a conditional proposition of this type: "If so and so were to happen to any mind this sign would determine that mind to such and such conduct." (*The Collected Papers* 8.315)

This quotation discusses the notion of interpretant, already covered by San Juan. The passage ends with a conditional clause: the sign *would* determine someone's conduct. This means that the final interpretant lives in the conditional future: a permanent would–be whose attainment always lies just ahead. Because the final interpretant is about truth, it can get closer and closer to a true understanding of the sign it interprets like a conic curve approaching its asymptote. This tantalizing march of semiosis towards truth leaves one big question open. What is the status of truth? Is it real or is it a construct whose reality depends on what we make of it?

Let us move from a seeming paradox. Peirce was convinced of the reality of the world. He defined the real as "that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be" (*The Collected Papers* 5.405). You don't start to float in the air just because you believe you can fly (but you can fly in your dreams); if your lover says "I am quitting you," you cannot change her words (but you can make her change her mind); if you write about a talking tree, your tale is real (but the tree is not). On this score, you would call Peirce a realist. On the other hand, he also believed we cannot have direct apperception of anything, whether they be entities in the inner psychical world or in the

outer physical world (see his famous "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed For Man" in *The Collected Papers* 5.231–263; and *The Essential Peirce* 11–27). All that is present to our conscience is present thanks to the mediation of other representations. As a consequence, all that *exists for us* is of the nature of signs. So, you could call Peirce an idealist.

These positions correspond—as I pointed out earlier—to established dichotomies in Western thought: the ontological debate, probably as old as Socrates, between realism and nominalism ("do universals or things have a more real existence?"); and the modern cognitive debate between realism and idealism ("is there a reality apart from its presentation to consciousness?"). Peirce's metaphysics was radically indifferent to these traditional currents of western philosophy. He wrote:

> I have thus developed ... the synechistic philosophy, as applied to mind. I think that ... it carries along with it the following doctrines: first, a logical realism of the most pronounced type; second, objective idealism; third, tychism, with its consequent thorough–going evolutionism. (*The Collected Papers* 6.163)

These words may look paradoxical, but they are not. A difficult exercise is required to grasp their real import: overcoming the dyadic logic that underpins the twin oppositions. Peirce's originality rests on bringing his notions of community and continuity to bear on the ontological debate. In so doing, he could see that truth and reality are inter–dependent, rather than sitting on opposite sides of an argument, and that their foundation is neither objective nor subjective, but supra–subjective. Let us see how this works in detail, beginning with a quotation that will tell us what Peirce meant by the terms "truth" and "reality."

> The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality. (5.407)

In the above quotation, truth stands to reality like sign to object. Let me remind you that for Peirce, it is the object that determines the sign. Therefore, it is not the task of truth to show what is real; it is the goal of reality to produce true signs. At the lowest level of perception, the pen I am holding in my hand is real only insofar as it produces a true perceptual judgment in me; entities that fail to produce true perceptual judgments are not real.

The next question is: what guarantee can I have that the chain of representations that connects the inquiring subject to the world (inner or outer) preserves the truth? The first immediate answer is discouraging because representations must be interpreted and interpretive inference is inherently fallible. To solve this problem, Peirce turned to his notion of community. Let us see a passage that specifies the relation between reality and community:

> The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. (*The Collected Papers* 5.311. Amended following *Writings of Charles S. Peirce* 2:239; and 608)

Seen under a certain light, Peirce's metaphysics resembles his theory of probability. Semiosis and reality converge like the frequency of an event in an ongoing survey and the calculated probability of the same event (see Parker). But it is one thing to toss the coin many times to see how frequently I obtain as many heads as tails; it is another to infer that heads and tails are events of equal probability. The former is a collection of events, a series of existent individuals or seconds; the latter is a concept, a general third. No matter how long the series, it will never cross the categorial line. This is why a true sign, one whose object is a real entity, will always be one step ahead of our empirical investigations. This eventual sign will coincide with the opinion shared by a community of interpreters that is not only indefinitely large but that never knows enough to stop learning something new. A consequence of this state of affairs is that logic and the community principle imply each other. The argument put forward by an individual is *valid* only insofar as it is submitted to the scrutiny of the community of inquirers and finds a lasting consensus, and it will be *true* only if it finds the consensus of an infinite community of inquirers. Thus, semiosis is driven by the certainty of the existence of a real object of inquiry and by the indefinite hope that the community will eventually attain perfect knowledge of it.

One crucial feature of the infinitely large community—as of any infinite collection or series—is that its members are no longer individuals but become parts of a continuum. A continuum is unlike a set in one important sense: it no longer comprises individual members (seconds) but vague possibilities (firsts), while the set itself ceases to be identifiable as an actual object and becomes a general entity or third. Think of the infinite

set as a line and of its non–individual members as points. A line is not actually made of points but of point-places. If you want to "make" individual points at these places you need to disturb its continuity—e.g., by intersecting the line with another line or by branching the line off in two as in the shape of the letter "Y." Also, the places are infinitely small, so in theory you can make an infinite number of points between any two points (see Putnam).

I realize that these are decidedly esoteric ideas, but I will close my notes with an example that can help you visualize them. Imagine a very long train, perhaps a hundred cars long; you can count the cars from first to last. Now imagine an indefinitely long train; you may begin to count the cars one after another but their total number is indefinitely high and you will never manage to reach the last one. Finally, imagine an infinitely long train. According to Peirce's view of infinite series, there would no longer be individual cars. In fact, there would be *possible* cars, and they would become actual and individual cars only thanks to the external intervention of someone or something standing along the railway. These possible cars of an infinitely long train are no longer existent but are nevertheless real. In general, in Peirce's metaphysics the notion of reality is detached from the notion of existence. Events like reading the word 'rabbit' here and now are real and existent; entities like the lexeme /rabbit/ in the English language are not existent but are nevertheless real. Consequently, "all reality [is] something which is constituted by an event indefinitely future" (*The Collected Papers* 5.311)—that is, a would–be (on continuity, see Potter and Shields; Myrvold; and Lane).

NOTES

1 All in–text references use the initials of Peirce's editions appended at the end. In particular, references to the Collected Papers (CP) will be given in the customary two–part number. So, CP 5.1 is from volume 5, paragraph 1.

2 In point of fact, Peirce was born on 10 September 1839 in Cambridge (Mass) to Benjamin and Sarah Hunt (Mills) and died on 19 April 1914 at his farmhouse just north of Milford (Penn) he had called Arisbe.

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APPENDIX

Peirce Primary Literature

Collected Papers (CP)

The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce. 8 vols. Ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1931-1958.

Essential Peirce (EP)

The Essential Peirce, Selected Philosophical Writings (1867-1893). Vol. 1. Ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1992.

The Essential Peirce, Selected Philosophical Writings (1893-1913). Vol. 2. Ed. Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1998.

Essays in the Philosophy of Science (EPS)

Essays in the Philosophy of Science. Ed. Vincent Tomas. NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.

Contributions to "The Nation" (N)

Contributions to "The Nation." Ed. Kenneth Laine and James Edward Cook. Lubbock, TX: Texas Technological UP, 1975-1987.

New Elements of Mathematics (NEM)

The New Elements of Mathematics by Charles S. Peirce. 4 vols. in 5. Ed. Carolyn Eisele. The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1976.

Selected Writings (SW)

Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance). Ed. Philip P. Wiener. First published, *Values in a Universe of Chance*. Doubleday and Company, 1958. Reprinted, NY: Dover, 1966.

Writings (W)

Writings of Charles S. Peirce, A Chronological Edition. 6 vols. Ed. Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana UP, 1981-2000.

CAVEATS ON THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING PEIRCE'S SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATISM

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Abstract
"Caveats" is San Juan's response to "Addendum" in which he praises Stecconi's focus on Peirce's theory of knowledge rather than merely on his linguistic paradigm. San Juan, however, disagrees with Stecconi for "conflating the various pragmatisms into one lump." San Juan prefers to regard Peirce as "a moderate realist" and reiterates the potential relevance of Pierce's semiotics to the global war on terrorism and the Sri Lankan civil war.

Originally drafted as notes for exploratory lectures on Peirce's potential use for literary and cultural studies (presented at St. John's University, University of Texas at San Antonio, and other venues), my paper does not claim to be a comprehensive introduction to its subject. In fact, it is merely a prolegomenon or propaedeutic to Peirce's "pragmaticism." Its original pretext (in the decade after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of "actually existing" communism) was the need to counter not simply the malaise of vulgar deconstruction, but also the phenomenal popularity of Richard Rorty and his brand of neoconservative pragmatism masquerading as chic neoleftism. Rorty's visit to the Philippines and his idolization by Taiwanese colleagues provoked this reaction on my part. Terry Eagleton, among others, has already exposed Rorty's neoliberal masquerade—"a brand of neo-Sophism for which, since all conventions are arbitrary anyway, one might as well conform to those of the Free World" (27). This "Free World" is what we know today as Bush's bloody rampage in Iraq and Afghanistan (to cite only two locales), and his client Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's extrajudicial killings and abductions of over a thousand civil-society activists.

And so not only does a certain kind of neoliberal triumphalism today deploy the doctrines of "pragmatism" as a theoretical alibi if not evangelical weapon, but its invocation of Peirce, via William James and John Dewey, serves to muddle the history of ideas and their historical-political genealogy. My interest in Peirce therefore draws from this historical context and its ethico-political imperatives. It is not simply an academic exercise; rather, it is an attempt to discover if there is any possibility—"potential" is

Peirce's more appropriate rubric—for harnessing it as an "antecedent" to a "consequent." For there is certainly a world of difference between Peirce's "pragmaticism," based on a singular kind of scholastic realism and William James's radical empiricism with its subjectivist/idealist implications. Peirce would also distance himself from John Dewey's instrumentalism geared to that kind of utilitarian, value-free application so sharply criticized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their numerous treatises, both polemical and scholastic.

A reading of Peirce's Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism of 1903 easily bears this out, as well as Nathan Houser's lucid exposition of Peirce's "pragmatism" in the introduction to *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 2 of the Peirce Edition Project. The pathbreaking "Letters to Lady Welby" (circa 1909-11) on semiotics also contain James's dictum that "Realism is right and Nominalism is wrong" (*Selected Writings* 419). It might be useful to point out that despite attempts to demarcate the evolutionary stages of Peirce's thought (see Manley Thompson's *The Pragmatic Philosophy of C. S. Peirce*), the tendency to confound Pierce with James/Dewey's "pragmatism" continues. One stark example is the chapter on pragmatism in Abraham Kaplan's popular *The New World of Philosophy*. Meanwhile, the British W. B. Gallie and the American Cornel West, among others, have belabored the difference, while the German academics (Jurgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel) have tried to link Peirce with Kant and Hegel in accord with the crisis of the European Enlightenment in the aftermath of World War II. Clearly, the understanding and evaluation of Peirce's achievement cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical vicissitudes of theory and the cultural sciences, as well as from the historical geneaology and fate of the institutions and communities surrounding these disciplines.

From this perspective, Ubaldo Stecconi is to be congratulated for focusing on Peirce's semiotics not simply as a linguicentric paradigm, but as a theory of knowledge and its larger implications. Unfortunately, following the still dominant tradition, he falls into the common error of conflating the various pragmatisms into one lump. For example, he contends that, for Peirce, "forming deliberate habits is due to thought and to thought alone." This is a common mistake of many and often arises from a highly biased selection of quotations from the massive archive of texts that Peirce produced without distinguishing the historical-theoretical stages of his philosophical evolution and the nuances he introduced as he negotiated the debates between realists and nominalists through several decades of intellectual peregrination.

On this point, I disagree with Stecconi that "Peirce was neither a realist nor a nominalist." I prefer to side with Edward C. Moore's position, cogently argued in his

"Introduction" to Peirce's *The Essential Writings*, that Pierce was indeed a moderate realist. That is to say, the central doctrine of Peirce's metaphysics inhered in the belief that there are "real generals." Moore is correct in choosing this passage as epitomizing Peirce's ultimate view vis-à-vis nominalists, logical empiricists/Vienna-school positivists, and freewheeling deconstructionists:

> No collection of facts can constitute a law; for the law goes beyond any accomplished facts and determines how facts that *may be*, but all of which never can have happened, shall be characterized. There is no objection to saying that a law is a general fact, provided that it be understood that the general has an admixture of potentiality, so that no congeries of actions here and now can ever make a general fact. (1.420; see also *The Collected Papers* 25)

Given this fundamental schism in our view of Peirce's thought, it seems pointless to carry on the argument further. It also explains why I do not subscribe to Stecconi's supposition that Peirce used "esthetic" primarily "as a logical category." While the philosopher Richard Shusterman, the leading exponent of Deweyan-style aesthetics, will certainly demur from Stecconi's reductive view, I prefer to join Floyd Merrell, John Sheriff, Anne Freadman and others who uphold Peirce's thinking as a more totalizing epistemology or metaphysics, if you like, that can applied to diverse regions of human thought and practice. This explains the orientation and modest intent of my essay.

Indeed, Peirce relaxed the traditionally rigid distinction between theory and practice, as Freadman points out in her insightful commentary on Peirce's theory of communication. She discovered the following passage from Peirce's hitherto unpublished papers: "An art is, in one sense the practice, and in another, the theory or doctrine of the practice, of any kind of work that is so difficult as to require, for any distinction in it, the devotion of a person's best energies to it for many years" (qtd. in Freadman 273). Peirce's semiotics is part of the architectonics of theory construction. It assumes that the discovery of meaning is a continuous process performed in communities of inquiry, and that "thinking is normative" (Searle 562) with ethical and political ramifications if it aims to be scientific in terms of the fixing and unfixing of belief.

It is definitely wrong to assert, as Stecconi unequivocally does, that Peirce stuck doggedly to a mathematical path. Scientific, yes, if by that we mean adhering to the theory of meaning embodied in Peirce's pragmaticist maxim: "In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception, one should consider what practical consequences

might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception" (*The Collected Papers* 5.9). This follows if, in the process of scientific inquiry, concepts or universals are regarded as real, that is, they have real external counterparts outside of the mind or human consciousness. Peirce's semiotics is a scientific method, as shown by Merrell (see, among his numerous demonstrations of the applicability of Peirce's semiotics to the human and social sciences, his books *Peirce, Signs, and Meaning*, and *Change through Signs of Body, Mind, and Language*), James Hoopes, and especially Peter Wollen (see his *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*). For its application to the social sciences, I recommend Eugene Rochberg-Halton's *Meaning and Modernity*.

Before concluding this brief remark, I would like to focus on the frequent and habitual mistake of confusing Peirce's semiotics (based on the categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness) with Saussurean semiology (based on a binary logic whose ambiguity has made Derrida's career possible, and that of his epigones profitable). Peirce's semiotics cannot be reduced to the dualism of body/mind, as Stecconi does when he states, for example, that "for Peirce, it is the object that determines the sign." In the stages of the semiotic process carefully charted by Merrell which encompass diverse modalities of the interpretant, the production of the sign goes through a long complex and intricate process in which the semiotic "object" is not identical or equivalent to the real "empirical" object. The tripartite relation between sign, semiotic object, and interpretant (not to be confused with the actual interpreter), goes through at least ten processes of abduction and induction, inferences that finally produce the sign. And so it is not the "empirical" object that determines the sign but a process of inferences affected and shaped by contingent contents, pressures and circumstances (see Merrell's *Change*). A perceptual judgment or the "final interpretant" is not the final stage of inference. Rather, it is a hypothesis that is open to test and confirmation, hence Peirce's belief in fallibilism and in the community of inquirers whose experience, induced by the testing of concepts and hypothesis, converge in a knowable notion of truth and of reality.

Stecconi seems aware of this when he alludes to the importance of community, an element in which historical and political factors begin to play. Nor is this community infinite, nor is reality "detached from the notion of existence," for Peirce believes in the interplay of chance (his "tychism" and lawfulness (his "synechism"). Signs (and its various categories and their combinations as icon, index, and symbol) can never be detached from human experience, the mechanics of (to borrow Merrell's classification) feeling, imaging, sensing, and awaring, up to the higher stages of inferring--scheming, impressing-saying,

acknowledging-saying, identifying-saying, perceiving-saying, and realizing (argument/text).

Hoopes is on target when he contends that Peirce's semiotics is a more powerful instrument or methodology than Saussure's when he states that "the meaning of the sign is not necessarily arbitrary but may be as logical as the thought that interprets it…. By explaining how thought is action, Peirce's semiotic makes it possible to understand why thinking, language, and culture are r*eal* historical forces" (12). I think this is a valid formulation because Peirce's architectonic of knowledge-production has a notion of potentiality (Thirdness) that makes actuality (Secondness) and possibility (Firstness) that is able to resolve the many paradoxes, conundrums, and antinomies, both social and individual, that have bedeviled and continue to beset humans from the time tools were invented. And, I need to emphasize, for Peirce language is only one of the tools, not the only equipment or faculty, that distinguish the human community.

As for Peirce's relevance to urgent social issues like the semantics of terrorism (see Herman), I would simply point to his involvement in many socially-determined scientific projects with which he was engaged in his lifetime. In 1904, Peirce held that "thinking is a kind of action and reasoning is a kind of deliberate action" (Hoopes 247). Thought and action, like body and mind, cannot really be separated; thought, for Peirce, is a process of sign interpretation and sign production, a process of intelligence involving institutions (political or cultural) conceived as semiotic syntheses capable of objective verification or falsification. Although not familiar with the topic of political economy (there is no reference to any socialist thinker in the Peircean scholarship), Peirce showed a profound acquaintance with the flaws of classical political economy that Marx and Engels so acutely expounded. Peirce satirically noted the "formula of redemption" of bourgeois economics: "Intelligence in the service of greed ensures the justest prices … [T]he great attention paid to economical questions during our century has induced an exaggeration of the beneficial effects of greed" (*Philosophical Writings* 363).

Given his close friendship to William James, Peirce could not but be influenced by the circle of public intellectuals in New England grappling with collective predicaments, such as the European plunder of Africa, the US colonization of the Philippines, and other global developments. Together with William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, James was active in the anti-imperialist movement. What Peirce's attitude to the French Commune (the major historical event of his European sojourn) was, remains an intriguing topic of investigation, given his contemporary Henry James's response to it in the novel of anarchist manners, *The Princess Casamassima* (1886).

As far as I know, based on the biographical accounts of James Brent, Roberta Kevelson, and others, Peirce was not manifestly active in the now historically precedent-setting Anti-Imperialist League. However, in May 1898, he joked about his cousin's Henry Cabot Lodge's unabashed imperialism; and in 1900, he criticized the imperialist hysteria in syllogistic form: "All men are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No Phillipino [sic] is entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, No Philippino is a man" (Brent 266). To apply Peirce's unique vision of pragmaticism, we may ask: what effects with practical bearings will such a conception of the "Phillipino" engender? My essay on the potential interface between Peirce's semiotics, the global war on terrorism, and the Sri Lankan civil war narrativized in Ondaatje's novel is my rather oblique, succinct and experimental response. A longer and more intensive elaboration of its premises has been deferred in view of the profound political crisis sweeping the world that has engaged, for now at least, the present author's time and energy, negotiating the tortuous passage between the homeland and his diasporic station of exile.

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NEW SCHOLARS FORUM

AMERICA IS IN THE HEART AS A COLONIAL-IMMIGRANT NOVEL ENGAGING THE BILDUNGSROMAN

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Abstract
Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*, the first Filipino American novel, has held a special place as one of the first of Asian American literary writing, but its craft has also been questioned because of the plainness of its language and its repetitious, tortuous plot. Through an evaluation and analysis of the novel as a Bildungsroman, this paper argues that the seeming failure of the plot to provide a coherent narrative of development is in itself the literary manifestation of the frustrating socio-economic realities in which the first Filipinos in America lived. Bulosan's novel is therefore not so much a failed Bildungsroman but a twentieth-century Filipino American engagement of a nineteenth-century form in which the encounter not only uncovers the myth of universality of the form but also asserts the self-representation of the heretofore unrepresented. As such, *America is in the Heart* needs to be read not only as a record of but as an involvement in the Filipino American struggle in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords
Filipino American literature, narrative, postcolonial novel

About the Author
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Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* is both an easy read and a tedious read. On the one hand, the language is very simple, almost childlike. On the other hand, the narrative movement seems repetitious and circular. For example, Allos gets sick four times in the first seven of forty-nine chapters and then falls sick again in Chapter Thirty-One; and in each of these times, someone assists Allos to read books. Part Two is filled with a multitude of farms that Allos works in and leaves. Perhaps, the largest circular movement begins in Chapter Thirteen and ends in the concluding chapter. In Chapter Thirteen, Allos gains his first employment in the United States at an Alaskan cannery and in Chapter Forty-nine, as he ends his story, he is once again on his way to work in Alaska. The circular movements in the narrative could, on the first read, leave the conclusion seemingly unprepared for, and hence rather unsatisfying. Because of this, the final assertion of

assimilation into American Society seems rather abrupt and questionable. However, upon further examination of the novel, an underlying forward movement in the narrative may be gleaned beneath the superficial circular movements. This study seeks to reevaluate the narrative of Bulosan's novel to distinguish the forward movement. Taking the novel's subtitle "A Personal History" as a cue, this study explores the narrative as a *bildungsroman* and examines how the novel both participates in and resists this genre.

The *bildungsroman* includes variances that make it sometimes difficult to judge a novel as either belonging or not to the genre. Bernard Selinger identifies the issue of eventual integration or alienation as one sort of variance of *bildungsroman* novels. Those which conclude with perpetual alienation of the subject may be called *antibildungsroman*, a deliberate attempt to ridicule "the notion that an (essentially alienated) individual could achieve any sense of identity in a society that is no longer meaningful" (Selinger 39-40). Another issue of variance is the centrality of the individual or society in the novel. Selinger notes that there are critics who subscribe to the *bildungsroman* as primarily concerning the individual protagonist's inner life and psychological development while others insist that it is the society rather than the individual that is central; and then there are those who suggest that it is equally about both the individual and the society (40).

Despite these and other variances characterizing the *bildungsroman* and the disagreement of critics arising from them, Selinger notes that it is clear enough that the origin of the genre, the point at which it is recognized to have come to existence, is Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795) and that the point of origin of current criticism and theorization on this genre, whether by agreement or opposition, is Jerome Buckley's 1974 definition in *Seasons of Youth: The "Bildungsroman" from Dickens to Golding*.

Jerome Buckley outlines the general outline of a *bildungsroman* narrative as follows:

> A child of sensibility grows up in the country or in a provincial town, where he finds constraints, social and intellectual, placed upon the free imagination. His family, especially his father, proves doggedly hostile to his creative instincts or flights of fancy, antagonistic to his ambitions, and quite impervious to the new ideas he has gained from unprescribed reading. His first schooling, even if not totally inadequate, may be frustrating insofar as it may suggest options not available to him in his present setting. He therefore, sometimes at a quite early age, leaves the repressive atmosphere of home (and also the relative innocence), to make his way independently in the city (in the English novels, usually London). There his real "education" begins, not only his preparations for a career but also—and often more

> importantly – his direct experience of urban life. The latter involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values. By the time he has decided, after painful soul-searching, the sort of accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make, he has left his adolescence behind and entered upon his maturity. His initiation complete, he may then visit his old home, to demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice. (17-8)

Buckley adds that "the growing child as he appears in these novels more often than not will be orphaned or at least fatherles" (19). Buckley recognizes that not every *bildungsroman* novel must have all the elements, but he insists that none "ignores more than two or three of the principal elements—childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (18).

Most of these elements are contained in *America is in the Heart*. The first part of the novel is devoted to the childhood of Allos. It narrates the departure of Allos and his brothers—Leon, Luciano, Amado, and Macario—from their hometown to big cities and, eventually for three of these brothers, to America. Although accomplished, though in a fragmented and unsystematic manner, Allos educates himself through reading until he is surprises himself when he realizes that he can write. The experience of alienation is also markedly present in Allos's life both in the Philippines and in the United States. In the United States, Allos discovers and embraces a socialist philosophy and then eventually finds his way to a vocation in writing. As a narrative of the development of a writer, *America is in the Heart* can in fact be identified as a specific kind of *bildungsroman* called the *kűnstlerroman*, or "a tale of the orientation of an artist" (Buckley 13).

Lisa Lowe concedes that Bulosan's novel may be read as a *bildungsroman* "to the degree that it narrates the protagonist's development from the uncertainty, locality, and impotence of 'youth' to the definition, mobility, and potency of 'maturity'" (45). Lowe contends that such a reading privileges "a telos of development that closes off the most interesting conflicts and indeterminacies in the text" and reduces the novel to an approximation, a low-rate mimicry of a nineteenth-century European genre. Lowe suggests that the novel could instead be read in a manner that privileges the novel's discontinuities with the genre, thereby revealing how it questions the notions of "development, synthesis, and identity" (45).

Lowe cites Allos's remembrance of his brother's speech to show that the novel

presents two opposing visions of America: "the national fiction of democratic nation-state without sorrow or suffering, and a nation whose members barely survive owing to exclusion from the nation-state" (47). Lowe sees the unevenness of American society suggested in the speech as being maintained in the end:

> The novel ends with the repetition of yet another departure and relocation, framed as symptomatic of a continuing inequality between powerful agribusiness capital and immigrant labor, rather than with settlement, permanence, or resolution. It is an uneven, divided notion of America that concludes the novel, rather than a naturalized unification of those unevennesses and divisions. Thus, America is in the Heart does not 'develop' the narrating subject's identification with a uniform American nation. (47)

By emphasizing the repetition of relocation and continuing inequality, Lowe's reading denies a successful assimilation of the protagonist to the American nation. The reading casts the novel's conclusion under a dim light but only accounts for the first section of the concluding chapter. The ending Lowe gives appears quite contrary to the brightness of the actual last sentences of the novel:

> I glanced out of the window again to look at the broad land I had dreamed so much about, only to discover with astonishment that the American earth was like a huge heart unfolding warmly to receive me. I felt it spreading through my being, warming me with its glowing reality. It came to me that no man—no one at all—could destroy my faith in America again. It was something that had grown out of my defeats and successes, something shaped by my struggles for a place in this vast land, digging my hands into the rich soil here and there, catching a freight to the north and to the south, seeking free meals in dingy gambling houses, reading a book that opened up worlds of heroic thoughts. It was something that grew out of the sacrifices and loneliness of my friends, of my brothers in America and my family in the Philippines—something that grew out of our desire to know America, and to become a part of her great tradition, and to contribute something toward her final fulfillment. I knew that no man could destroy my faith in America that had sprung from all our hopes and aspirations, ever. (327)

These last sentences are filled with such optimism that it cannot be so easily reconciled with Lowe's reading. Is it possible to account for this optimistic conclusion without refuting Lowe's reading that keeps the conflicts and indeterminacies present?

Such a self-contradicting concluding chapter is but one of the many idiosyncracies of Bulosan's novel. A consideration of those other unusual if not disturbing features of the novel may well lead to a fuller understanding of the conclusion. Perhaps the first notable disturbing feature of the novel is the dual voices of the narrator. The first voice is a childlike voice that tells the personal history of Allos. The second voice is an almost academic voice providing historical information and social analyses of the society the protagonist lives in. The second voice intervenes infrequently, though extensively in a few occasions, and comes in when the narrator wants to explain the social background of personal events. As such, the second voice is present *to set the stage*, increasing the significance of the personal events.

However, the society that the second voice textually represents increasingly becomes more than just a social setting. In Chapter Eight, Allos says,

> But the revolt at Tayug made me aware of the circumscribed life of the peasants through my brother Luciano, who explained its significance to me. I was determined to leave that environment and all its crushing forces, and if I were successful in escaping unscathed, I would go back someday to understand what it meant to be born of the peasantry. I would go back because I was a part of it, because I could not really escape from it no matter where I went or what became of me. I would go back to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life. (62)

Society, or the environment as Allos calls it, with all its "crushing forces," is itself that which attacks Allos and his family and that which makes his life miserable. It is the society, and in the case of the quotation above the Philippine colonial society, that the protagonist desires to escape from. The society thus gains a central presence in the novel as the explicit antagonist. The main conflict of the novel is between Allos and the Philippine colonial society; then, later, the American exclusionist society. If *bildungsroman* novels vary according to the centrality of the individual psychological on the one extreme and the social structural on the other, Bulosan's novel clearly places both at its center with each acting as the protagonist and the antagonist.

Essentially related to the dual voices in Bulosan's novel is its most annoying feature of being repetitious. Martin Joseph Ponce describes the text's mobility narrative as "disorganized and 'unmappable'" (53) which has prompted Sau-ling Wong to ask, "why …

it had kept a place of honor in the Asian American canon" (136). Indeed the novel is riddled with an endless list of forced relocations, identical troublesome gambling houses, cycles of temporary economic success followed by failure, similar tragic miscegenous marriages, undifferentiable incidents of beatings and police abuse, recurrent sickness, and untraceable meetings and separations of Allos and his brothers.

The multiple repetitions of incidents give the impression of a circular narrative movement that confuses and tires the reader. This feature of the novel can easily be mistaken as evidence for questioning its aesthetic quality. However, another salient feature of the novel is its extreme subtlety. A clear example of this extreme subtlety is the story of Mary. After meeting Mary on the bus, Allos takes her to their apartment where she does housework for their house companions. The narrator then says,

> And then my brother Amado, who had not worked as he had promised … began bringing suspicious characters into the apartment. Mary was still with us, but she withdrew into her room. Then one day she disappeared without a word of farewell. When I came upon her months later … she clutched me and wept. (303)

Out of these two sentences of seemingly unrelated events, the narrator suggests in extreme subtlety how Mary was prostituted by Amado, the fact of which is confirmed only by the word "purity" in the succeeding sentence: "The whole world could not contain my thoughts and emotions, losing one so delicate and molded into purity out of our hope for a better America" (303).

It is with special attention to Bulosan's extreme subtlety that the circular narrative movement must be interpreted. Bulosan gives sufficient clues on how to interpret the circular feature of his narrative. In the already quoted passage from Chapter Eight, he says that he would go back to his hometown eventually "to give significance to all that was starved and thwarted in my life" (62). In Chapter Thirty-eight, speaking of the men in the labor movement, Allos says, "It was comforting to know that these men too were stirred by the social strangulation of our people" (169). Then, speaking of Nick who has been caring for him in his sickness, he says in Chapter Forty-four, "But he knew too that it was not only the disease that was weakening me, but also the black frustration that wrapped my life" (299). Through these words and through the circular narrative movement, Bulosan characterizes Allos's relationship with society as an experience of being thwarted and strangled, a black frustration that wrapped his life. All his efforts to rise above poverty, to gain knowledge, and to have human affection are foiled by society's forces. In colonial

Philippines, the courts, the middle class, absentee landlordism, the church, and even the public school system that promised emancipation, all conspire to keep him and his family confined to peasant life even as they keep on moving from Mangusmana to Binalonan, to various nearby towns, to Baguio and abroad. In exclusionist America, the cops, the farmers, the anti-miscegenation laws, the civil service, the women, but also the Chinese, the veteran, opportunistic Filipinos, and the criminal underworld, all conspire to keep him and his fellow immigrant workers down. Unable to move up, Allos and his people move around in circles on the same plane. Thus the circularity of the narrative movement must be interpreted as both metaphor and a realist narrative description of the plight of the colonial peasant and the immigrant worker in America.

While the circular narrative movement underscores society's oppression, it also reveals the perseverance of the desire of Allos and his people for a better life and their determination to take action to improve their lot. It is their unending desire for upward movement that keeps them trying and that keeps the narrative moving in circles. The circular narrative movement is therefore a trope for both social immobility and the enduring desire for social transformation.

Furthermore, the colonial, class and racial struggles Allos faces informs the *bildungsroman* thematics of the novel. The same social forces perpetrating social immobility prevent Allos from journeying into his manhood. In Chapter Nine, Allos makes the conventional departure of the *bildungsroman*. "I am leaving now, Father," he says one day (63). And though his parents try to hold him back because he is too young, he goes to Baguio. In Baguio, he meets Miss Mary Strandon, a librarian, for whom he works as a houseboy and through whom he gains access to books. A neighbor also begins to teach him English. After a couple of years, he makes the *bildungsroman*esque return to his hometown and declares "I had come back to manhood, here in my native village" (76). Or so he thought, for soon enough he is running away from Mangusmana again, for fear of getting prematurely marred to a girl he danced with. Eventually, it becomes clear to Allos that neither a better station in life nor manhood are accessible to him in colonial Philippines and so he leaves for the United States.

According to Jerome Buckley's master narrative of a *bildungsroman*, there should be "at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, [that will demand] that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values" (18). This element of the *bildungsroman* is perhaps the most aberrant in Bulosan's novel. Although there is a debasing sexual encounter with a prostitute in Santa Maria, there seems to be no exalting sexual encounter or love affair that eventually leads Allos to manhood. It is not because

Allos is never attracted to women, nor is it because he does not fall in love. He stares at the film director's wife's naked body (141), smells the sweetness of Miriam (213), goes on a drinking binge because of Miriam's death (219), feels a slight tug in his heart for Dora (224), sympathizes with Alice Odell (230), writes vehement letters to Eileen Odell (235), begins to touch Teresa's face (250), and lights a match in the dark to look at Mary's face (301). But Allos never reports having a relationship with any of these white women. Instead, he makes himself sexually harmless to them, assuming the role of a child or a pet for them.

The white women themselves infantilize him. Miriam explains what she is doing with Allos in these words, "I would be happier if I had something to care for—even if it were only a dog or a cat. But it doesn't really matter which it is: a dog or a cat" (212). Eventually, it becomes Allos. The Odell sisters do the same. They provide for his education through books and take care of him in his sickness. Mary keeps house for him. Thus, through an infantilizing process the white women and Allos himself are mutually complicit with what David Eng calls the racial castration of Asian Americans in which associations between sexual and racial difference are fossilized so that to be Asian American means to be sexually castrated (1-2). The curious thing about Allos is that while his brothers and other immigrant acquaintances still go after white women despite the punishment many of them have suffered from white men, Allos very willingly submits to the prohibition.

That Allos's castration is not only socially enforced but also self-imposed is clearer in his relations to non-white women. While there may be no social sanctions in relating with non-white women, Allos still refuses to get involved with them. He runs away from Mangusmana when the girl he danced with comes to his house demanding marriage. In Lingayen, he runs away from the boarding house after he brings a baby he found in the schoolyard to his landlady. His reason for the self-castration is explained in Chapter Twelve where he says,

> I went to Binalonan to say good-bye to Luciano. His wife had just given birth to another baby. I knew that he would have a child every year. I knew that in ten years he would be so burdened with responsibilities that he would want to lie down and die. I was glad that I was free from the life he was living. When I had finally settled myself in the bus, I looked down and saw my brother's pitiful eyes. (89)

Allos thus associates having a wife and children with the assurance of a miserable life. He suggests the same sentiments about having a family and its attendant poverty when he waves goodbye to Leon on the way to Manila. In Allos's mind, the woman is a

figure of entrapment, entrapment in the social forces that have kept him and his family in their peasant existence. Allos's castration was therefore self-imposed, a defense against the social forces that meant to oppress him whether as a peasant in colonial Philippines or as an immigrant worker in exclusionist America.

Because Allos's sexual maturation process has been subsumed in his conflict with society, his story as a *bildungsroman* takes an aberrant route that could very well dispel the claim that his story belongs to the genre at all. Instead of a sexual conquest, Allos embarks on a social conquest. He begins in Part Three of the novel by organizing unions. Eventually, his social conquest takes the form of writing. His sexual passage is displaced onto an authorial passage. Thus, after Miriam, Allos's attractions are displaced onto writing. He says about Dora Travers:

> Dora sat in a corner, her back to the wall. In a little while she fell sound asleep. I felt a slight tug at my heart. I watched her still face…. The next morning I sat in my brother's room and started to write a poem, remembering Dora Travers and how she slept…. I was glad. I felt inspired. Yes, there was music in me, and it was stirring to be born. I wrote far into the night, subsisting on coffee and bread. I did not stop to analyse why my thoughts and feelings found expression in poetry. It was enough that I was creating … I wrote fifteen poems in one sitting … Then I knew surely that I had become a new man. I could fight the world now with my mind, not merely my hands. My weapon could not be taken away from me anymore. I had an even chance to survive the brutalities around me. (224)

Allos's attraction to Dora Travers thus precipitates his writing by which he experiences his fecundity and by which he could fight society. His writing, he says *makes him a new man*.

After Dora leaves for Russia and Allos is forcibly confined in the county hospital, he writes about Eileen his regular visitor,

> I created for myself an illusion of understanding with Eileen, and in consequence, I yearned for her and the world she represented, the water rushed down the eaves calling her name. I told her these things in poems and my mind became afire … When I became restless, I wrote to her. Every day the words poured out of my pen. (235)

The very displacement of Allos's sexual desire thus moves him into writing; and it is in that writing that he finds the weapon with which to fight the brutalities of society.

Accompanying Allos's writing is his reading spree. With the help of Eileen and others, he reads extensively trying to understand people, societies, and the world.

His reading and writing become his weapon, his way of meeting the world head on. Thus he writes,

> I became fascinated by three young American writers…. I was irresistibly drawn by their contemporaneousness, their realism and youth. In Fast, I caught a glimpse of the mainsprings of American democracy in the armies of George Washington; but in Stuart, I felt the quality and depth of men's lives in their attachment to each other and to the common earth that contains them. I felt a kinship with Shaw, whose bitterness and oblique humor are traceable to a feeling of isolation in a society where he is an unwilling heir to bourgeois taste and prejudice.
>
> I was intellectually stimulated again—and I wanted to discuss problems which had been bothering me … I felt like striking my invisible foe. Then I began to write. (305)

Allos thus began to write. At first, magazines in Manila took notice of him and he starts publishing there. He feels that "the time had come … for [him] to utilize [his] experiences in written form. [He] had something to live for now, and to fight the world with; and [he] was no longer afraid of the past" (306). Soon after, Allos gets his first book published. It would have been a fine mark of his final arrival to manhood if not for Amado's girl who starts tearing it up. But Amado does give the final recognition of Allos arrival. He grabs the book from the girl and hits her for tearing it up; and, in his farewell letter, he recognizes that Allos's volume will contribute something to the world and that, although he doesn't understand all that Allos is doing, he knows that it is for the good of all.

Thus, through Allos's reading and writing, the society that was master to Allos is now being mastered by Allos. Through his reading, Allos masters the society, and through his writing, Allos acts to change that society. This comes about only by his perseverance through all the brutalities that society had set on him and through all those years that society made him go around in circles. This is the "something" that grew out of his difficulties. As Allos returns to Alaska at the end of the novel, he is very much aware that society had yet to be transformed; but he is now armed to fight for that transformation.

The novel thus ends with all the indeterminacies and discontinuities Lowe laments are smoothed over by a *bildungsroman* reading, and yet a development has indeed occurred in Allos, hence the optimistic ending. The conclusion is an optimistic hope, not so much celebrating America as it is, but its promise which has yet to come to "final fulfillment" (327).

In its participation in the *bildungsroman* genre, Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* almost faithfully follows Buckley's suggested master narrative of the genre. However, in its discontinuities with that master narrative, namely the necessity of displacement of Allos's sexual desire, Bulosan's novel deftly distinguishes the social forces that make it impossible for a colonial-immigrant subject's story to be told faithfully following a nineteenth-century bourgeois literary form. This necessary aberration of Bulosan's *bildungsroman* exposes the fact that the literary form itself is political. It unmasks the *bildungsroman*'s valuation of "development, synthesis, and identity" (Lowe 45) as complicit with society's tendency towards uniformity and conformity. Finally, Bulosan's novel requires a reconfiguration of the genre for it concludes with neither assimilation of the *bildungsroman* nor complete alienation of the *antibildungsroman*. Rather, it concludes with engagement in which the protagonist self-consciously stands in, and at the same time stands against, society. As Bulosan's protagonist engages American society's illusion of inclusion, his novel engages the *bildungsroman* genre's illusion of final conclusion and completion.

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KOLUM KRITIKA

FUNGIBILITY, *DEAD SOULS*, AND FILIPINO OCWs

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Abstract
This self-reflective essay investigates the unimportance of the individual in a capitalist economy. Drawing from his working experience in investment banking, the author recognizes that individuals are not recognized as unique persons but are, instead, absorbed into a system that is more concerned with trade and profit. This reflection informs his reading of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*: the transaction of buying and selling souls and the realization of individuality. His reading then brings Ocampo Reyes to the final reflection that it is all too common to treat Filipino overseas contract workers (OCWs) as fungible objects lacking individuality.

About the Author
José Edmundo Ocampo Reyes holds degrees from Ateneo de Manila University and Columbia University. He was featured in the most recent New Writers issue of *The Hudson Review*, and his poems and translations appear or are forthcoming in *American Literary Review, Caracoa, Circumference, Michigan Quarterly Review, Philippine Studies, Pleiades, Poetry International, Poetry Daily, Rattle,* and other Philippine and US journals and anthologies. A former fellow at the National Writers Workshop at Dumaguete City, he is the recipient of the Der-Hovanessian Translation Prize. "Fungibility, Dead Souls, and OCWs" won First Prize for Essay in the 2006 Don Carlos Memorial Awards for Literature.

When I first heard the word *fungible*, brought up during a conversation on bearer bonds about a decade ago, I immediately fell in love with its music, which added a few light notes to what had previously been a monotonous day. Fun' jə bəl: one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, collectively forming a dactyl; three short yet gentle vowels; that distinctive *j* sound in the middle, technically called the voiced postalveolar affricate. Despite the fact that I'd never encountered the word before and was just starting to decipher its meaning through context, there was something familiar about it, perhaps its sonic proximity to the more commonplace *tangible.* Because of its sound, I began to associate it with the fuzz of a peach, the shushing waves of an ocean. My mind's tongue savored its delicious syllables. I soon discovered, however, that its distinctiveness belies its denotation, which privileges similarity over uniqueness.

John Austin, in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (published posthumously in 1879), contrasts things that aren't fungible with things that are:

> When a thing which is the subject of an obligation...must be delivered in specie, the thing is not fungible, i.e. that very thing, and not another thing of the same or another class in lieu of it must be delivered. Where the subject of the obligation is a thing of a given class, the thing is said to be fungible, i.e. the delivery of any object which answers to the generic description will satisfy the terms of the obligation.

The key phrase is "which answers to the generic description." If an obligation demands delivery of a unique object, for instance, an Amorsolo painting purchased by a museum, that object is not fungible; no other painting in the world, not even another Amorsolo, will satisfy the obligation. But in the case of fungible objects, or fungibles, the unique characteristics that distinguish a thing from other members of its given class are deemed irrelevant, as long as the terms of the underlying obligation are satisfied. If, for instance, a museum orders 1,000 reproductions of that Amorsolo painting from a printer, it doesn't matter whether he produces them all himself or has to subcontract a fraction of the order, as long as he delivers 1,000 prints that meet the specifications (paper stock, print quality, glossiness, etc.) that had previously been agreed upon.

Though the word is, strictly speaking, a legal term, one we do not normally encounter in everyday situations,[1] we deal with fungibles every day. Purchasing virtually any commodity, such as orange juice, jeans, chicken, gasoline—all of which are fungible—we take out bills, likewise fungible, from our wallets. We do not care, for instance, whether the specific amount of gasoline we purchase for our fungible Toyota Corolla has been drilled from Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Alaska, or Kuwait. Similarly, while each bill technically has a unique serial number, a gas station attendant will not care whether the violet hundred-peso bill we pay him with has serial number YJ179848 or AQ452974. During its journey from printer to consumer, did the bill pass through the hands of a gambler who lost everything one night playing mahjong, or the trembling hands of a college freshman who used it to purchase movie tickets during a first date? None of these particulars is of consequence to the buyer, to the seller. What matters is that the gasoline meets certain chemical specifications, the bill is genuine, and the transaction marginally increases the oil company's bottom line.

My first encounter with the word *fungible* occurred when I worked as a trader in a bank's treasury. Being a trader is all about routines, which tend to give each day, however different its particulars from those of other days, a certain regularity, the way templates give documents the same look regardless of content. Every morning I'd drive from my home in Quezon City to the office in Makati, which took an hour even though the distance

was only about twelve kilometers. Even though no two trips were alike—the cars traveling alongside me were always different, I might opt to drive on different lanes on different days, and potholes I may have hit one day were avoided the next day—pace Heraclitus, I felt like I was making the same trip every day. No matter which route I took, whether I drove along Ortigas then turned right on EDSA, or took the back roads of Little Baguio and entered the Makati Business District through Buendia Avenue, I would inevitably hit traffic. Sometimes I'd wind up alongside a bus whose passengers would either be asleep, heads leaning against the windows; or staring blankly into space. But before I could I ponder the sadness of it all, the car in front of me would inch forward, and I'd have to step on the gas or else risk falling behind someone intent on cutting in. As I crawled along with the traffic, the cars of different makes, models, and colors would morph into one blaring, suffocating mass.

Upon my arrival at the office I'd skim through the top stories in Bloomberg and Telerate, both trading systems, and the business dailies, to familiarize myself with what had happened in London and New York. I needed to know, among other things, every interest rate hike or cut by the Federal Reserve, where the long bond[2] was trading, and how Philippine assets fared overnight, in preparation for the morning briefing, during which we determined a trading strategy for the day. Trading would begin soon afterwards, at the same time each day. We would call up our counterparties, that is, competing banks, to check their prices for bonds, loans, deposits and currencies, and they would call us to do the same. Sometimes we would have an axe to grind; we'd aggressively bid for securities or offer them cheaply. Other times we would simply let other banks make the first move in order to get a better sense of their positions. Small talk during such phone conversations, particularly during hectic days, would be kept to a minimum; the only relevant details in our conversations were asset names and asset prices. We would write trade tickets and verify trade confirmations sent by other banks. We frequently updated our spreadsheets. All the while, we would keep our eyes on the headlines, index levels and stock prices that flashed on our television and computer screens, making sure that we were aware of any potential market-moving event—a rate hike by another country's Central Bank, a large company declaring bankruptcy, a head of state declaring currency controls—as soon as it became news, so that we could act accordingly.

Around noontime, things generally quieted down for a few hours, until the London market opened, when a slew of European counterparties would come online, and trading would resume. It was only after we were able to transfer our positions to our New York office at 8:00 or 9:00 P.M. that we were able to go home, unless we were scheduled to meet

a client or broker for drinks. By the end of the day, after the dust cleared, we would have hopefully accumulated a profit, bringing us closer to our annual budget. The next day, it was more of the same.

What struck me about the years I worked as a trader was the way fungibility pervaded my world. "What's your offer for Philippine Par Bonds? 72-5/8? Okay, I lift you for two million." It was the bank and its creditworthiness that mattered, not the person on the other end of the line. It didn't matter whether he was having a bad day, or whether you were once classmates. There was also no guarantee that some other bank wouldn't pirate him (or you for that matter) the next day, or that he'd be promoted to treasurer while another person took over the trading duties. That person may as well have been as fungible as the Par Bonds you were purchasing from him because you had someone on the other line willing to buy them at 73 cents on the dollar, thereby completing the arbitrage, or risk-free transaction. Unless the bank went into default, it would still be your counterparty the following day.

Meanwhile computers would keep track of the fungible credits and debits to our cash and asset accounts, while somewhere in a vault stacks of fungible bonds I had never seen lay gathering dust until someone demanded physical delivery of one, a rare occurrence. Even currencies and credit became fungible commodities bought and sold by banks and corporations, speculators and hedgers, part of the trillions of dollars' worth of assets changing hands everywhere and nowhere each day, unbeknownst to the average person on the street.

At the end of the day, we were judged based on the amount of profits we generated for the firm. It didn't matter whether we got there by stratagem, pure luck, or a combination of both. It didn't matter what the underlying assets of our trades were, whether they were sovereign bonds, corporate bonds, or convertible bonds. It didn't matter whether along the way another bank let go of dozens of employees because it found itself on the wrong end of this zero-sum game. We traded, took our profits, then moved on to the next trade. Once a trade was consummated, there was little or no time to ponder specifics. We had a target to meet, and every dollar in profit we accumulated along the way was virtually fungible. Come December, those fungible profits, along with those of other groups around the world, would somehow be absorbed into the consolidated figures of our firm's annual report.

Fungibility, then, is the oil that keeps the innumerable cogs in the great machine of capitalism going. The same force that allowed us to shift millions of dollars instantaneously from one account to the next without having to count each and every bill also allows

manufacturers to mass-produce cars, MP3 players, dolls, and t-shirts without having to scrutinize each item. It allows us to buy our day-to-day groceries without having to go through an auction for each can, box, or fruit. Imagine a world where fungibility did not exist, one in which we would have to deliver a specific bond, pay for a particular stamp with a unique coin. It would be as if we'd never left the world of barter, the time when people would roll massive stone coins to market. All commerce would grind to a halt.

Yet fungibility has a price. In our rush to satisfy the daily obligations of our job, there is a great risk that we will fail to satisfy the more important obligation to take the time to acknowledge the uniqueness of the Other. As the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, quoting a Thai proverb, says, "Life is so short, we must move very slowly." Because of the difficulty of slowing down in the business world, there never was a day during the five years I worked in finance that I didn't dream of leaving it all behind. What I value most about my experience was not the thrill of making a profit, the routine, the fungibility that facilitated our transactions. It was the times when I was able to slow down enough to listen to those I worked and dealt with, and get to know them a little better; when I would have dinner at a former officemate's apartment, discussing anything but work, and watch his sons grow by leaps and bounds; when I discovered a colleague's fascination with the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg; when I watched *King Lear* with another bank's trader at the Fringe Club Theatre in Hong Kong; when late one night a co-worker told me that because of the severity of traffic, he would get home around midnight, then wake up at 5:30 a.m. just to get to the office. During these instances, they became neither colleagues nor competitors, but individuals with their own unique stories.

Unfortunately these were the exceptions, not the rule. Even when an extraordinary event occurred, such as when the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas was forced to devalue the peso in July of 1997, *Buy low, sell high* was still our mantra, our imperative. On that day, phones rang more persistently than usual, salesmen barked orders to traders, who shouted back while shuttling between several tense phone conversations with brokers and other traders. Figures changed furiously on the monitors, and there was even a point when there was no quote for the peso because the BSP stopped making a market on it, forcing banks to guess what its true level was. Fungibility, the same force that facilitated currency transactions for corporations looking to import goods, had also made it easy for speculators to sell pesos and buy dollars with impunity, and forced the BSP and other central banks across the region to jack up interest rates to defend their besieged currencies. I stood in the comfort of an air-conditioned trading room, several stories above the crowds and traffic of Hong Kong, while several hundred kilometers away the peso fell from 26.30 to 32.30,

the first phase of a prolonged devaluation, and most Filipinos went on with their lives, unaware that the next morning they would wake up to an even scarcer world.

II

While *fungible* is not generally used in analyses of literary works, it seems to me particularly appropriate for discussing Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which negotiates (in the dual sense of "to work towards a compromise" and "to navigate") the tension between homogeneity and individuality more successfully than any other work I have encountered. The concept of fungibility, or rather, the desire to make things fungible, is a force that operates relentlessly throughout *Dead Souls*. This force manifests itself most overtly in a series of financial transactions similar to the ones I was involved in during the time I was still a trader; the only difference is that the underlying commodities in the book are souls—that is, Russian serfs—instead of currencies or bonds.

In the book's milieu, the government imposes a tax based on the number of serfs a landowner owns as of the last census. Unfortunately, because it takes years for a new census to be undertaken, landowners whose serfs die or escape soon after would still have to pay taxes on those same serfs until the next census. It is this particular discrepancy between actual and recorded numbers of souls that the main character, Chichikov, perceives as an arbitrage opportunity. Banking on the logical expectation that owners would desire to disencumber themselves from their dead and inutile souls, he tries to transfer as many of their souls to his name as he can in order to use them as collateral for a sizeable mortgage. For his purposes, the souls are fungible. What matters to him is that they are male, deceased (or have run away), and are still under the owner's name as of the most recent census. The serfs' individual histories are initially of little consequence to him, because only the three aforementioned parameters are relevant to the acquisition of the wealth he desires.

For Chichikov, time and secrecy are of the essence. His scheme will only work as long as a new census is not undertaken; at the same time, he cannot let others know of his scheme, since they could report him to the authorities or copy his idea. Like an opportunistic bond trader, he tries to consummate each transaction as efficiently as possible, gravitating toward individuals who would potentially have lost a significant number of serfs to the plague; at the same time, he tries to take advantage of any fortuitous situation he finds himself in. As such, any close examination of the traits of individual serfs runs contrary to his goals, since it will only delay his progress.

In addition to wanting the souls to remain anonymous (literally, "nameless"), he also wants to remain anonymous himself. When we first encounter him, he is described as "a man who, though not handsome, was not ill-favored, not over-fat, and not over-thin … though not over-elderly, he was not over-young."[3] While such a description helps the reader imagine Chichikov's physical appearance, it does little to show his uniqueness as a character; the passage could also describe countless other individuals. Even the narrator seems hesitant to discuss Chichikov's past in any detail until the last chapter of Part I, the only one of the epic's three parts that is extant.

Several events, however, undermine Chichikov's desire for anonymity and expedience. He gets off to a successful start, obtaining souls from the landowner Manilov *gratis*, with virtually no trouble other than having underestimated the distance to his estate. Things, however, go downhill from there. After consummating the deal with Manilov, instead of immediately finding Sobakevitch's estate, the next place on his list, he gets lost in the process and encounters two persons, Korobotchka and Nozdrev. Both meetings turn out to be exasperating for different reasons. Korobotchka turns out to be nosier and more suspicious than Chichikov bargains for. Though he is ultimately successful in obtaining her dead souls, her subsequent inquiries about the going price of such souls are partly responsible for Chichikov's troubles in the town of N. Nozdrev, on the other hand, is incorrigibly deceitful. Chichikov gets nowhere with him, and in fact, has his scheme put in jeopardy when Nozdrev barges into the Governor's ball and starts divulging details about their meeting.

More importantly, these encounters allow readers to learn more about Chichikov. For instance, the narrator's description of Chichikov's relationship with Korobotchka, in contrast to Madam Manilov, warns the reader to suspect Chichikov's motives. He is no longer simply viewed as the charming person whom the townspeople of N. adore, but is now seen as a scheming individual who will put on whatever mask is necessary in order to achieve his goal of accumulating dead souls.

Chichikov's next encounter is with Sobakevitch, who proposes an exorbitant asking price for his souls. Chichikov is astonished by the proposal, to which the landowner responds that his souls are high quality "genuine souls" as reputable as the carts sold by Michiev, an honest wheelwright. But Chichikov doesn't want to hear about Michiev, Stepan, Milushkin, or any of the other souls Sobakevitch describes, since to him all these souls are fungible. He would want nothing more than to quickly agree on a reasonable price with the landowner and leave. The only problem is that Sobakevitch is intent on presenting them not as commodities, but as individuals, albeit to obtain a good price for

himself. They eventually come to an agreement, but Chichikov later cannot help but think about the individual souls, since that was the way they were presented in such intimate detail by Sobakevitch.

For the first time, Chichikov looks at souls, not as a class of objects, but as persons. Though he ultimately asserts their fungibility by pushing through with the transfer of souls to his name, he cannot help but be fascinated by what made each soul unique during his or her lifetime. He imagines the carpenter Probka Stepan. He visualizes his life and sees him walking the roads and making a living.

He then proceeds to imagine what the other muzhiks like Maksim Teliatnikov the shoemaker might have been like while they were still alive. Taking the time to ponder the individual qualities of these souls might detrimental to his purpose, but this could be seen as a victory of uniqueness and particularity over fungibility, if only a temporary one. While Chichikov meditates on the souls, they no longer remain anonymous, but begin to reclaim their names and voices. By the end of Part I, he has departed from N., where people have already started to ask questions, and moves on towards the redemption that Gogol had planned for him but left unfinished.

The financial transactions Chichikov enters into may be central to the text, but these to me are only half of the story. While the souls themselves become a site of relentless struggle between the assertion of individuality and the desire to make things fungible, a similar struggle takes place on the level of the text itself. On the one hand, the narrator himself has a tendency to stereotype, to see people within a certain group as interchangeable, insofar as the members share certain characteristics. He generalizes about a Frenchman or a German Later, in an incident involving Selifan, Chichikov's driver, he takes the opportunity to make a generalization that all Russians will avoid admitting a mistake—even if they know they are in the wrong.

On the other hand, the narrator has an even stronger impulse to assert the uniqueness of people and things, constantly digressing in order to illumine the subject before him. There are plenty of examples of this in the book. An old woman is quickly described during a simple transaction. The old woman bargains over the price of vodka, ensuring her profit while declaring her loss. In the context of *Dead Souls*, the brief glimpse into the character of the old woman at the inn could be viewed as nothing more than an insignificant digression. This passage in no way affects the subsequent plot, and could conceivably be omitted without materially affecting the rest of the book.

What strikes me about this digression, however, is that it foregrounds the individual characteristics of this old woman, giving more weight to these qualities than to whatever

qualities the *class* of old women might have. Rather than become anonymous, like one of the countless dead souls transferred to Chichikov's name, this old woman becomes *metonymous*. That is, her individuality allows her to carve her own niche from within the larger class of old women. Fungibility gives way to individuality.

Such digressions abound in *Dead Souls*. Just as Chichikov repeatedly makes detours in the course of his acquisitions, so too does the narrator relentlessly make detours in what would otherwise be a straightforward narrative. The difference is that in the former case, the detours are an unwelcome distraction for Chichikov. In contrast, the narrator, for the most part, seems genuinely interested in revealing the particular nature of everything he encounters. As a general rule, the narrator feels an urge to give characters voices and to allow the reader to glimpse each one's uniqueness.

The narrator's "passion for circumstantiality" finally motivates him to reveal Chichikov's history to the reader. The main character, who has been the focus thus far, is given even more of a voice than perhaps he himself would have wanted, and the motive for the accumulation of souls is finally known. What is at stake, however, is more than a mortgage: it is the representation (in the dual sense of "depiction" and "act of giving a voice to") of character in the face of unrelenting forces that seek to homogenize, to abstract, and to silence. By showing the many sides of Chichikov's personality and by allowing the reader to glimpse his personal history, the narrator allows him to become a unique character in his own right, not merely another anti-hero from a class of anti-heroes.

Part I of *Dead Souls* ends with an apostrophe to Russia written in a rather high, declamatory language. Russia is asked where it is going? It does not respond because it only exists in the abstract, as an "imagined community" to use the terminology of Benedict Anderson. It has no voice other than the individual voices of its citizens. No author could possibly represent all such voices in any text, but Gogol has done the next best thing. He has provided the reader with Chichikov, Petrushka, Nozdrev, the County Prosecutor, and a handful of memorable individuals who, because of the narrator's relentless "passion for circumstantiality" become metonyms for the Russia he imagines himself addressing. Through the multiplicity of characters in *Dead Souls*, Gogol has shown that in order to depict a people, an author must first depict the uniqueness of its countless citizens, and, in doing so, assert the primacy of individuality over fungibility.

III

I've never set foot in Russia, but the parallels between the nation Gogol depicts and

the Philippines seem to me inescapable. Today's Philippines, much like nineteenth-century century Russia, still finds itself largely an agricultural nation with the majority of the land in the hands of a few wealthy landowners. And though technically the Philippines has no slaves, it is no stranger to indenture. Our people have suffered through hundreds of years of colonialism, resulting in, among other things, the country's persistent indebtedness to foreign countries and institutions, and its place as the largest exporter of labor in the world, exceeding even Mexico. Furthermore, one cannot talk about the export of labor without mentioning overseas contract workers, or OCWs, who, through their billions of dollars' worth of annual remittances, are one of the primary fungible means of sustaining its ailing, dependent economy. If one were to apostrophize and imagine today's Philippines, as Gogol did Russia, one would necessarily have to look beyond its borders and acknowledge these workers toiling in every corner of the globe.

In September of 1996, I was assigned to Hong Kong, where I lived and worked for three-and-a-half years. With its combination of cosmopolitanism, vibrant nightlife, and market-friendly policies, Hong Kong rivals Tokyo as the financial hub of Asia. I was no stranger to that place, having been there several times as a tourist. I had flown into Kai Tak Airport, whose runway was a patch of concrete surrounded by dozens of apartment buildings; any plane would have to bank at a precarious angle on its landing approach, or graze a building. I had walked along Nathan Road, the main thoroughfare on Tsim Shah Tsui, with a perpetual moving crowd of shoppers who bustled in and out of the various establishments. I had eaten at restaurants with roasted chickens, ducks, and slabs of pork hung on display for passersby to see. I had ridden the Star Ferry, which shuttled between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon at a turtle's pace, bobbing on the aquamarine waters of Kowloon Bay. I had watched dolphins and killer whales perform their crowd-pleasing leaps and tricks at Ocean Park. I had gazed upon the city's evening skyline, a rival to Manhattan's, its palette of neon and fluorescent lights spilling onto the shifting water like wanton streaks of paint, while the dark outline of the Peak loomed in the distance. But nothing prepared me for what was to come. This was the first time I would find myself alone, separated from my loved ones for an extended period of time; I could not seek any solace from the crowds of strangers. And while my experience in Manila had already given me a taste of what the international capital markets were like, I was nonetheless amazed to see up close the breathtaking pace and volume of transactions, which dwarfed what I had previously been exposed to.

I deliberately chose to live away from the office in Central, far from the spreadsheets, the never-ending stream of prices, the tense conversations. When I got home, I wanted to

put all thought of positions, profits, and transactions as far from my mind as possible. To get to work, I would commute from my apartment in Ap Lei Chau, an island barely off the southwestern coast of Hong Kong. The span of the bridge connecting both islands was so short that it took me more than a year to figure out I was crossing a channel, not a river. I would generally take the 590 bus, which headed north through the Aberdeen Tunnel into Happy Valley, right alongside the racecourse, then west through Wan Chai and Admiralty districts into Central, where it deposited me underneath Exchange Square. Though the trip typically took me forty minutes, about twice the time it took my officemates to take a cab from the Peak or walk down from Midlevels, riding the bus was infinitely more relaxing than my previous hour-long commute in Manila. Like the bus passengers I had caught glimpses of on EDSA, I would either close my eyes, lean my head against a window, and try to catch a few minutes' worth of sleep in my stiff, upholstered seat; or stare off into the mass of red taxis, buses, and cars in a rush to get to one of the countless towers downtown. Though my day would just be beginning, I would already be thinking of my return home to my apartment, when after a long and tiring day at work, I would look southwards into the moonlit waters, watching the cargo ships traverse the channel that separated Ap Lei Chau from Lamma Island.

Yet on weekends I often chose to head back to the heart of the city, the place I was so desperate to get away from at the end of each weekday. I would have lunch at a Japanese food court at the basement of Pacific Place, or have a Thai, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, or Cajun dinner with friends at a Soho restaurant. I would visit an Impressionist exhibit at the Museum, or attend a Grace Nono concert at the Cultural Center, then walk along the Kowloon waterfront before hailing a cab to go home. I would catch the latest Hollywood blockbuster at the multiplex, or an independent film like Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* at the tiny Cine-Art House in Wan Chai. I would walk through the Hong Kong Botanical Gardens in Admiralty, or browse the books at Swindon in Tsim Sha Tsui, which had the best poetry section in all of Hong Kong.

Sometimes I would even find myself wandering the area near my office in Central on Sundays, noting the slower pace, the softer chatter, the thinner crowds on the walkways and sidewalks. To me there was something comforting about knowing no trades were closed, no phones rang off the hook, and no money changed hands inside the abandoned offices. I would notice the distinct features of each building, which melted into one big gray blur during my daily rush: Jardine House, jokingly dubbed "the House of a Thousand Assholes" by a broker because of its circular windows, the building's most notable feature; the triangular configuration of the Bank of China building, designed by I. M. Pei; the

modernist architecture of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation building, a modular structure of steel, aluminum, and glass designed by Sir Norman Foster; and right beside it, the beige Standard Chartered Bank Building, a narrow finger of concrete topped by a useless block, an attempt to assert superiority over its main rival by having the taller of the two skyscrapers. As I walked alongside these buildings, I would inevitably come across huge throngs of Filipinas, so numerous that entire streets had to be closed to traffic.

Because of its vibrant economy and proximity to the Philippines—a mere hour-and-a-half away by plane—Hong Kong is a natural destination for OCWs. During weekdays I caught sight of them in the midst of all the locals whenever I left the office to buy a packed lunch of soyed chicken, lamb curry, or roast duck. I could tell by their button noses, small build, dark hair, brown skin, and sad eyes that these women were Filipina. During weekdays, they were usually alone or in small groups, but on Sundays, these nannies took over Central, congregating in various locations from the base of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Building to the Star Ferry Terminal to Des Voeux and Queens Roads near the Landmark and Mandarin Oriental, displacing the red taxis and busses that traversed there during the week. Dressed in casual attire, they would huddle in groups on the street, exchange stories, cut or braid each other's hair, and feast on adobo, pansit, Jollibee fried chicken, and steamed rice, while the locals, inured to their presence, walked calmly on towards wherever it was they had to get to.

My knowledge of their circumstances was, and still is, secondhand. They earned a fixed wage set by the Hong Kong government. They got about a week of Christmas vacation. Whatever their job had been in the Philippines—maid, cook, secretary, teacher—it paid a tiny fraction of what they were earning as nannies. Together with other OCWs all over the world, they remitted or made *padala* billions of fungible dollars back home to "satisfy the terms of the obligation" to support their family, their country. Like me, they had left family behind. Unlike me, they had done so more out of necessity than by choice.

Or so I believed. During the countless times I walked past them, I could have chosen to sit down and introduce myself as a fellow Filipino. I could have discovered for myself whether my preconceptions were true or not. I could have stopped looking at them as a collective, stopped hearing the aggregate of their conversations as a single, relentless buzz, and begun to listen to their individual stories. I could have found out what their interests were, what provinces they came from, how long they had been away from home. Instead, I viewed them as being as fungible as Chichikov's dead souls or the Hong Kong Dollar bills I withdrew and spent in my three-and-a-half years of living there. Though I spoke the same language as they did, I was too proud to attempt to bridge the gap between my

circumstances—my education, my economic status, my job—and theirs, and went my separate way.

Contrast these wasted opportunities with a particular encounter, also in the midst of a crowd. One Friday after work, I was to fly home for my birthday. As I had done many times before, I took the Airport Express to Chek Lap Kok Airport in Lantau Island, a trip that lasted around twenty-four minutes. The train arrived on schedule, and I walked across the enormous departure hall with towering glass walls and a high, multi-vaulted steel ceiling—a far cry from the cramped interior of Kai Tak Airport, which had been shut down a few years earlier—and towards immigration. Once the official stamped my passport, I walked over to W. H. Smith to skim through its meager stock of books, typical for an airport bookstore. After a few minutes, I took the escalator down to the shuttle that would take me to my terminal, several hundred meters away.

When I got to my boarding gate, several passengers had already been waiting in their seats, and a queue had already formed. Even though this particular combination of tourists, locals, businesspersons, and children of various nationalities was unique, the crowd might as well have been any other crowd on any other weekend I happened to be flying home. That is, it would have been, had I not noticed a familiar-looking gentleman of Indian descent waiting in line. His dark hair had receded noticeably, though a few stray hairs were visible on his forehead. Behind his glasses was a pair of gentle eyes that seemed trained to observe what others' eyes simply noticed or ignored. His appearance suggested he was comfortable with travel: he wore a dark blue overcoat, black denims, black leather shoes, and had a laptop slung over his shoulders and a leather bag at his feet. Summoning my courage, I went up to him.

"Excuse me, sir, but are you Pico Iyer?" I blurted out. I had been a fan of his ever since I encountered one of his essays in an old issue of *Time* magazine, and had seen his photograph on one of his book jackets.

"Yes, I am," he replied. Though he was visibly surprised, he still managed a hint of a smile.

We spoke all too briefly, because our plane was about to board. He asked if I was involved in writing. I replied that I was, sort of, but that by profession I was an investment banker. I asked a nearby gentleman if he could take our photograph together, and he obliged. Afterwards, Iyer took out his wallet and gave me his card. "This is the first time anyone has come up to me," he said, just as the passengers in front of him started to board.

Perhaps it was because of a pre-established connection to Iyer—my awareness of the unique combination of lyricism, precision, and thoughtfulness that distinguishes his voice

from that of every other writer in the world—that I was able to summon the courage to go up to him. Reading his essays, I was struck by how comfortable he seemed in an ever-shifting, postmodern world, and how he offered perspicacious observations and insights without ever rushing to judgment. He was always high on the list of writers I'd wanted to meet, and this time nothing was at stake other than the potential embarrassment of having mistaken someone else for him.

Yet I, too, had a connection to those nannies I had encountered during my Sunday walks. We were, we *are* Filipinos, looking for a better life than the one our country could provide. This should have been more than enough of a connection. Instead, I was like Chichikov, immersed in my discontent with my job, determined to head off to some other destination, alone.

Looking back on my indifference towards those OCWs, I cannot help but think about the beleaguered country we left behind, which has to cope with countless problems, including natural disasters, huge budget deficits, a stagnant economy, rising population, low productivity, and corruption. Among the loudest responses to these problems are calls for unity, calls to sacrifice our individual dreams for the sake of the common good, calls to halt the dreaded crab mentality. Crowds flock to the street by the thousands or even millions during periods of great dissatisfaction. We organize ourselves into various groups, political parties, and *barkadas*, and lump everyone else into categories (for instance, "Westerners," "leftists," and "politicians") we can conveniently target or blame, even if we cannot possibly have gotten to know every single member of each group. People send emails, text each other and sign pro forma petitions. Those who don't join in are deemed *walang pakisama*, or worse, traitors.

While uniting towards a common goal is important, perhaps that is the easy part. What is difficult and time-consuming is what the documentarian Jonathan Raban calls the imperative to understand the Other: the act of trying to understand the unique subjectivity of each individual, however wide the gaps that separate us. Too often, it seems to me, we are like Chichikov, in a hurry to accumulate as many fungible souls for our various causes, ignoring or rejecting anyone who does not serve our purpose; when we could be like the epic's narrator, who welcomes detours and constantly digresses from the plot at hand in order to discern the peculiarities of the people he encounters.

It is no accident that I use the word *digress*, which comes from the Latin *digredi* ("to go aside, depart"). The word normally suggests a deviation from the topic at hand, but there was once a time when it meant "to transgress." I spent those Sundays refusing to take a detour from my comfort zone and acting as though getting to know a stranger was a sin,

a transgression against my time. I consider this inability to take a risk one of my greatest failures as a writer, a Filipino, a human being.

Let me end with one final encounter, the closest I ever got to glimpsing one of these women's worlds. Riding the 590 bus home one evening, I overheard two OCWs seated nearby conversing in Tagalog as we were winding our way through the streets of Wan Chai. One was visibly burdened, while her companion smiled with a combination of sympathy and firmness. I picked up hints of the former's pregnancy. Then sometime during the conversation, under the glaring streetlights, the latter said, "*Kung gagawin mo ang iniisip ko na gagawin mo, pag-isipan mo nang mabuti at magdasal ka.*" ("If you're going to do what I think you're going to do, first think carefully and pray about it.")

I will never know what happened to the pregnant nanny, whether she decided to carry that child, who may have been a boy or a girl, to term. I will never know whether she is now happily married and at peace with herself. I will never know if she is now back in the Philippines, reunited with her family. I will never know whether she and her companion still talk to one another as they ride the 590 bus along the crowded streets of Hong Kong. I will never know whether I misunderstood the context of that remark to begin with. I will never know.

But at that moment I realized that before me was a unique individual, not some fungible person "answer[ing] to the generic description" of nanny, OCW, or Filipina, who was undergoing an ordeal so terrible it made all my burdens seem petty by comparison.

NOTES

1 According to the website *WordCount* (http://www.wordcount.org), "fungible" is the 66,619th most frequently used word in English out of a database of 86,800, ranking after such words as *fundoplication* (47,085th), *micraster* (56,675th), and *homeotherms* (66,604th), none of which appears in the current edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

2 30-year US treasury bond, a benchmark for long-term asset prices

3 All quotations from *Dead Souls* are taken from the Project Gutenberg translation by D. J. Hogarth (http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1081), which is in the public domain.

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LITERARY SECTION

POEMS

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Lawrence Ypil teaches poetry and writing at the Ateneo de Manila University. Recently, he won first place in the Carlos Palanca Awards for Literature for his poetry collection *The Highest Hiding-Place.* He spends his time between Manila and Cebu.

AT THE PIANO

Wanting to cleave clearly in the mind
the wooden chopping boards of the house
into piano keys,
and the long tables of the dining room
into some imagined concert: *Do you hear it?*
Yes? Do you not since then not realize
this grand scale?

The poor boy is playing a sonata
in his head, yes? *Yes.* *Now.* (Pushed
into agreement as if pushed by birth
into an empty room without choice
and flowers for wallpaper and a mirror
kept blind dark in a drawer)
There was a piano, once, in my head.
And a stage. And the world surprised
by what had been found. Difficult piece:

the left hand flying over the right
and the air-pedal stepped through and clean
to sustain. And all the world standing
behind kitchen counters and the dinner plates
waiting for the imagined overture
to complete its applause:

If only there was no need to explain.
If only the real thing was as clear
and as audible as
once the beautiful music.

*

Brown beaver in a stream
and the grass green

Small girl on a swing
and a bird wing

And because he thinks it's meant to be spring,
he colors the clear edges of all living
things in his piano book—

Where the paw touches sharp the blades
of the green patch and the bare arm
of the blonde girl arcs her slender
reach to the sun. And old Brahms who lifts his hand
in a wave, even if this is meant to be
a slow waltz he's playing, and a packed
piano concert hall he's set in where a bright
blue blazer's not the right suit
for this true master to wear.

This genuine thing:
Every day before the sun rose, I dreamt
the world already in color. Ivy on the old wall
greener by far than any I had seen
the lush trees bending some friends
hiding behind jars, sliding doors
snuck into the empty cabinets of the garage
wanting to be found and:
everyone loved.

Wanting to tell the truth, to play it.
Song remembered from somewhere else
and someone else's mistake:
the bored boy on the waiting couch
knows the girl now playing the piano
has no applause in sight.
The day could be awash with light!

what colors blind him with the waiting *bird on the wing*
wrap his hands with a song *small girl's swing*
fill his eyes while he's playing
a fast loud trick of a trill in his head
in what was said to be "with feeling" *terrible*
terrible thing

*

All encompassing terror of the grand design

I wanted the great concertos, the Bach arias.
I wanted: *Praise be to God*
who fashions with his own hands the universe
and all of creation out of a deep love
for everything without choice.
Without being dramatic.

I wanted the long pause.
I wanted the audience stunned
to tears because: this we have
not heard before in the streets this
song this beautifully done. It moves.
It brings us to the edge of our sight.

I am not the light. I was not even part
of its terms of recovery or perfection.
Joy without end without just reward.

Who has not, faced with a sin,
said: I want to be good?
For he hears even our thoughts.

I wanted that silence.
I wanted the huge applause after the silence.

PORCH

Because it was what we thought
was meant by family: Laughter.
A new house. A party in the garden
where the tables were filled with young faces.

Who did not want this true
and tender accomplishment? This just
reward handed over to the world's honest men,
its citizens. Every house

rested on its joys. So when one of the guests
nudged a glass when she was telling a joke
which fell on the floor and broke,

we laughed. We were accountable
merely for our own mistakes and
committed solely. And everything was
part of the good story, really.

How could we not love what it cost?
Crack on the marble floor just set,
dent on a polished
kitchen door. A small window
overlooks the children, one nimble,
one frail, balancing on the far
edge of the porch.

LITERARY SECTION

WRITING FICTION: IMAGINATION, HISTORY, AND VOICE IN SINGAPORE FICTION

Suchen Christine Lim
Singapore

About the Author

Suchen Christine Lim is the prize-winning author of *Fistful of Colours,* which was awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. Her fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth,* was shortlisted for the same prize in 2004. *The Amah: A Portrait in Black and White,* a co-authored play, was awarded the Short Play Merit Prize in 1989. Her other novels are *Ricebowl* and *Gift from the Gods*. Her novels are used as texts in literature programs in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and the US.

She has also published short stories and children's stories. Her latest publication is a non-fiction book, *Stories of the Overseas Chinese*. Currently she is putting together her first collection of short stories and writing her fifth novel.

In 1997, she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to attend the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa. She is the first Singapore writer honored as the University of Iowa's International Writer-in-Residence in 2000. She has given readings in Malaysia, the Philippines, USA., UK, Australia and New Zealand, and has been writer-in-residence in Myanmar, Australia, and Scotland.

Editor's Note

This essay was read by the author at the international conference "Reading Asia: Forging Identities in Literature" held at the Ateneo de Manila University on February 1-3, 2007.

INTRODUCTION

I am deeply honored to be here in Ateneo University before such a distinguished audience. Let me begin my talk with two stories about a professor and a writer from your beautiful country, the Philippines, and how they made an impact on the life of my fragile imagination at a time in the 1980s and 1990s when Singapore, my beautiful island, took great pride in being a robust, hard headed and pragmatic nation. (But we have changed. We have had a makeover. We recognize that we have a heart; we have passion and creativity.)

This is my second visit to the Philippines, but my connection to this country began in 1980 or thereabouts when I took an elective course on the literature of the Philippines at the National University of Singapore. It was taught by Professor Lucille Hosilos, the visiting professor from the University of the Philippines. I was a college teacher on study leave then. I was pretending to read for my honors degree in literature, when in fact, I was

secretly trying to write. But what it was that I was trying to write, I didn't know at the time. And that's the thing about the imagination. It has to stumble about in the land of chaos before knowing what it is doing. So I was very shy and didn't want people to know that I was not writing my honors thesis.

I recall leaving home at 6:15 every morning so that I could be in the university by 7:30 and I wrote in the canteen till 10 when the first lecture or tutorial began. I had an old 10-pound Olivetti typewriter that I lugged on the bus to university every day. Manual typewriters were noisy. I needed a place where I could type without disturbing my fellow students. Professor Hosilos was very kind. She didn't ask too many questions. She probably knew I wasn't writing my thesis. But nevertheless, she brushed aside university rules and regulations, and quietly offered me the use of her office when she went on sabbatical. Her kindness gave me "a room of my own" to write what turned out to be my first novel, *Ricebowl*. In the privacy of her room, my imagination wrote its way out of chaos. I enjoyed that room for a month before the Head of the Social Sciences Department evicted me. (But that's another story.)

Now the writer from the Philippines who made an impact on my writing life is your eminent National Artist, Frankie Sionil Jose. I met Manong Sionil Jose when I won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. He was one of three judges with Professor Edwin Thumboo. What impressed me most at the prize-giving ceremony was that he ignored me, the winner. He spoke to those who did not win so that they could ask him questions about their writing. A few years later when he returned to the National University of Singapore, he asked to meet me. And that was when I felt his detached kindness. I use the word "detached" as a compliment in the way Buddhists use the word to describe a kindness that does not expect gratitude. At that time, I was buried in the Ministry of Education, struggling to write while working full-time as a curriculum specialist. Frankie, who was in his seventies then, asked to have lunch with me. I can still recall the scene. We were in the back seat of a taxi driving past the Botanic Gardens and Gleneagles Hospital. Blazing sunlight on the white walls of the hospital. Frankie took my hand in the taxi. I was taken aback. What was this older writer trying to do? He said, "Suchen, you must write. Don't ever give up. Write." Those words were like drops of water on a parched soul.

Looking back to these two encounters with the professor and the writer, I realize now that the imagination of the beginning writer needs time, space, and a kind word to boost her courage to stumble about in the valley of darkness and chaos, to write her way towards the story or novel or poem or play that she was meant to write.

THE GENESIS OF A NOVELIST LIES IN THE IMAGINATION

Let me illustrate with two stories about beginnings. After the publication of my first novel, *Ricebowl*, I was minding my own business one afternoon when a woman popped into my head. She was painting furiously with her bare hands on a huge canvas. I sat down and wrote what I saw. Then I called a friend and read out the two pages to him. Powerful, he said. Yeah, but who's she? I didn't know. All I knew then was that this woman was too strong for me to handle. So I locked up the two pages and went on to write my second novel, *Gift From The Gods,* to test if I could write. I thought *Ricebowl* was a fluke. About three years later, those two pages that I had locked up in my drawer became part of the opening chapter of *Fistful of Colours*, my third novel, which covers eighty years of Singapore's history. And the woman painter who painted with her bare hands became Suwen, the main character.

Suwen, the product of my imagination, came first, then, the history of Singapore followed, almost like another main character in the novel. The history inside the novel is the result of my tracking of the three main women characters and their family background and relationships.

This was the novel awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize. But after winning the prize, I felt drained. I felt I had nothing more to write. Then one afternoon, I saw an image of a Chinese boy with a queue. He was squatting in a boat on a wide river of no name. Time and place unknown. I saw his back. I couldn't see his face. For weeks, I puzzled over this recurring image as I went about my work in the Ministry of Education, writing English language curriculum materials. A boy wearing a queue, squatting on a boat. That was it. A fragment was lodged in my head.

WE WORK WITH WHAT ENTERS OUR IMAGINATION

I did not plan to write *A Bit of Earth*. In those days, I didn't understand my own creative writing process. So now I will try to recall as faithfully as I can what actually happened. When I did pay attention to the image in my head, I either realized or decided subconsciously that the Chinese boy with the pigtail was fifteen years old. And judging by his queue and his attire, he must be someone from the nineteenth century. One week later, I named him Wong Tuck Heng. When this name came to me, I realized that he was Cantonese. If he had been Hokkien, for example, then his surname "Wong" would have been either "Ong" or "Ooi" or "Wee." Same Chinese character but different sounds. And translated into English, different spellings as well.

At around the same time, I was reading books on Malayan history because I reckoned I had to find out more about nineteenth century Malaya. I am a history buff, and I was a member of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. One morning, I joined Malaya and China together. I gave Wong Tuck Heng a tragic family history in China. His father was a poet. The beheading of his father made him flee to Malaya where he became a tin mining coolie. And that was how I found my protagonist in my fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*.

IMAGINING HISTORY IS PART OF THE FUN OF WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

Imagine this scene somewhere in nineteenth century Malaya—two men getting off a boat. Musa Talib and Tai-kor Wong were trading partners bringing supplies up the Sungei Perak. The year was 1873 just before British colonial rule in the Malay state of Perak.

> "It's no good, Che'Wong, for a man to be alone," Musa had said to him…. "The Almighty Creator made women for men's enjoyment and we men have to show appreciation by taking pleasure in them."
>
> Tai-kor Wong thought that the Indian-Muslim's view of women was not so different from his own. As he told Musa then, women were teacups and men, teapots. "One teapot can pour into many teacups. Never one teacup into many teapots." Musa had laughed at the image. "It shows that you Chinamen have wit like us Malays. Let's drink to that, my friend!" (*A Bit of Earth* 103)

This bit of inspired dialogue came to me one day when I was reading an article in the journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS) about the history of trade in Malaya. That was how I imagined some aspect of Malay-Chinese relations to be before the arrival of the British. I might be wrong. I might be right. Perhaps such conversations never happened in those days between a Chinese trader and a Malay trader. Perhaps they did. Who knows? That kind of colonial history was never captured. But what we do know is that nothing unites men more than wine, women, and song. And we do know that there were inter-racial unions in those days. Nawawi, a minor character in the novel, was a product of such a union.

A Bit of Earth begins with the stoning and drowning of an adulteress in a fictional village called Bandong, in the state of Perak. This scene in the novel is based on a footnote

in my secondary school history textbook. The adultery of a Cantonese woman and a Hakka tin miner had occurred at a time when the Cantonese and Hakka clans were fighting for tin mining rights in the Malay state of Perak. This adultery case was cited as one of several causes of the tin mining wars in nineteenth century Perak that eventually led to the British colonization of Malaya. This historical footnote was subsequently considered trivial and it was deleted when government-appointed committees of textbook writers were asked to write history textbooks instead of independent-minded professors.

But that colorful footnote stayed in my mind. The footnote gave the barebones of a human tragedy: an adulterous Cantonese woman was punished because she fell in love with the enemy. The fate of her Hakka lover was not mentioned. The footnote also suggests that national history is not simply about a string of wars or boring constitutional developments; that individual and personal events like marriage or adultery could change a nation's fate. Like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings that sets off a chain of unforeseen consequences.

I read and wrote reams of rubbish before I arrived at the start of my novel. Glancing back over my shoulders now, I see those reams of rubbish as necessary rubbish. I threw away pages. The act of throwing the discarded pages down the rubbish chute was cathartic and therapeutic. It taught me not to cling to my writing.

The subject matter of the novel is the lode of tin ore below the surface. One has to remove the rocks and topsoil. Dig it out. In this case, it is the history of a diverse people becoming attached to the land of one's birth and one's adoption. It is based on a piece of historical fact—the Perak tin mining wars in the 1870s. The novel spans a period of forty years to 1912, the rise of the Republic of China. In my Author's Note, I wrote, "*A Bit of Earth* is a work of fiction based on fact sculpted by the imagination."

Storytelling is embellishment. At some point the imagination takes over. Imagining the history of the powerless deleted by the powerful is part of the fun of writing historical fiction. Something that the Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, demonstrated so admirably in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. My imagination took the deleted footnote in my secondary school history textbook and embellished it into the first two chapters of my fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*.

Now imagine a village square. A woman is tied up and made to kneel in front of a crowd of tin miners and their women. They are howling for blood and stoning her.

> "Throughout … the victim maintained a stoic expression. Is it strength or indifference? [Tuck Heng] wondered. He had never witnessed the punishment of an

adulteress before, although he had heard stories of how such women were drowned in rivers and lakes back home in Sum Hor. He peered at the woman as he would a trapped rat. Even a rat would shriek when tortured, but she neither cringed nor whimpered.

Her silence incensed the mob.

"Whip the bitch! Whip the lust out of her!"

The women started to flail her with bamboo poles. The louder the men urged, the harder the women hit. It was as if they had to prove their own fidelity to moral law."

Chitra Sankaran, who lectures in the National University of Singapore, has written an interesting article on this chapter. She discusses silence as the resisting voice of the powerless. Imagining history enables us to access other silenced voices, for example, the silenced voices of women in a male dominated society.

Imagine a Chinese temple. Go inside and listen to the women talking about Ah Fah, the adulteress, who had just been drowned. They tell her side of the story.

"Ah Lai's mother, did you know that Ah Fah used to cry her heart out? Each time we went to the river to wash clothes. I'll go mad soon, she said to me one day. My mother-in-law is turning me into a mad woman."

The other women tried to stop her (from going on) but she pushed them away.

"Ah Lai's mother. Your son is twenty-eight this year. But inside his head he's only six years old. When you locked him in the bedroom with Ah Fah, he kicked and bit her. She showed me the teeth marks. And the lashes. You caned her every night, she told me…. A mother-in-law is the sky, and daughters-in-law are the earth. You can do anything to her as long as she's under your roof. So she looked for another roof."

Ah Lai's mother was strangely quiet after that." (*A Bit of Earth* 22, 24)

SINGAPORE'S URBAN HISTORY IS A HISTORY OF ERASED PLACES AND VOICES

Place denotes ethnicity in colonial Singapore's history. When Stamford Raffles planned the city of Singapore, he followed the practice of the English empire builders,

which was to divide and rule. He marked out on a map where each ethnic community would live: the Malays in Geylang Serai, the Chinese in Chinatown along South Bridge Road, the Indians in Little India along Serangoon Road, and the Europeans in Tanglin along Napier Road and the Botanic Garden. Although we still have Geylang, Little India, and Chinatown today, they are now ethnic attractions for tourists. I would like to talk about place and voice in Singapore fiction by reading to you an extract from *Fistful of Colours*. In this scene, Zul, an English-educated, Malay Muslim journalist, is waiting for Janice Wong, who is leaving home and family because her Chinese Christian parents are against her pending marriage to him.

> Zul parked his car in the cool shadow of the Geylang Christian Assembly of Christ Church … He looked at the cars whizzing past him. This Geylang neighborhood was a far cry from the one in which he had spent most of his boyhood. Gone were those familiar landmarks which had given his boyhood a sense of stability because he had once thought they were eternal, suspended in time even though the rest of Singapore was changing. But those totems of his youth, like everything else, had been bulldozed and demolished to make room for the new concrete boxes erected in place of the Flame trees, the angsanas, the lallang patch, the muddy ditch (where he'd caught his first guppy) and the roadside barber's stall under the angsana tree. Ah Seng, the Chinese barber, in khaki shorts and cotton singlet, cut the hair of all the neighborhood boys, right there where the shops were now. Coarse white powder flying in the air, joking, scolding and cajoling the boys, where was the man now? The price was always fifty cents a haircut for children. How old was he when he was brought to Ah Seng for his first haircut? He couldn't remember; but judging by the remembered scene of his bawling and shrieking when Ah Seng lifted him up and sat him on the high cane chair, he must have been five or thereabout. "Mali! Mali, Machik! Potong kepala! Lima puloh sen sa'ja!" Ah Seng had grinned wickedly, and he'd kicked the man's shin, all the while shrieking for dear life. "Mak! Mak! Ta' mahu!" He didn't want to have his head cut off! "Bukan potong kepala, Zul! Gunting rambut sahaja!" his mother had laughed till the tears rolled down her face …
>
> When he looked up, the view before his parked car was the neat row of two-storey HDB shophouses which had taken the place of the zinc and wood shops of the Chinese grocers and Indian dhobis. With a sharp pang, he recognized what he had known all his life. That, as always, it is the outer physical rim of our social hub

> which changes faster than its core of age-old prejudices, cock-eyed perceptions and irrational fears. For as long as we mix and mingle in the comfortable confines of the marketplace, all is well; move beyond that into the personal and the intimate areas, then the hub quivers and shakes like a machine into which one has accidentally poured water instead of oil." (142-4)

The erasure of physical and linguistic landscapes and with them, our dialect voices and collective communal memories, that inner terrain which is part of society's intra-psychic landscape, appears to be inevitable. Blame that on progress, globalization, the will of one man or the ruling party, I don't know. Everywhere in Singapore and elsewhere, vast tracts of land are bulldozed, flattened, and built over until the land is quite unrecognizable. Some pain to a community is involved, especially that of the original inhabitants. When a building or landmark is torn down or turned into a commercial tourist attraction, the individual has little to anchor him to the land. His or her voice is lost among the rubble. Some places in Singapore are subjected to so many physical changes that new places spring up (in the course of a few months) and within a few years, the memories associated with that old place are gone, and a new generation of voices has taken over. As a result, our voices and memories are erased, and most probably, this is the reason that led Singapore novelist Gopal Baratham, one of our most important writers, to name his last collection of short stories, *The City of Forgetting*. One of the roles of the Singapore writer is to remember and not forget other voices, and to chronicle the experiences of individuals, especially those who do not speak English or Mandarin, to add to the nation's collective memory.

TO IMAGINE SINGAPORE'S HISTORY IS TO IMAGINE HER VOICES

Languages and dialects are places of location and identity. The linguistic landscape of a place offers the writer rich possibilities, experiences, attitudes and memories, and they influence the way we use language. Irish writers and poets like James Joyce and Seamus Heaney, Jewish American writers like Bernard Malamud, Indian writers like Vickram Seth, African writers like Chinua Achebe, and Filipino writers like Sionil Jose and Charlson Ong had dug into their memories of non-English languages spoken or heard during their childhood to mine the rich lode of linguistic resources and experiences.

In past forty-three years since our national independence, Singapore writers, more so than other writers in Southeast Asia, have to deal with the rapid changes of our linguistic landscape. In the 1980s, the government discouraged the use of Chinese regional

languages. Almost overnight, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew or Hakka operas and films on television and cinema were banned. Recently, there has been a quiet relaxation on the ban. Today, after a quarter of a century, there are regular radio news broadcasts in the Chinese regional languages.

As a writer, when I return to the dialects I had heard during my childhood, certain characters spring to life and I have phrases and sayings that, even if written in grammatical English, would situate the character in Southeast Asia at a particular time. For example, "Umbrellas have different handles; people have different fates." This is not an English proverb. It is not a saying by Mandarin speakers. It is a folk or colloquial saying of the Cantonese immigrants implying that such is the reality of life that people have different lives and fortunes.

I am going to read to you snatches of dialogue. These dialogues could not have happened in modern Singapore or Malaysia The linguistic landscape today is very different from that of yesterday when the Chinese dialects flourished and gave a person his or her own identity associated with the old homeland, village, and clan.

Imagine Chinatown in the 1900s. A crowd gathered in front of the shophouses. A man stood on a soapbox.

> "Pigs and dogs! Sons of sows! Oh how they suck us dry!" the great bullhorn voice of a tua-tow bellowed out in the provincial Hockchia dialect. "We give them our sweat and blood! What did they give us? Ask the towkays! Ask!"
>
> "Nothing! Nothing!" the mob roared its reply in the Hockchia dialect which tied them to one another like an invisible umbilical cord.
>
> In the murky shadows, flattened against the walls of the shophouses, Ong Ah Buck and his Hokkien clansman listened to that bullhorn voice, a guttural voice growling like an enraged tiger, a voice which could send out men in the hundreds to burn and assault other men of other tongues. It spoke no Hokkien, no Mandarin. It had no learning. It had, worst of all, in the eyes of the two men, no earning power. The Hockchia were the poorest of all the poor rickshaw coolies in Chinatown. But this Hockchia voice had the power to move poor men. It could repeat what was said in the shops and marketplaces with the roar of a hungry tiger.
>
> "Patriots! Countrymen! Clansmen! Sons of the Chinese earth! We are the fucking hungry! We are the fucking poor! The homeless and the homesick! But can we the fucking poor make sacrifices for our motherland? Can or not? Say! Can or not?"
>
> "Can! Can!" the mob chanted. (*Fistful of Colours* 100)

You will have noticed that the writer in English can create a verisimilitude of the dialect used, but not the actual Hockchia words themselves. Certain linguistic markers, similar to that used in native English speech, are also used to show the social status of the speaker and the low register at which the dialect was used.

The next example is that of a Chinese dialect spoken at a higher register denoting the higher social status and educational level of the speakers. The wife of Wong Tuck Heng, chief of the Cantonese clan, is consulting a monk in a Buddhist temple. The British authorities are about to deport her husband to China. Mrs Wong, who does not want to return to China with him, fears that her reluctance is a betrayal of her homeland.

> "Betray is a very strong word, Mrs. Wong. We have a saying in China, 'Enter earth, sprout roots'. Do you understand my meaning?"
>
> "Are you saying that I've entered the earth of this land and sprouted roots, Si-fu?"
>
> His eyes twinkled with gentle humor as he gazed at a weeping willow he had planted next to a coconut palm. Then speaking in a low soft voice, he turned to her.
>
> "From sunrise to sunset, from one day to the next, till our black hair turns white, we eat, we sleep, we bear children and we watch them grow. We watch them get married and in turn bear children of their own. How time flies, we say to ourselves. Then one day we look down at our feet and we're surprised. Roots have sprouted in the ground of our daily living." (*A Bit of Earth* 379-80)

Elsewhere I have done the same thing with Malay speech, but I have added the actual Malay words (to indicate that as a writer, born in Malaysia and raised in Singapore, I am honoring our national language which is Malay). The next example, from *Fistful*, is based on Zul's recollection of his father and Ah Hock, the man his father had saved during the war.

> "Telima kasih, telima kasih," Ah Hock cried when he woke up after a long sleep.
>
> "Boleh cakap Melayu?" my father asked.
>
> "Sikit boleh, sikit, sikit!"
>
> My father spoke quietly to Ah Hock in pasar Malay, I think, and as I imagine the scene now, I believe it must have dawned on my father then that the essence of our communication lies not so much in words as in the feelings behind the words.

> "Hati yang baik." My father's kindly look and tone were received with gratitude; Ah Hock grasped his hand and murmured "Telima kasih" over and over again, mispronouncing his Malay words and getting the intonation all wrong. However, that did not bother my father. Neither did it bother Ah Hock that my father's Hokkien had sounded terrible. Their feelings of sympathy as fellow sufferers gave their words a force which accurate pronunciation could never have. (277-8)

The complexities of the Southeast Asian linguistic and multicultural landscapes inform and shape Southeast Asian writing in English. This is a theme I have explored in an earlier paper delivered in Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2004. And I quote:

> For the Singaporean and Malaysian writer, the linguistic landscape is far more complex than that of the Irish writer dealing with English and Gaelic, or the divide between Protestants and Catholics. In his general introduction to "The Fiction of Singapore (up to 1990)," professor and poet Edwin Thumboo gave an illustration of the linguistic complexity that the fiction writer, writing in English, faces.
>
> "[T]hough [the fiction] relied on the experience of one individual, the writing in English increasingly included characters from other communities—Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Eurasian, ex-Colonial—each with its types and sub-types. This expansion in the range of types is exacerbated by linguistic and other changes across the generations, and within the ethnic groups. Among Chinese, it is not unusual to find dialect-speaking grandparents, bilingual parents and grandchildren competent in English and Mandarin but not dialect. Grandparents and grandchildren do not therefore share any language. Ambitious fiction cannot afford to be too much neater than life…. Let us say then that there are two uncles, the first who speaks excellent English and poor dialect and no Mandarin—having been schooled from the age of ten in England—and the second with excellent dialect, fair Mandarin and and poor English, chiefly because he had looked after the family business of Lim Kim Kee & Co. We exclude other close relatives, friends, rivals, etc. Nonetheless, repeat this with variations and modifications, with the Indians—including the Tamils—and the Malays, then ponder on the implications for the first of types and sub-types and their use in fiction.
>
> "Even with the three-generation Chinese family and with two uncles added, and limiting the fiction to one ethnic group, the writer would need to invent an appropriate language for each character in the different, permutating social and

> linguistic setting they inhabit and operate in. This is especially so with the middle generation. The second uncle would have to be given excellent English when he is supposed to be speaking dialect, fair English when speaking Mandarin, and poor English when speaking English. The mathematics of the discourses involved in coping with a larger range of types is obviously infinitely daunting."

A writer writing within a multicultural society like Singapore is acutely aware of the different voices and the need to honor these voices so that they are heard besides English, Mandarin, and Singlish speech. My way of doing it may not be the best way and as we mature as a writing community, Singapore writers and poets will find better ways of developing these different voices into an aesthetic that will mirror our society as it is, and I hope, no, I wish, academics in Southeast Asia will also develop a critical framework to discuss fiction and poetry of Singapore and other writers in Southeast Asia, not as something perceived through the aesthetics based on a western monocultural and monolingual society. Some years ago, an academic in Singapore accused me of not having a consistent voice in my fiction, a criticism to which I had no reply at the time and I dutifully noted my failing. But now, four novels later and the last two displaying different voices, I find that one consistent voice does not suit my artistic purposes in my last two novels, and what I feel as an artist rooted in a multicultural society. We need to develop a polyphonic aesthetic for reading and writing the different voices and languages in a multicultural society to reflect the different points of view and shifting perspectives. And perhaps, this will be Singapore's literary contribution to the world of literature where many writers in the West, especially in the United States, still write within their own monocultural community for fear of being accused of cultural misappropriation. Singapore literature in English, as reflected in the works of our poets, novelists, and especially her playwrights, has shown that the ethnic borders in our society are porous, and the English language is the malleable clay used to create the verisimilitude of the various languages and voices in our midst.

I would like to end my talk by posing a few questions for academics and critics. Do you see a shared history and aesthetic among Southeast Asian writers writing in English? If there is such an aesthetic, what are its characteristics? Since Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines have literary works in English and other languages, has any academic developed a comparative literature framework to look at these works? What are the issues related to translation in the Southeast Asian context? Many readers, writers, curriculum planners, and syllabus designers, I'm sure, would like to know some of the answers. There

is increasing interest in Southeast Asian writing in English. Last year, the Ministry of Education in Singapore launched a new literature syllabus that, for the first time, included the study of Singapore fiction, plays, and poetry. In time to come, it will include the rich literature of this region. And on this positive note, I will end my talk.

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