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### Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Urban Transgressions: Narratives of Migration and Contagion in London 1930-2022

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in English

by

Milena Messner

Committee in charge:

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Professor Teresa Shewry

December 2022

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September 2022

Urban Transgressions: Narratives of Migration and Contagion in London 1930-2022

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by

Milena Messner

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of friends, family, and colleagues over the course of my time at the University of California, Santa Barbara. First I want to thank my dissertation committee for supporting this project. I count myself lucky to have a committee with such diverse expertise which has helped me to shape my interdisciplinary approach to my writing. I thank Teresa Shewry for being a careful and astute reader who is always able to identify core strands of my arguments and challenges me to focus and solidify them. I thank Julie Carlson for her rigorous and detail oriented feedback, which has been essential in sharpening and nuancing my work. Julie has also been a mentor to me long before this project began. My experience teaching for and working alongside her in the Center for Literature and the Mind have been instrumental in shaping the kind of academic, teacher, and thinker I aspire to be. Finally, I want to thank my committee chair, Maurizia Boscagli, who has been essential to the development of this project, and to my time spent living and working at UCSB. Maurizia was the person to encourage my transition from the Early Modern period to Modernism during her Twentieth Century Modernity graduate seminar, which was the very first class I took as a graduate student. Ever since then she has been a vital source of mentorship and support to me, whether this be in my pedagogy, research, or personal life. I am grateful to her for the meticulous editing, recommended reading and viewing, and stimulating conversation that inspired this project over many years.

I am also incredibly thankful to the UCSB undergraduates I taught and worked alongside and the new perspectives they brought to the texts we studied together. I have learnt so much from my students and feel privileged to have taught across such a broad spectrum of literary and critical history. I particularly want to thank the students of the very first class I put together and led entirely independently in 2019; the open and respectful space for critical thought and honest reflection that we curated together that summer is very special to me. I also thank my graduate cohort for fostering an intellectually and critically generative environment at UCSB. I owe particular thanks to Jamiee Cook and Anita Raychawdhuri, without whom I would not have been able to make it through this program, let alone succeed in it. Jamiee, our coffee runs, trips to panera, and shared office made every difference to my day to day. Your empathy, groundedness, and investment in your politics, and your capacity to weave these qualities into your writing, teaching, and relationships are a great source of strength for me. Anita, I genuinely don't know who I would have been in graduate school without you. I'm so glad we made the (admittedly slightly rash) decision to live together after meeting just once and only very briefly at open day. I am in awe of your drive, passion, and intelligence, without which I would not be the scholar or person I am today. The many tales of woe we've experienced together (the betrayal of Carlo, our rejection from mmmm, discovering a shared passion for the land before time) have provided me with more narrative content than I thought I'd get in a lifetime, and have been worth repeatedly sacrificing my uber rating for (RIP).

I wouldn't be in this PhD program in the first place if it were not for the longstanding support of my friends in London. Meera, our friendship is feminist pedagogy in practice and I'm so grateful for the time we've spent living in different homes across London together this year. Thank you for the countless writing sessions, resources, and conversations over coffee and wine t

hat we've shared over the years. Faizan, I owe chapter three in large part to our shared appreciation for the fictions of Hanif Qureshi. Your insightful nature and our ability to go down any and all conversational avenues together have stretched my thinking about work and myself in more ways than I could count, even if I believed they could be quantified in that kind of concrete way (which I don't). Amy and Julia, your endless curiosity about people and the world we live in have been an endless source of inspiration for me; I love unpacking the world with you both. Jon, our shared-analytical mindedness has made all the difference to this project, and to me. Thank you for keeping me caffeinated, and for your patience on the countless times I've interrupted you with my softgirl ramblings on cosmopolitanism modernism, why streets are the margins of cities, or whether dissociation has a form; I owe chapter one of this dissertation entirely to conversations with you. Your openness and ability to hold space for things have altered the way I look at the world and my life trajectory in new (and sometimes scary) but always interesting ways. Last but not least, Jonny, I can say with absolute certainty that I would not have made it through this PhD without your unwavering support and belief in me, particularly when I couldn't find it in myself. I will never forget the evening in Victoria Park when you pushed me to submit the application that ultimately meant I could remain in London and actually finish this dissertation. This entire project is indebted to you. I will never know what I did in a past life to get you as a best friend but whatever it is I am perpetually grateful.

Finally, I want to thank my family, who have encouraged critical and analytical thought from my childhood on. My confidence in my own mind arises in large part from debates and discussions I have had with them over the years. Thomas, I aspire to your sensitivity and kindness. Katharina, you are, and always have been, my rock.

## VITA OF MILENA MESSNER

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- 2020 “The Body and the City in Ben Lerner’s 10:04”. The Urban Humanities Working Group Center for Cultural Analysis, Rutgers University, postponed due to COVID-19.
- 2020 “You poor creatures”: Storytelling and Survival in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*. Afterlives Conference, The Graduate Center (CUNY), postponed due to COVID-19.
- 2019 “Do it beautifully”: Art as Violence in Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. UC



Berkeley-Stanford English Conference, Stanford University.

2018 “Postmodern Pathologies in Ben Lerner's 10:04”. Pacific, Ancient and Modern Language Association (PAMLA), Western Washington University.

2018 “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (Hamlet, II:ii): Role Playing and the Players in Shakespearean Tragedy”. Early Modern Center, UC Santa Barbara.

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## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Arnhold Research Fellow and Undergraduate Mentor, UC Santa Barbara

2018-2019: “The Project on the City”.

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20th and 21st century anglophone literature, modernism, literary urban studies, public health, post-colonial theory, race, gender, and sexuality studies, medical humanities, immigration, psychoanalysis.

## **Abstract**

Urban Transgressions: Narratives of Migration and Contagion in London 1930-2022

By

Milena Messner

This dissertation asks how global circulation and displacement invite us to reconsider our conceptions of nationhood and socio-spatial urban belonging. I center my study of immigration on the city because international migration is a driving force of urbanization that has fundamentally altered the socio-spatial landscapes of cities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In particular, my project anchors on London because it has been undeniably shaped by colonialism, immigration, and urban renewal into the world city it is today. The existence of the immigrant border-crosser undermines the fixity of the border and reveals white nationalism to be a fragile and ultimately incomprehensible model for citizenship today. London emerges as a space of conflict; a city in which marginalized subjects challenge the coherence of the category of citizen and reorient us towards models of urban collectivity that are imperfect, messy and conflictual but offer some hope for urban co-existence across differences of race, ethnicity, and culture.

To study how immigrants are inhabiting the city I read cultural texts produced by non-white, non-European, first and second generation immigrant authors originating from former British colonies including Africa, India, Pakistan and the Middle East: from the novels of Caribbean colonial expatriate Jean Rhys; to the fiction of Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta and Windrush author Andrea Levy; to the literary texts and cinema of Hanif Kureishi; ending with a reading of a contemporary refugee novel by Moshin Hamid, and covering a publication span of

1931 to 2017. Each of my chapters addresses the impact of a different wave of transnational migration that has shaped London as a global postmetropolis: from colonial migrations during the British Empire (1930s), to the Windrush generation (1948), and more recent waves of immigration, no longer strictly colonial or post-colonial, from the 1960s onwards. These cultural texts of transnational migration extend Henri Lefebvre's demand for a 'renewed access to urban life'<sup>1</sup>: a call to action for the city dweller as a new political subject with the tools to reshape, reform, and reclaim the city as their own. This project is invested in interdisciplinary work, and as such I bring multiple theoretical discourses into dialogue with one another, including but not limited to urban studies through Henri Lefebvre and Fredric Jameson, immigration studies; in particular Étienne Balibar's work on borders, postcolonial feminist theory through Françoise Vergès and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, psychoanalysis through Julia Kristeva, and contemporary iterations of biopolitics, in particular Mel Chen and Roberto Epistito's work.

"Colonial Exhibiting: Jean Rhys' "Wild" Women" reads a selection of Jean Rhys' cosmopolitan novels alongside artistic expositions of the colonial other such as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911) to unpack the relationship between wildness, art, and objectification. Rhys foregrounds the liminality of colonial expatriate women to challenge and destabilize the intersecting patriarchal and colonial logics that shape the surveilling male imperial gaze of the anthropomorphised city, which actively participates in the protagonists' oppression and surveillance in the novels. While the novels strive to expose the violence of British imperialism, they elide white settler women's complicity in colonialism and are limited by their dependence on precisely those colonialist binaries they endeavor to challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities*. (1996).

“City Bodies, Urban Texts: Race, Empire, and Residential Politics in Immigrant Council Estate Fictions” looks at the aftermath of the midcentury migration of the “Windrush” generation<sup>2</sup> of Commonwealth citizens who were brought to London to combat labor shortages and rebuild after World War II. I look at urban belonging for these immigrant communities through the lens of residential politics, reading a set of council estate novels by Buchi Emecheta, Monica Ali, and Zadie Smith which center the experience of first and second generation minority ethnic immigrant women attempting to navigate social housing environments in London. The liminality of the council estate unsettles binary divisions between public and private, and city and home, and fosters visions of urban residential belonging that begin in the home but extend beyond it, working to problematize harmful stereotypes of the ‘problem family’ and ‘problem estate’. As examples of postcolonial bildungsromane which adopt minority ethnic immigrant women as their protagonists, the novels reveal how the assimilation of these women is contingent on their wilful submission to white supremacy and nationalism, and challenge the nineteenth century bildungsroman’s trajectory of capitalist assimilation.

“The City of Exiles”: Dirt, Waste, and Gentrification in Margaret Thatcher’s London” examines the impact of Margaret Thatcher’s racist, anti-immigration policies during the 1980s, connecting the urban management of dirt to gentrification and ethnic cleansing. This chapter deconstructs instances where migrants become mapped onto sites, locales, or engagements with refuse. I read a span of Hanif Kureishi’s works which harness the creative and transformational potential of dirt to counteract the boundary policing mechanisms of hygiene discourse and practice. These cultural artifacts are examples of ‘dirty utopias’ which open up alternative ways

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<sup>2</sup> The “Windrush generation” emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain between 1948 and 1971. They are named after the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian migrants to the UK in 1948.

of being in the world which arise out of, respond to, and counter conditions of oppression and precarity.<sup>3</sup>

“Beyond the Border: Global Mass Migration and the Brexit era” focuses on contemporary global fluxes of migration, and in particular on the precarious status of the refugee in a world where the intersecting factors of late stage capitalism, globalization, global warming, and global conflict make the safe movement and rehousing of people from around the world a more urgent concern than ever before. Moshin Hamid’s *Exit West* projects readers into a prospective future in which vast scale global migrations to the west have already taken place. In doing so Hamid repositions refugee displacement from a “crisis” to an inevitable reality, focussing on in the aftermath of mass migration for which nation state models of citizenship have been ultimately unfit to meet the challenges and demands of a globalized world.

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<sup>3</sup> This line of argument is inspired by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s work on “dispossession”: a condition of precarity which foregrounds political action that endeavors to counter these conditions through public acts of resistance. For a more in depth reading, see: Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

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## Introduction: How Will We Live Together?

The Venice Biennale Architettura (2021) asked its contributors from forty six countries around the globe to consider an ever pressing question: “How Will We Live Together?”. This question centers migration and re-habitation as era-defining social and spatial realities of twenty-first century life, where global warming, globalization, late stage capitalism, and global conflict are driving waves of migration to the west in previously unprecedented numbers. Nation state models of citizenship that sentence foreigners to a conditional existence and infringe upon their human rights are ill-equipped to cope with the needs of a globalized world. “How Will We Live Together?” invites audience members to rethink socio-spatial belonging for the inevitable future waves of migrants coming to the west.

It is precisely these questions of global circulation, displacement, and citizenship that my project *Urban Transgressions: Narratives of Migration and Contagion in London 1930-2022* takes up and responds to. I center my study of immigration on the city because international migration is a driving force of urbanization that has fundamentally altered the socio-spatial landscapes of cities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the early twentieth century, British colonialism shaped transnational migration and the cosmopolitanism of the city. Today, transnational migration, similarly bound up in processes of imperial expansion, colonization, and decolonization, is a driving force of globalization that has contributed to the ethno-racial diversification of urban centers. My project anchors on London because it has been undeniably shaped by colonialism, immigration, and urban renewal into the world city it is today.



Each of my chapters addresses the impact of a different wave of transnational migration that has shaped London as a global postmetropolis: from colonial migrations during the British Empire (1930s), to the Windrush generation (1948), and more recent waves of immigration, no longer strictly colonial or post-colonial, from the 1960s onwards. While my analysis proceeds in linear historical order, this does not mean to suggest that these periods should be thought of as distinct from one another. On the contrary, while the British Empire can be thought of to have ended after India's declaration of Independence in 1947, the influence of twentieth century colonialism continues to underpin political and urban relations in London. The airing of the "Windrush scandal" (2018)<sup>1</sup>, which exposed the hundreds of Commonwealth citizens who were wrongly detained, deported, and denied their legal rights as official citizens of the United Kingdom, for instance, exhibits the impact of ongoing legacies of imperialism in twenty-first century Britain. The scandal also showcased how the commonwealth often functions as a contemporary form of colonialism which infringes upon migrants' rights.<sup>2</sup> The issue of migrant rights and access in the city are vital to *Urban Transgressions*, which endeavors to challenge the contingent status of migrants living in London.

To study how immigrants are inhabiting urban space, I read cultural texts produced by non-white, non-European, first and second generation immigrant authors originating from former British colonies including Africa, India, Pakistan and the Middle East: from the novels of Caribbean colonial expatriate Jean Rhys; to the fiction of Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta and Windrush author Andrea Levy; to the literary texts and cinema of Hanif

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<sup>1</sup> The Windrush Generation refers to people arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries to counter severe labor shortages in the wake of the Second World War. Today, the Winrush Generation make up a large proportion of workers in public sectors such as the National Health Service (NHS).

<sup>2</sup> Afua Hirsch. "What is the Commonwealth if not the British Empire 2.0?" *The Guardian*. (17 April, 2018).

Kureishi; ending with a reading of a contemporary refugee novel by Moshin Hamid, and covering a publication span of 1931 to 2017. While these chosen twentieth and twenty-first century anglophone texts are situated in diverse communities and cultural and historic moments, they all center migrants who variously engage in boundary transgression in the city. This project is invested in these various forms of border-crossing - sociopolitical, geographic, bi-racial, queer - and with the material and psychological consequences that these transgressions produce. The existence of the immigrant border-crosser also undermines the fixity of the border and reveals white nationalism to be a fragile and ultimately incomprehensible model for citizenship today.

As a project invested in interdisciplinary thinking *Urban Transgressions* is itself a border-crossing enterprise. The project draws upon multiple theoretical fields and discourses, including urban studies drawing on Henri Lefebvre, Michel De Certeau, and Fredric Jameson; immigration studies, in particular Étienne Balibar's work on European borders in the twenty-first century; postcolonial and feminist theory including works by Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Françoise Vergès; psychoanalysis, in particular Julia Kristeva's work on abjection; and Mel Chen and Roberto Esposito's contemporary responses to Michel Foucault's theorisation of bio-politics. The issue of contagion and the question of urban belonging are at the heart of my study of migration, and I will unpack both aspects more fully over the course of this introduction.

*Urban Transgressions* asks how global circulation and displacement complicate notions of urban belonging and lay the groundwork for rethinking the 'right to the city' anew.<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre's *Le droit à la ville* (originally published in 1968) examines the impact

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities*. (1996).

of capitalism on the twentieth century city and formulates the 'right to the city' around the class-based inequalities that stem from the commodification of urban life. Lefebvre calls for a 'renewed access to urban life' which denotes not only basic human rights and access to resources but a call to action for the city dweller as a new political subject with the tools to reshape, reform, and reclaim the city as their own.<sup>4</sup> I take up and extend Lefebvre's demand for a renewed access and right to urban life in the context of an increasingly urban, globalized, and multicultural world. The assertion that the city belongs to those who live in it is central to my conceptualisation of urban belonging for migrant communities.

The reclamation and restructuring of the city became critical topics during the summer of 2020 as Black Lives Matter (BLM) rallies swept the globe, seeing monuments to colonisers and slave owners vandalised, decimated, and toppled in cities around the world. Groups dedicated to campaigning for the removal of colonial monuments and to changing the curriculum to reflect the experience of those colonized and otherwise oppressed peoples who have gone underrepresented in state education have subsequently followed.<sup>5</sup> The removal of these monuments showcases the possibility for spatio-political reform to be enacted through collective public action and social force. The coming together of ordinary people to reject the celebration of the colonizers and enslavers commemorated in certain urban monuments and call for their removal asserts the primacy of urban subjects, whose civil engagement in urban

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<sup>4</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Meera Somji, Ameya Tripathi, Rhianna Ilube started the campaign "Remove Clive" to remove the statue of Robert Clive - the first governor of the East India Company's Bengal presidency - from Whitehall. Ilube and Somji have also since set up the video series "A History of Everyone Else" (see: <https://www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org/ahistoryofeveryoneelse>) which responds to the dominant 'great men' story of British imperialism by centring those who have been sidelined from history and remain untaught in the British curriculum: the resistance movements, stigmatized social groups, artists, young people and more.

space constitutes the city as an oeuvre of co-created space.<sup>6</sup> This reclamation of urban space by the people, for the people, is an example of what Lefebvre calls a renewed access to urban life: a call to action that empowers city dwellers' to reclaim the city as their own.<sup>7</sup>

Spatial marginalization is produced by political and architectural constructions of space and social formations of race, class, gender and sexuality as they come to demarcate the boundaries of citizenship. As such I turn to a number of spaces that represent and facilitate the exclusion of migrants. The significance of these spaces is complicated by the ways that the immigrant protagonists in the cultural texts I study move through and repurpose them. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), for example, Nazneen experiences the council estates as a space of domestic confinement and claustrophobia as well as a stimulating political environment and potential platform for resisting this entrapment. Sometimes the spaces I analyze also constitute ephemeral homes which provide shelter to protagonists seeking a reprieve from the violence they are subject to in public, as is the case when queer lovers Johnny and Omar come together in secret at the laundrette they built together in *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).

The question of citizenship is central to my project because it functions to distinguish a nation's insiders from its outsiders, and therefore shapes urban belonging (and unbelonging) in the city. Citizenship is often racialized. Racism and nationalism are mutually constituted and work together to position migrants as the "others" of western urban centers. The militarisation of the borders of western nations in the twenty-first century is a symptom of the rise of right-wing nationalism, which privileges whiteness as a prerequisite for

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<sup>6</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *The production of space*. trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Vol. 142. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1991). p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city". (1996).

inclusivity in British national identity. Despite the fact that many immigrants are white and many black people are born and bred in Britain, immigration is tied to racial prejudice in Britain.<sup>8</sup> This racial prejudice is reflected in the racialization of migration in immigration policy, tabloid journalism, and the right-wing media more broadly.<sup>9</sup> Enoch Powell insistence that “although a black man may be a British citizen, he can never be an Englishman” in his anti-immigration 'Rivers of Blood' speech (1968) exemplifies the ways racism and xenophobia have positioned migrants and their children as “other”.<sup>10</sup> The British Nationality Act of 1981<sup>11</sup>, the rise of the right-wing United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP)<sup>12</sup>, the 2018 Windrush Scandal<sup>13</sup> and the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union (Brexit) on 31st January 2020 are all symptomatic of an increasingly white nationalist and right-leaning climate in the UK. The legislation of the burqa ban in France (2011) also provides an important contemporary example of how the state has infringed upon immigrants' rights.

Models of citizenship built on nationalism are mired in racism, and render migrants' status, rights, and access to the city contingent and precarious. I use the term “urban citizenship” to describe an alternative model for belonging in the city which draws on Étienne Balibar’s anticipation of a ‘cosmopolitical transformation of citizenship’ divorced from ideas of racial or ethnic belonging in twenty-first century Europe.<sup>14</sup> The inability of

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<sup>8</sup> David Olusoga. *Black and British: A forgotten history*. (Pan Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Jon E. Fox, Laura Moroşanu, and Eszter Szilassy. "The racialization of the new European migration to the UK." *Sociology* 46.4 (2012): 680-695.

<sup>10</sup> Enoch Powell. "Rivers of blood." *Birmingham Post* 22. (1968).

<sup>11</sup> The 1981 British Nationality Act abolished citizenship as a birth-right in the United Kingdom.

<sup>12</sup> The UK Independence Party places its central focus on border-control, immigration and the exit of Britain from the European Union (Brexit).

<sup>13</sup> The hostile environment policy, which came into effect on October 2012, aimed to target those unable to prove legal residence in the UK as a means to restrict illegal immigration within the UK.

<sup>14</sup> Balibar argues that the proliferation of emigrant communities living in Europe without the benefits associated with being European will eventually mean a new model of European citizenship divorced from ideas of ‘ethnic’ and ‘racial’ belonging must be founded. Étienne Balibar. "At the borders of citizenship: A democracy in translation?." *European journal of social theory* 13.3 (2010): 315-322. p. 20.

European nations to accept their migrants and grant them equal status in terms of rights and recognition has global political consequences, because it infringes on Europe's capacity to realize itself as a unified constituency which can collectively resist or influence global trends in politics, culture, or the economy.<sup>15</sup> The democratization of borders and citizenship would facilitate the rebuilding of this collectivity. Urban citizenship invites a redefinition of national sovereignty which alters traditional constitutions of 'national' states so that new forms of social and political belonging can materialize.<sup>16</sup> The resistances on the part of foreigners to vindicate their basic rights upon migrating to Europe make them members of an active community of citizens before they are granted formal citizenship, and shapes their right to belonging in the city around an active engagement in public urban space.<sup>17</sup>

The multiethnic Anglophone authors studied in this project recount the stories of migrants attempting to navigate their new urban landscapes. The various sociopolitical and spatial barriers that the protagonists repeatedly encounter represent border controls beyond the dividing line between nations.<sup>18</sup> These structural impediments to movement expose the various ways that migrants are policed and excluded by the state. Exposing the workings of these often invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere, is vital to shaping new visions for urban belonging because they direct individuals from different social classes to have vastly different experiences of the law, the civil administration, the police and elementary rights.<sup>19</sup> However, the texts also envisage forms of movement, place-finding, and

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<sup>15</sup> Étienne Balibar. "At the borders of citizenship: A democracy in translation?." *European journal of social theory* 13.3 (2010): 315-322. p. 321.

<sup>16</sup> Étienne Balibar. *"We, the people of Europe?." We, the People of Europe?"* (Princeton University Press, 2009). p. ix.

<sup>17</sup> Balibar. "At the borders of citizenship". (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Étienne Balibar. "What is a border?" in *Politics and the other scene*. (Verso Trade, 2012). p. 84.

<sup>19</sup> Balibar. "What is a border?". (2012). p. 81-2

collectivity-building that imbue immigrant protagonists with the power to disrupt oppressive regimes and norms and which constitute enactments of their urban citizenship.

Hybridity and mobility speak to the transgressive potential of immigrants living in western cities, and are therefore principal concepts for my project. I turn in particular to José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers Of Color And The Performance Of Politics* because it foregrounds hybrid identity formation in spatial terms. For Muñoz, hybrid formations, 'people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality and gender identifications,' claim identificatory positions which are 'always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors'<sup>20</sup>. What Muñoz highlights here is a form of identity navigation which can be read spatially as well as ideologically. My work is invested in precisely these navigations - material, ideological, identitarian and cultural - that the displaced characters of my texts embark on in their attempts to re-situate themselves in urban environments. The paths forged by migrants as they socio-spatially navigate the city make visible the socio-cultural, psychological, and material realities of marginality but also constitute a re-mapping of urban space that challenges their "outsider" status. Protagonists' transgressions in the city call for the recognition of diversity and difference in urban environments and assert new visions of identity, collectivity and belonging.

In order to broaden the right to the city to include diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural subjects, my project looks at moments where the violence that migrant communities encounter is visualized and mapped onto the city as a metaphorical body. As such I draw from theorists that read the city as a body. The body and the city are intimately

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<sup>20</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Vol. 2. (U of Minnesota Press, 1999). p. 32, emphasis mine.

related.<sup>21</sup> In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) Fredric Jameson claims that postmodern architecture ‘stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps impossible, dimensions.’<sup>22</sup> His is one of the most pertinent theoretical approaches for this part of my work because it considers the challenges to human perception prompted by shifts in urban architecture through unlikely, perhaps impossible, bodily expansion. The western concept of the body politic is also particularly important to my understanding of urban “bodies”. Originating in ancient Greek philosophy, and later developed into a modern theory of the state as an artificial person by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century, the body politic considers the city, realm, or state as a metaphorical physical body.<sup>23</sup> This metaphor of the city as a body still persists today; for instance in the depiction of immigrants as possible invaders of western nation states positions the nation as a permeable body.

Urban embodiment, by which I mean moments where the city is imagined as a metaphorical body, as well as the way that urban space becomes embodied in literary texts, signifies variously across the text I study. In Jean Rhys’ novels intersecting patriarchal and colonial forms of oppression get mapped onto, and animate, London and Paris. These ‘living’ anthropomorphised cities are hostile agents which enact male conquest and actively participate in the protagonists’ oppression and reinscribe the protagonists’ marginalized status.<sup>24</sup> In other instances, such as in the council estate fictions I read in chapter two, urban

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<sup>21</sup> Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith. *The production of space*. (1991). p. 170.

<sup>22</sup> Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. (Duke University Press, 1991). p. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan: or, the matter, forme & power of a commonwealth, ecclesiasticall and civil*. (University Press, 1904).

<sup>24</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the history of the sexualisation of urban space, see: Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman. *The sex of architecture*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).



embodiment is employed as a means to visualize the symptoms of zoning, territorialisation and exclusion that are experienced by their characters in the city. Rather than participating in the oppression of marginalized subjects, these moments of urban embodiment function to advocate for London's "outsiders". In *Brick Lane* (2003), for instance, parts of east London become a representative urban "body" that stands in for and visualizes the structural inequities to which minority ethnic immigrant communities are disproportionately subject. These moments of urban embodiment challenge nationalist logics of exclusion because they re-configure London's immigrant communities from a "threat" to rightful urban subjects.<sup>25</sup>

Instances of urban embodiment which expose the violence marginalized communities are subjected to, picked up in depth in chapter three, are indebted to the field of urban geography, and in particular Chris Philo's theory of urban wounding. Philo uses the city-body metaphor to challenge the idea of the 'vulnerable community' which wrongfully locates vulnerability within the community themselves and conceals the influence of structural violence which works make these communities disproportionately vulnerable.<sup>26</sup> The council estate fictions participate in this visualization of the impact of structural violence has on marginalized communities through depictions that expose the impact of state violence, written on the body of the city as a wound, tear, or scar. As such, the novels focus on retribution and repair for the oppression these communities face as a result of an ongoing legacy of imperialism which continues to shape urban relations.

This matter of the city-body brings me to the issue of contagion. Immigration is policed through various cultural mythologies and state controls pertaining to public health

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<sup>25</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

<sup>26</sup> Chris Philo. "The geographies that wound." *Population, Space and Place* 11.6 (2005): 441-454. p. 442.

and hygiene, making contagion a central issue in thinking through the right to the city for migrants. The boundaries of civilization are drawn by delineating the clean from the dirty. In the nineteenth century, the slum dwellers were the identified carriers of contagion who posed a threat to the clean and civilized bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup> In a twenty-first century context, immigrants represent the new urban ‘scum’ whose associations with dirt, disease, and moral impunity are indivisible from the ideological construction of a ‘pure’ and protected nation state. In *Immunitas* (2002), Roberto Esposito describes how migrants are positioned as agents of contagion by drawing ideological parallels between immigration, global epidemics, and computer viruses, each of which presents a risk that is to do with trespassing or violating borders: ‘a disease threatening an individual body, a violent intrusion into the body politic, or a deviant message entering the body electronic’.<sup>28</sup> To return to the metaphor of the body politic, all of these instances are imagined as “threats” to the body at a ‘crossroads of biology, law, politics, and communication.’<sup>29</sup> The link Esposito draws between immigration and global epidemics in particular showcases how public health discourse can be used to justify the exclusion of foreign bodies from western nations by imagining them as “threats” to national security and the well-being of the nations “legal” subjects. This idea in turn necessitates a surveillance state with strict, militarized borders put in place for the supposed protection of its citizens. Public health and hygiene are also used to police and control immigrant circulation beyond the border.<sup>30</sup> Immigrants are subjected to a series of selective controls like health and security checks in the city. These constitute part of what Michel Foucault termed

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. (Cornell University Press, 1986). p. 126.

<sup>28</sup> Roberto Esposito. *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. (Polity Press, 2002).p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Esposito. *Immunitas*. (2002). p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Bong Joon-ho’s film *Parasite* (2020) deals with the parasitic nature of the under-classes in late stage capitalism.

“bio-power”, referring to regulatory mechanisms employed by the state to achieve the subjugation of its subjects’ bodies and population control.<sup>31</sup>

The issue of contagion also engages the city because processes of urbanization and industrialisation produce pollution; the city is often viewed as an agent of contagion. While urban metropolises are seen, on the one hand, to offer an array of opportunities and increased freedom, they are also regarded as diseased, polluted and morally relativistic places in which people become alienated and detached.<sup>32</sup> Representations of cleanliness/dirtiness construct a racial spatialization that enables the militarization and gentrification of cities, with poor people of color blamed for their innate dirtiness and driven out of their neighborhoods in order to make the city “clean”, with connotations of ethnic cleansing and purification.<sup>33</sup>

I connect the urban management of dirt to the gentrification and ethnic cleansing that began to transform the urban landscape of London, as well as to the production of the white, heterosexual male subject: the standard on which the boundaries of civic acceptability are framed, and against which otherness takes shape. Chapter three of this dissertation picks up this strand of the argument, reading dirt as a marginalizing marker as well as a potential disruptor of oppressive systems of power. Hanif Qureishi’s fictions speak back against the use of contagion as a derogatory marker, at times to reject the association of immigrants with dirt and disease outright, and in other instances to harness dirt’s creative and transgressive potential.<sup>34</sup> For instance, *My Beautiful Laundrette* harnesses dirt’s inherently transgressive

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault et al. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Georg Simmel. "The metropolis and mental life." *The urban sociology reader*. (Routledge, 2012). 37-45.

<sup>33</sup> Françoise Vergès. "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender." *e-flux journal #100* (2019).

<sup>34</sup> Here I draw on Mary Douglas’ understanding of dirt as ‘creative formlessness’ in: Mary Douglas. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (Routledge, 1966).

nature to disrupt existing systems of order and force us to rethink boundaries of hygiene and convention.

Border-crossing involves a dislocation that is both geographical and psychological. As such, *Urban Transgressions* reads the migrant as a biopsychosocial entity. Balibar's claim that the racism directed against non-European immigrants originates in Europe's internal xenophobia is integral to my psychological investments in this project, because it suggests that European racism is shaped by a sense of internal otherness.<sup>35</sup> Psychoanalysis is a crucial analytic for understanding marginalization, displacement, and failures to belong. Julia Kristeva calls the self a 'strange land of borders and otherness ceaselessly constructed and deconstructed.'<sup>36</sup> These concerns for the stranger and of estrangement are internal to nations as well as individual selves. The psychoanalytic concept of projection, by which subjects project "bad" internal objects onto others, is a crucial mechanism that shapes "otherness", as in the Balibar's example of Europe's internal and external "others". Kristeva's work on abjection is also particularly important for my psychological inquiry into the issue of marginalization, because immigrants are often positioned as figures of abjection.<sup>37</sup> While Kristeva reads the abject as inherently traumatic, *Urban Transgressions* recognises the ways that abjection's transgressive nature also has creative, disruptive, and political potential.

The multiethnic Anglophone authors I study call attention to the politics of urban-exclusion and endeavor to carve out spaces of urban belonging for immigrants living in western metropolises. The transgressive existence of the spatial outsiders that populate these texts disrupt nationalistic and territorialising categories of identity, citizenship and

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<sup>35</sup> Balibar. "At the borders of citizenship." (2010). p. 321-2.

<sup>36</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Strangers to ourselves*. (Columbia University Press, 1991). p. 191.

<sup>37</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. Vol. 98. (University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982).

urban belonging and call for their revision. The socio-spatial navigations embarked upon by the immigrant protagonists I study carve out alternative visions for what I will term urban citizenship: an alternative to legal or nation-state citizenship which centers the city dweller as an agent rather than an object of their rights, enacted through their active engagement in the city.<sup>38</sup> The city is realized as an arena where characters can protest and actively resist their precarity and conditional status. London emerges as a space of conflict wherein migrants can challenge the coherence of the category of citizen and reorient us towards models of urban collectivity that are imperfect, messy and conflictual but offer some hope for urban co-existence across differences of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Each of the four chapters in my project examines the impact of a particular period of transnational migration to London and how the presence of immigrants intersects with spaces, practices, and other discourses of the city. Each chapter foregrounds the spatial, cultural, and psychological navigations of migrants who reside on the margins of the city, and how these maneuverings expose, untangle, and disrupt the workings of white nationalism. I start with modernist texts of urbanism and colonialism and end with postmodernist postcolonial novels of immigration. As a whole the texts offer new perspectives on urban citizenship and belonging in the city, work which is of particular urgency in our current political moment as we grapple with the ongoing global impact of the Syrian refugee crisis, the COVID19 pandemic, and the ever pressing climate crisis.

My first chapter “Colonial Exhibiting: Jean Rhys’ “Wild” Women” begins with migrant modernism and reads a selection of Jean Rhys’ cosmopolitan novels, including *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

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<sup>38</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

(1931) alongside artistic expositions of the colonial other such as Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911) and *Les Femmes d'Oran* (1925). The novels relay the experience of colonial native protagonists living in London and Paris during the height of the British Empire following WWI.<sup>39</sup> This chapter unpacks the relationship among wildness, art, and objectification by drawing on John Berger's work on art and objectification, Frantz Fanon's work on colonialism and estrangement, and Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz's attempts to reclaim wildness as a means of opposing rather than affirming the systems of colonialist exploitation it is bound up in. Rhys associates colonial expatriate women with many forms of liminality: between cities, as participant and spectator, present lived experience and memory, metropole and colony, dream and reality, wildness, and civilization. This liminality is foregrounded as a means to challenge and destabilize the intersecting patriarchal and colonial logics that shape the surveilling male imperial gaze, which functions as a caging device in the novels. However, Rhys' heroines are ultimately unable to escape the gaze of the anthropomorphised city, which actively participates in the protagonists' oppression and surveillance. Their limited agency to change their circumstances marks a bleak reality for colonial migrants living in western urban centers in the early 1900s.

I respond and contribute to more recent criticism which has focused on Jean Rhys' status as a colonial woman in this chapter. Rhys occupies a complicated identity as a member of the white settler class inhabiting cultural space between white European and black Caribbean society, whose positionality is seldom examined in English texts of imperialism. Her novels often draw on her personal experiences living and writing in London and Paris,

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<sup>39</sup> Nigel Rigby and Howard J. Booth, eds. *Modernism and Empire: Writing and British Coloniality 1890-1940*. (Manchester University Press, 2000).

where she is subject to gendered violence and positioned as a colonial “other”. While her cosmopolitan novels strive to expose the violence of British imperialism, her writing also elides white settler women’s complicity in colonialism and is limited by its privileging of whiteness.

My second chapter “City Bodies, Urban Texts: Race, Empire, and Residential Politics in Immigrant Council Estate Fictions” looks at the aftermath of the midcentury migration of the “Windrush” generation<sup>40</sup> of Commonwealth citizens who were brought to London to combat labor shortages and rebuild after World War II. The chapter reads a set of council estate novels, including Buchi Emecheta’s *In The Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) and Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2021) which center the experience of first and second generation minority ethnic immigrant women attempting to navigate social housing environments in London. As examples of postcolonial bildungsromane which adopt minority ethnic immigrant women as their protagonists, the novels challenge the tenants of the nineteenth century western bildungsroman as laid out by Franco Moretti in *The way of the world: The Bildungsroman in European culture* (2000).<sup>41</sup> The novels reveal how the assimilation of these women is contingent on their wilful submission to white supremacy and nationalism, and challenge the bildungsroman’s trajectory of capitalist assimilation.

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<sup>40</sup> The “Windrush generation” emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain between 1948 and 1971. They are named after the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian migrants to the UK in 1948.

<sup>41</sup> According to Moretti, the form of the traditional western bildungsroman was crucially influenced by the rise of market capitalism alongside which it developed in the 19th century. See: Franco Moretti. *The way of the world: The Bildungsroman in European culture*. (Verso, 2000).

Housing is a major determinant of access to social resources, voting rights, and public services which establish the minimum rights of citizenship.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, residential politics provide a lens through which to unpack the conditional status of those colonial migrants living in London and to advocate for their right to the city. Chapter two draws on urban geography and architectural theory, in particular the work of Fredric Jameson, Sharon Marcus, and Michel De Certeau, to theorize urban embodiment. The council estate emerges as a space of paradox: on the one hand it is claustrophobia of domestic labor and entrapment, on the other it is associated with a platform for resistance and the building of residential coalitions that endeavor to challenge and oppose shared conditions of precarity.<sup>43</sup> The physical, social, and political navigations embarked upon by the protagonists of the novels assert their urban citizenship.

My third chapter “The City of Exiles”: Dirt, Waste, and Gentrification in Margaret Thatcher’s London” examines the impact of Margaret Thatcher’s racist, anti-immigration policies during the 1980s, connecting the urban management of dirt to gentrification and ethnic cleansing. This chapter examines how migrants become mapped onto sites, locales, or engagements with refuse, developing the dissertation’s focus on modes and ideologies of contagion. I draw on Mel Chen’s work on biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect to consider how matter that is considered dirty, abject, or otherwise “wrong” intersects with certain marginalized figures and shapes cultural and political life.<sup>44</sup> I also draw on Mary Douglas’ work on dirt, Françoise Vergès’ work on the racialisation of the labor of cleaning and caring, and Julia Kristeva’s articulation of the abject to argue that the clean/dirty divide is

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<sup>42</sup> David Madden and Peter Marcuse. *In defense of housing: the politics of crisis*. (Verso books, 2016). p. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, racial mattering, and queer affect*. (Duke University Press, 2012).



constructed as maintained through a racial spatialisation which positions foreigners as “matter out of place.”<sup>45</sup> These delineations, despite their generally boundary-policing mechanisms, also have creative and transformational potential.

The cultural artifacts I study in the chapter - including multi-ethnic fiction and cinema of study in the chapter, including Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), “The Tale of the Turd” (2002), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, Dir. Stephen Frears) and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), are nuanced in their approach to dirt as signifying both marginalization and transformation.<sup>46</sup> These artifacts provide examples of what I term ‘dirty utopias’ which concern the communal ways in which people gather together in public resistance to oppressive systems of power. Dirt is employed in a transformative fashion that opens up alternative ways of living and being in the world which arise out of, respond to, and counter conditions of oppression and precarity.<sup>47</sup>

My coda “Beyond the Border: Global Mass Migration and the Brexit era”, which ends the project, focuses on contemporary global fluxes of migration, and in particular on the precarious status of the refugee in a world where the safe movement and rehousing of people from around the world is a more urgent concern than ever before. This final section tackles refugee-exclusion and the proliferation of borders in the twenty-first century by drawing on Étienne Balibar’s work on the heterogeneity of borders which are enacted through state surveillance, security checks, and other similar controls. Moshin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017) describes the future of mass migration and envisages alternative global futures for

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Douglas. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (Routledge, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> The creative and destructive potential of dirt as a transgressive entity is addressed in Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>47</sup> I am inspired by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s work on “dispossession”, a condition of precarity which also foregrounds political action that counters this precarity through public acts of resistance. For a more in depth reading, see: Butler and Athanasiou. *Dispossession*. (2013).

cohabitation and urban belonging. The magical doorways which provide instantaneous passage to destinations around the world in the novel signify the fragility of borders in the twenty-first century and call for a reconsideration of nation state models of citizenship, which are unfit to meet the challenges and demands of a globalized world. By projecting readers into a future in which vast scale global migrations to the west have already taken place, Hamid removes the urgency of the refugee “crisis” in order to focus on the aftermath of migration and answer the question: “how will we live together?”.

## Chapter One: Colonial Exhibiting and Jean Rhys’ “Wild” Women

### **Introduction: Wildness, Art, Objectification: Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907) and the Male Imperial Gaze**



Pablo Picasso's proto-cubist oil painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* (1911-12) denotes a double encounter in which two scenes are inscribed: the brothel and the heralded 1907 visit of Picasso to the collection of tribal artifacts in the Musee d'Ethnographie du Trocadero.<sup>48</sup> Picasso's painting incorporates a shock factor by projecting the primitive onto women as "other" through entwined strategies of exoticism and eroticism according to patriarchal and colonial frameworks.<sup>49</sup> The women embody a multifaceted "other" that is both gendered and racialized through dual processes of eroticism and exoticism. The women are racialized through skin pigmentation and the African tribal masks they wear, which summon up 'an imagined and ruthless barbarity that the male modernist makes it his mission to confront.'<sup>50</sup> The critical response to *Les Femmes d'Alger* has replicated Picasso's fetishization of African

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<sup>48</sup> Hal Foster. "The "Primitive" Unconscious of Modern Art." *October* 34 (1985): 45-70, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Shock has long been the dominant paradigm for theorizing urban modernism. See: and others.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia Leighton. "Colonialism, L'art Negre and Les Femmes d'Alger." in Christopher Green ed. *Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger*. (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

culture by fixating on the most visible signs of difference in the painting.<sup>51</sup> For instance, critics have often differentiated the masked women as distinctly ugly, bestial and dirty or contagion ridden - racist stereotypes that have long plagued darker-skinned peoples.<sup>52</sup>

Contemporary responses to Picasso's artwork continue to challenge its colonial patriarchal contexts. The title poem of "Picasso, I want my face back" (2009), written by commonwealth poetry prize-winner Grace Nichols for instance, speaks back against the surrealist portraits of Picasso's muse, the surrealist photographer Dora Mar. The poem critiques the objectification of the muse and their subjugation to the artist: 'Picasso, I want my face back / the unbroken geography of it.' This first person resistance to Picasso's visual renditions of Dora Mar challenge an artistic process that exploits others for its own ends.

The spectacle and viewing dynamics of *Les Demoiselles* are implicated and invested in colonialist logics because they work to position the women as "savage" transgressors of the supposed boundaries of civilization. Wildness is a colonialist ideology that justifies the surveillance and policing of colonial "others" rehearsed in Picasso's artwork. However, Jack Halberstam's mission to reclaim the governance-opposing disorderliness of wildness as a potential mode of unknowing and a resistant ontology in his recently released *Wild Things, The Disorder of Desire* (2020) offers the potential for theorizing wildness as a means of opposing and dismantling, rather than affirming, systems of colonialist exploitation. While Picasso's *Les Demoiselles* undoubtedly participates in patriarchal and colonial subjugations, the depicted women's unflinching gaze also challenges the one-sidedness of the male, imperial gaze. As such the painting functions within a complex structure of wildness that

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<sup>51</sup> Anna C. Chave. "New encounters with Les Demoiselles d'Avignon: Gender, race, and the origins of cubism." *The Art Bulletin* 76.4 (1994): 596-611.

<sup>52</sup> Chave. "New Encounters". (1994). p. 606.

simultaneously proliferates and resists the circulation of colonialist ideologies. The painting prompts a reconsideration of how the other is positioned, constructed and maintained, and for whom, considerations which are vital for this chapter, as it addresses the relationship among wildness, art, and objectification against the backdrop of colonial modernism when the British Empire is at its height in the aftermath of WWI.

Primitivism involved the appropriation of the ancestral arts of black artists to the purposes of art and engendered the vocabulary for the discourse that maintained and supported the power relationships of colonization.<sup>53</sup> *Les Demoiselles* responds to and incorporates some of the era-defining contextual boundary transgressions of modernism. The liberation of women following the ‘Great War’<sup>54</sup>, and the mixing of cultures, peoples, and nations during the height of the British Empire are the most pertinent developments, as both gave rise to particular societal anxieties that provide context for the artwork. Picasso, and modernist artists more broadly, expressed particular anxieties regarding the blurred boundary between sex and work<sup>55</sup> represented by the prostitute whose body is a marketable commodity, and the appearance of colonial natives in the metropolis. *Les Demoiselles* provoked horror, anxiety, and disgust in its contemporary viewers, who emphasized the bestiality and grotesque indecency of the women. This critical reception, typically sexist, heterosexist, racist and neocolonialist<sup>56</sup> register white patriarchal anxieties about women and colonial “others” which inform the male, imperial gaze: the subject for this chapter.

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<sup>53</sup> Kobena Mercer ed. *Cosmopolitan modernisms*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005)

<sup>54</sup> British women entered the workforce during the war and won the right to vote in 1919 in part due to their contribution to the war effort while their husbands and brothers were away fighting.

<sup>55</sup> Stallybrass and White describe the fear, anxiety, but also desire that is stirred up by the interpolation of the slums and the general public in the Victorian era, emphasising the terrifying yet titillating tactility of the prostitute and slum-dweller. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. (Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>56</sup> Chave. "New encounters". (1994).

In the early twentieth century British colonialism shaped transnational migration and the cosmopolitanism of the city. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* exhibits the inequality of the sexes and of nations and peoples, a legacy of modernism and European colonialism. I have chosen Jean Rhys to open this dissertation because her metropolitan novels strive to expose and challenge these inequalities by centering protagonists who exemplify the entrapment faced by colonial female subjects in the metropole. My chapters each follow a particular phase and period of transnational migration - from colonial, to postcolonial, to less explicitly colonial forms of contemporary migration. The midcentury migration of Caribbean Commonwealth citizens - the so-called "Windrush" generation - will be the subject of my second chapter. Rhys' modernist novels model how texts from the colonial era handle the im/possibilities that attend multiply-marginalized characters. The portrayals of female colonial experience in her novels is a good example of an earlier "logic" that is superseded in later literary-historical investigations the likes of which challenge the idea that rigid boundaries between colony/metropole, black/white relations ever existed, and which explore the nuances of the male colonial gaze as a bidirectional as opposed to unilateral system, mutually shaped by fear and desire on both sides.<sup>57</sup>

Rhys associates colonial expatriate women with many forms of liminality: between cities, as participant and spectator, present lived experience and memory, metropole and colony, dream and reality, wildness, and civilization. This liminality is shaped by the surveilling male gaze and its investments in colonial logics. The male, imperial gaze sets up boundaries between the subject (the male gazer) and object (the watched woman), but the

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<sup>57</sup> For an example of contemporary theorisation on the nuances of the gaze, see: Bracha Ettinger. *The matrixial borderspace*. Vol. 28. (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

gaze is also complicated by liminality, which works to unsettle and transgress these boundaries, complicating dominant ways of seeing and being seen. The novels make some attempt at unsettling the binaries implicated in earlier logics used to address colonial experience. However, Rhys' reliance on colonially implicated binaries in her depictions of female reality, even as she strives to critique and challenge them, situate her novels in a particular historical moment.

Analyses of Jean Rhys' fictions tend to fall into one of three camps: they discuss some aspect of psychoanalysis, trauma, or failure in Rhys' characters; they consider Rhys in light of postcolonialism, transnationalism, or imperialism; or they analyze her work through the spectrum of her identity as a Caribbean, Creole, or West Indian woman writer. More recently criticism has focused more on Jean Rhys' status as a colonial woman, work to which I respond and contribute.

Jean Rhys occupies a complicated identity as a member of the white settler class inhabiting cultural space between white European and black Caribbean society, whose positionality is seldom examined in English texts of imperialism. As a white, female, Dominican colonial expatriate living and writing in London and Paris, Rhys is subject to gendered violence and positioned as a colonial "other" in European cities during the height of the British Empire. Dominica was a British colony until 1978. However, as a white settler woman she is also historically implicated as an agent and beneficiary in colonialism, and occupies a very different positionality from Black or Indigenous native peoples. Rhys has a particular and informed perspective on the marginalization experienced by deracinated colonial women in the city, and many of her protagonists are autobiographical in nature. While her cosmopolitan novels strive to expose the violence of British imperialism through

the suffering experienced by her female deracinated colonial protagonists in the metropole, her writing also elides white settler womens' complicity in colonialism and is limited by its privileging of whiteness.

The gaze also enacts a form of capital (non) exchange that makes women's survival contingent on their ability to commodify themselves for men. The women in Jean Rhys' novels all depend, to varying degrees, on the financial support of men for their survival. As such they often self-fashion themselves to appeal to a set of narrow and unforgiving patriarchal aesthetic standards. They are forced to make themselves into objects of consumption in order to support themselves. It comes as little surprise, then, that Rhys' protagonists frequently identify with works of art; Julia, the protagonist of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, for instance, encounters a reproduction of a Modigliani nude as 'more real' than her, and at the same time 'the same' and 'all that matters' of her.<sup>58</sup>

The male gaze assumes the authority of the male subject, while the imperial gaze assumes the centrality of white western national subjects. My theoretical conceptualisation of the male, imperial gaze is indebted to the work of film theorists Laura Mulvey and Elizabeth Ann Kaplan<sup>59</sup>, as well as John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Both Berger and Fanon describe dissociation and splitting as symptoms of internalizing the gaze. Berger argues that since the way a woman appears often determines how she will be treated, in particular by men, women must interiorise it 'to acquire some control over this process.'<sup>60</sup> Women subject themselves to their own self-surveillance as if observing themselves from outside of themselves: 'a woman must continually watch

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<sup>58</sup> Jean Rhys. *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. (WW Norton & Company, 1997). p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> Kaplan argues that the imperial gaze functions as a one-way system: the rulers look and the colonized are looked at.

<sup>60</sup> John Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (Penguin UK, 2008). p. 46.



herself'.<sup>61</sup> Both the role of the surveyed (female) and surveyor (who is male) become internalized so that women turn themselves into an object of vision by perceiving themselves from outside of themselves.<sup>62</sup> As such the male gaze dictates relations between men and women as well as the relation of women to themselves.<sup>63</sup> Fanon notes that colonialism produces a similar estrangement in colonized black subjects, who develop an inferiority complex as a result of internalizing the white gaze and the colonizer's subjugating regard. This results in a double bind for colonial subjects wherein to be black is to be made to feel inferior, but to attempt to be white instead of black results in complete self-annihilation.<sup>64</sup> Dissociation is highlighted by all of these theorists and is experienced in some form by all of Rhys' protagonists that I discuss, which is symptomatic of their estrangement and marginalization in the city.

The male imperial gaze functions as a caging mechanism in Rhys' fiction. The protagonists are repeatedly described in animalistic terms and often situated as prey to both the watchful eyes of the crowd and of the personified city. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, wildness has been weaponized by providing language and ideology that upholds the "coloniality of being", developing the othering lexicon to justify massive systems of violence and the exploitation of Native and Black peoples.<sup>65</sup> Within this structure of being, Wynter proposes, bourgeois humanism produced an imperial order of man dependent on a series of foundational hierarchies all organized around an exaggerated sense of the power of colonial masculinity. This power expressed itself through seemingly neutral formulations —order,

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<sup>61</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008). p. 46.

<sup>62</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008). p. 47.

<sup>63</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008). p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black skin, white masks*. (Grove press, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Sylvia Wynter. "Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—An argument." *CR: The new centennial review* 3.3 (2003): 257-337.

law, social stability, with the police positioned as fundamental to protecting collective “safety”. However, this “order” actually comes at the expense of persecuting those others who are constituted as irrational, unstable, and violent, as “threats” to urban safety, as represented by the oppression faced by the “wild” colonial expatriate women that populate Rhys’ novels.<sup>66</sup>

Liminality takes the form of haunting in the novels; Rhys’ protagonists frequently encounter their own ghosts as they navigate the city. John Berger’s depiction of how women are ‘continually accompanied by [their] own image of [themselves]’ describes the internalized watcher as a ghostly shadow companion.<sup>67</sup> This kind of self-haunting is unheimlich in Sigmund Freud’s terms because it manifests as something terrifying that leads back to something familiar, as repressed trauma from the protagonist’s pasts repeatedly surface and fracture the narrative and its linearity.

Colonial and metropolitan spaces haunt one another in the novels. Rhys opposes the marginalization of native colonial subjects in western imperialist cities by making them the central protagonists in her novels. The narratives in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1931) and most particularly *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) travel seamlessly between the colony and the metropole in a manner which resists any stable demarcation of the two; the boundaries delineating these spaces become blurred and destabilized boundaries. I am indebted to postcolonial theory and its various readings of haunting, particularly to Homi Bhaba’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) and “The World and the Home” (1992) for their inherent

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<sup>66</sup> Wynter. "Unsettling the coloniality of being". (2003).

<sup>67</sup> John Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (Penguin UK, 2008).

liminality. These texts focus on in-between spaces, dislocation, and non margin centers, which provides theoretical navigation for the liminal terrains of Rhys' fictions.<sup>68</sup>

Bhabha argues that stirrings of the “unhomely” - a paradigmatic of postcolonial experience which involves the estrangement and displacement of historical migration and cultural relocation - echo through fiction, making another world visible to us in a manner both ‘divided’ and ‘disorienting’.<sup>69</sup> The “unhomely moment” connects the traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunction of political existence by blurring boundaries between public and private and home and world.<sup>70</sup> Bhabha argues that fiction can re-orient us to a different temporality through which to signify the event of history; he calls this ‘historical re-cognition.’<sup>71</sup> However, the unhomely is unknowable and unrepresentable without the present, which mediates a kind of return. The “post” in postcolonial, then, refers both to a future tense (as in beyond colonialism) as well as to a return to colonialism’s roots, in order to recognise the way that its othering ideologies continue to shape socio-political relationality *now*. By traversing two or more disparate cultural and geographical spaces, a migrant perspective undermines the primacy and fixity of the nation-state and its narrowly conceived determinations of identity. Bhabha also describes the present from which fiction arises in these terms: as a liminal, migrational entity, capable of re-orienting our view of history by way of a passage between temporalities:

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<sup>68</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. “The World and the Home.” *Social Text* No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992), pp. 141-153, p. 141.

<sup>70</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Bhabha. “The World and the Home.” (1992). p. 143.

‘the present that informs the aesthetic process is not a transcendental process but a moment of “transit” open to disjunction and discontinuity which sees the process of history engaged in a negotiation of the framing and naming of social reality, not what lies inside or outside reality but where to draw (or inscribe) the “meaningful” line between them.’<sup>72</sup>

The new world that emerges from the unhomely is a “haunted” present, a phenomenon that is depicted literally when Rhys’ protagonists encounter their own ghosts. These shadowy manifestations of themselves and their pasts often mediate a confrontation with multiple temporalities. These temporal de-stabilisations connect the personal struggles of the protagonists to the broader historical context of deracination during the time of the British Empire. However, often the new world, or “third space”, Bhabha speaks of being opened up by the unhomely feels just out of reach.<sup>73</sup> The protagonists are often unable to recognise their own ghosts, a symbol both for their personal isolation in the metropole and for how colonialism and its hauntings can wreak havoc on individual and collective consciousness as opposed to strengthening it.<sup>74</sup> These hauntings signify an inability to move beyond their traumatic pasts and the contexts of patriarchal and colonial exploitation that shape them. Rhys' heroines are seen to be repeatedly (re)-traumatized and victimized by intersecting colonial and patriarchal forms of power that operate on all levels of the urban spaces they

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<sup>72</sup> Bhabha. “The World and the Home.” (1992). p. 144.

<sup>73</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>74</sup> Michael F. O'Riley. *Postcolonial haunting and victimization: Assia Djebar's new novels*. (Peter Lang, 2007).

move through. Their limited agency to change their circumstances marks a bleak reality for colonial migrants living in western urban centers in the early 1900s.

*Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), which opens the chapter, attends to the liminality of being both a participant and a spectator. The protagonist Sasha Jensen's unwilling positioning as both a participant in and a spectator to the world's fair<sup>75</sup> is a duality which denotes the complicated positioning of native subjects living in the imperial metropolis. While *Good Morning, Midnight* mostly takes place in Paris, it begins and ends in London, and repeatedly travels back there in accordance with Sasha's past reminiscences. The narrative hovers in liminal territory between cities and between temporal moments, allowing us to read it as a London novel while also attending to important particularities about the Parisian context, such as the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne*, which Sasha eventually visits on her last evening in Paris before returning home to London.<sup>76</sup>

*Voyage in the Dark* (1934) deals in turn with the liminality of migrant passage and the experience of un- and re-homing, as well as to the paradoxical signification of the sea, which connotes both a passage and a barrier to retrieving the young protagonist Anna Morgan's homeland, Dominica. *After Leaving Mackenzie* (1931) focuses on a similarly paradoxical function of animalism and wildness. On the one hand the discourse of wildness is seen to proliferate colonial ideologies that position Rhys' deracinated women as inhuman animals,

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<sup>75</sup> Popularized in the late 19th and early 20th century, the so-called "world's fairs" were international exhibitions dedicated to showcasing the achievement of nations and representing the nation to itself. These fairs functioned as a microcosm of colonialism because they architecturally segregated the colonies in separate buildings and exploited native people, who were brought in to work for the profit of the fair and the voyeuristic enjoyment of its spectators.

<sup>76</sup> The Exposition Universelle, or the Paris Exposition was a "world's fair" that, most importantly for my purposes, exhibited various pavilions for the French colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Southeast Asia. These pavilions featured traditional architecture of the countries and displays of local products mixed with modern electric lighting, motion pictures, dioramas, and guides, soldiers, and musicians in local costumes. For instance, the French Caribbean islands promoted their rum and other products.

caged in by their relentless surveillance like animals in a zoo. On the other hand, Julia Martin, this novel's protagonist, harnesses wildness as a means to challenge and undo patriarchal associations of women with domesticity, as well as imperialist notions of civilisation that seek to conquer and tame the "wild" according to racist and colonialist ideologies. In both novels the boundaries between dreams and reality, past and present, and the imperial metropole and native colony are repeatedly blurred. This refusal to draw spatial and ideological boundaries signifies Rhys' anti-imperialist sentiment. The novels resist the drawing of borders, unsettling colonialist delineations of civilized from uncivilized, human from inhuman, and so on, which serve to excuse and justify the exploitation of native peoples.

The female colonial expatriates who populate Rhys' fictions embody various forms of boundary transgression. Their status as outsiders to the urban economy represent the oppressive ordering dictates of colonial modernism, which are rehearsed and recapitulated in and through the anthropomorphised western metropolises that they inhabit. The surveillance and exhibiting to which these deracinated female protagonists are repeatedly subjected signifies the omnipresence of a male imperial gaze, a visual tool of objectification which functions to uphold patriarchy and nationalism. Like the omniscient guards of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon<sup>77</sup> along with Charles Baudelaire's idle, detached, and anonymous observer of modern life<sup>78</sup> who finds his home wandering the arcades of nineteenth-century

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<sup>77</sup> Designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century, the panopticon was a model for a prison, but could lend itself to other institutional systems of control. The concept of the design is to allow all prisoners of an institution to be observed by a single security guard, without the inmates being able to tell they are being watched. Jeremy Bentham. *The panopticon writings*. (Verso Books, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> Charles-Pierre Baudelaire. "The Flaneur". *The painter of modern life*. (Penguin UK, 2010). The flâneur began as a literary type of 19th-century France associated with leisure, idleness, and urban exploration. It was Walter Benjamin, drawing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, who made this figure the object of scholarly interest in

Paris, the observer is ideally positioned to see but not be seen, while the object of their gaze is exposed. The flâneur cannot be female because she is hyper-visible and hyper-policed in the city.<sup>79</sup> Rhys' metropolitan novels convey an understanding of intersectional power structures dictated by gender, nationality, race, and class that undergird urban living spaces during the height of the British Empire.<sup>80</sup> Surveillance policies borders and shapes how colonial women appear as liminal, yet in turn the liminality and transgressive capacities of these women also troubles the gaze.

Wildness is a colonialist ideology that justifies the surveillance and policing of colonial outsiders, the likes of which Rhys' protagonists are unrelentingly subjected to. However, Jack Halberstam's mission to reclaim the governance-opposing disorderliness of wildness as a potential mode of unknowing and a resistant ontology in his recently released *Wild Things, The Disorder of Desire* (2020) offers the potential for theorizing wildness as a means of opposing and dismantling, rather than affirming, systems of colonialist exploitation.<sup>81</sup> While Picasso's *Les Demoiselles* undoubtedly participates in patriarchal and colonial subjugations, the depicted women's unflinching gaze also challenges the one-sidedness of the male, imperial gaze.<sup>82</sup> As such the painting functions within a structure

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the 20th century, as an emblematic archetype of urban, modern experience. Benjamin depicts the flâneur as a connoisseur of the streets, particularly at home in the Parisian arcades.

<sup>79</sup> While for the purposes of the work in this chapter the concept of a female flâneur is entirely incompatible with the hyper-visibility of female colonial women in the city, I still want to recognise the important feminist work that has been done on the category of the flâneuse by the likes of Janet Wolff, Deborah L. Parsons, Helen Carr, and others.

<sup>80</sup> "Intersectionality" was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw. It is a concept explicitly indebted to black feminist theory. See: Kimberle Crenshaw. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1241.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Halberstam. *Wild Things*. (Duke University Press, 2020). p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Art historians have theorised feminist subtexts about women coming to power due to the positioning of the central figures in the painting and their relation to Venus Anadyomene (from Greek, "Venus Rising From the Sea"). This motif contains the subtext of a woman coming to power at the expense of a patriarch whose authority was unexpectedly and irretrievably revoked, providing the possibility to read the painting as a feminist fable or good omen of vengeance won against male tyranny. Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk. *Art history: a critical introduction to its methods*. (Manchester University Press, 2006).

of wildness that simultaneously proliferates and resists the circulation of colonialist ideologies. The painting prompts a reconsideration of how the other is positioned, constructed and maintained, and for whom, considerations which are vital for this chapter, as it addresses the relationship among wildness, art, and objectification against the backdrop of colonial modernism when the British Empire is at its height in the aftermath of WWI.<sup>83</sup>

Rhys' novels explicitly respond to this time of crisis in the history of the Empire. Like Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, they expose the ways in which the male imperial gaze functions through intersecting patriarchal and colonial forms of oppression and conquest that work to reinscribe such divides as viewer and object, self and other, and western center and colonial periphery. However, they also work to unsettle and problematize these boundaries both by detailing the traumatic impact of marginalization on the protagonists as well as by harnessing wildness' potential for destabilization and disorder. Rhys urban female colonial expatriates with 'no pride, no name, no face, no country' who 'don't belong anywhere'<sup>84</sup> are transgressive precisely because of this unbelonging.

Liminality is inseparable from colonial divides because it is experienced in relation to a structure where the metropole is imaginatively and materially divided from colony, but it also functions to challenge and problematise these boundaries. The novels foreground their liminality to destabilize temporal and spatial order, with narratives that hover between the colony and the metropole, the past and the present, and dreams and reality, establishing a narrative form that mirrors the destabilization and dislocations of migrant modernism. While necessarily imperfect given the limited agency the protagonists experience to bring about

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<sup>83</sup> Nigel Rigby and Howard J. Booth, eds. *Modernism and Empire: Writing and British Coloniality 1890-1940*. (Manchester University Press, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Jean Rhys. *Good morning, midnight*. (WW Norton & Company, 1986).



change in their personal lives, the novel's narratological liminality exposes and unsettles imperialist divides in the context of the Western imperial metropolis.

**1. 'I don't want the way to the exhibition - I want the way out'<sup>85</sup>: Imperialist Encounters at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* (1937) in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)**

Until recently criticism has not paid enough attention to the situated context of 1930s Paris and London in Jean Rhys' fiction. In particular, 1937 Paris was teeming with people from around the world who functioned as both spectators of and participants in the world's fair, a location that Sasha Jensen, the protagonist of *Good Morning, Midnight*, spends the novel avoiding but eventually goes to visit on her last night in Paris before her return to London.<sup>86</sup> World's fairs, also known as universal exhibitions or expositions, were large international long-standing exhibitions (typically 3-6 months) designed to showcase the industrial, scientific, and cultural achievements of nations. They were popularly held in imperial western metropolises during the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>87</sup> "Exhibition" and "exposition" have slightly different valences. "Exhibition" suggests a public display of works of art or items of interest, held in an art gallery or museum or at a trade fair, while an "exposition" has a notably consumerist element: it indicates an event at which people, businesses, etc. show

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<sup>85</sup> Rhys. *Good morning, midnight*. (1986). p. 6. All future references will be to this edition and will be indicated in the body of the text.

<sup>86</sup> Linda Camarasana. "Exhibitions and repetitions": Jean Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* and the world of Paris 1937. in Gay Wachman, Robin Hackett, and Freda Hauser ed. *At home and abroad in the empire: British women write the 1930s*. (Associated University Presse, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> The Great Exhibition of Products of French Industry (Paris, France, 1798 - 1849) was a precursor to the Great Exhibition of 1851, held in Hyde Park, London, which was typically regarded as the first in a series of world fairs, exhibitions of culture and industry that became popular in the 19th century.

and sell their goods; as in a trade fair.<sup>88</sup> In “Paris, capital of the 19th century” (1938), Walter Benjamin connects the rise of world expositions to the birth of the entertainment industry and the transformation of the world and its contents into commodities.<sup>89</sup> The exhibition becomes a sign for the operation of commodity spectacle more broadly.<sup>90</sup> “Exhibition”’s connotations of spectatorship and display, and “exposition”’s context of production, commodification, and consumerism foreground systems of objectification in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939).

The age of the exhibition is necessarily the colonial age.<sup>91</sup> Aside from displaying cultural and technological products, the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* also displayed the nation of *Grande France* to itself.<sup>92</sup> The role of the colonies in informing the portrayal of the Empire through ‘a historical narrative that produces an historical erasure’<sup>93</sup> is particularly pertinent for understanding the positioning of colonial expatriates living in the western metropolis. It is important to note that Sasha Jansen, the protagonist of *Good Morning, Midnight* is not provided with a cultural or geographical background outside of the metropolitan centers of Paris and London. Nonetheless, Sasha reflects the paradoxical situation of the colonial migrant who relocates to Europe but is unable to establish a sense of "home" in her new place of residence. Jean Rhys’ identity as a colonial migrant is similarly complex. Rhys was born in Dominica in 1890 to a Welsh doctor and white Creole mother and was brought up in the West Indies before moving to England in 1907 at the age of seventeen, after which point she returned to her birthplace only once over

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<sup>88</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (online).

<sup>89</sup> Walter Benjamin. "Paris, capital of the 19th century." *New Left Review* 48 (1968): 77.

<sup>90</sup> Christina Britzolakis. "'This way to the exhibition': genealogies of urban spectacle in Jean Rhys's interwar fiction." *Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007).

<sup>91</sup> Timothy Mitchell. "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order", in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff. (London & New York: Routledge, 2002). p. 303.

<sup>92</sup> Linda Camarasana. "Exhibitions and repetitions". (2009). p. 56.

<sup>93</sup> Linda Camarasana. "Exhibitions and repetitions". (2009). p. 57.

the course of her life. White, settler descendant women inhabit a very different positionality to Black and Indigenous peoples as they are partially implicated as agents and beneficiaries in colonialism, in spite of also being subject to gendered violence and potentially inhabiting a position as “other”.

The question as to what extent Rhys can be considered a West Indian author as a white descendent of slave-owners who did not often return to Dominica over the course of her life and whose protagonists often inhabit ambiguous cultural and geographical identities has been discussed and disputed.<sup>94</sup> However, many critics have emphasized the influence of Dominica in Rhys’ fiction, sometimes so subtle they are imperceptible to the unacquainted reader, and at other times more clearly central to the narrative, as in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) a post-colonial novel set in the West Indies and in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) whose young protagonist is explicitly identified as a Dominican migrant living in London.<sup>95</sup> As Erica Johnson has argued, while *Good Morning, Midnight*, makes only vague references to the Caribbean, Rhys embeds Creole elements in the text in order to suggest that Sasha's estrangement from country, language, and body results from a colonial Caribbean past which informs Sasha's experience of metropolitan space.<sup>96</sup>

The term “Creole”, as Antonio Benitez-Rojo explains it, refers to a complex linguistic and cultural system that emerges from the mixing and intersection of difference.<sup>97</sup> Historically, the linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions of various Caribbean islands

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<sup>94</sup> Helen Carr. "Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual." in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester University Press, 2003): p. 93-113.

<sup>95</sup> Erica Johnson. "Creole Errance in" *Good Morning, Midnight*." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 3.3 (2003): 37-46. p. 38

<sup>96</sup> Johnson. "Creole Errance". (2003): 37-46. p. 38

<sup>97</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo. *The repeating island: The Caribbean and the postmodern perspective*. (Duke University Press, 1996).

represent diverse composites of indigenous, European, African, and Asian influences. Creole identity is complicated by the legacy of colonialism because, historically, many island-dwellers feel a sense of exile even in their Caribbean countries, a result of the islands' historically subordinate, dependent relationships with metropolitan Europe. Rhys sums up this sense of estrangement, otherness, and unbelonging shared by all of her heroines in her autobiography *Smile Please* (1979), where she writes: "I would never belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong and failing [...] I am a stranger and I always will be."<sup>98</sup> Even when the Caribbean origins of her protagonists remain ambiguous, Rhys' characters can be read in the context of the perpetual displacement and estrangement she experiences as a colonial migrant living in imperial western metropolises.<sup>99</sup>

For the purpose of the exhibition, the colonies were set up in entirely separate buildings, enforcing an architectural segregation that recapitulates, rehearses, and makes spatially explicit the ideological boundaries drawn between nation and colony. The exhibition site therefore foregrounds the modern, progressive ideology of nationhood while ironically illustrating the competition between hierarchies within and exclusions from European nationalism.<sup>100</sup> As Linda Camarasana points out, the three core male characters - Sasha's former husband Enno, the young gigolo René, and Nicholas Delmar, a Russian man who approaches Sasha on the street to inquire as to why she looks so sad - all served in foreign armies, indicating France's imperial incursions into North Africa and shattering the image of the unity of nations by exposing how Imperial Europe produces exiles, mercenaries and

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<sup>98</sup> Jean Rhys. *Smile Please*. (Penguin UK, 2016). p. 124.

<sup>99</sup> Lin Yan. "Identity, Place and Non-belonging in Jean Rhys's Fiction." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 8.10 (2018): 1278-1282.

<sup>100</sup> Linda Camarasana. "Exhibitions and repetitions". (2009).

emigres in national wars.<sup>101</sup> Sasha Jensen and René, a young gigolo whom she meets in Paris, make a visit to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* towards the close of the novel. Sasha's repeated description of the exhibition as 'cold' coupled with René's comment that the star of peace, intended to symbolize international harmony, is 'mesquin' (petty) and 'vulgar' (p. 135) exposes the historical erasures of the exhibition. The exhibition's ideology of unity is ultimately revealed to be nothing more than a facade: cold, empty, and unrealisable. The eerie omnipresence of the exhibition in the novel echoes the all-encompassing representative power of the world exposition in the 19th and 20th centuries, when it served to manufacture national identity and imperial purpose through a calculated representation of the non-western world.

A vignette following her visit to an artist's studio provides context for the kind of ephemeral community of the excluded that Sasha comes across in her navigations through the city. Sasha perceives certain figures from the pictures she has seen in the studio walking alongside her through the city, notably grouping together the 'misshapen dwarfs' who juggle with 'huge coloured balloons', a 'four breasted woman', and an 'old prostitute waits hopelessly outside the urinoir' (p. 83): a collectivity of outsiders. The former two figures find their logical home in the circus, where they would perform or exhibit themselves for profit.<sup>102</sup> The inclusion of the latter, a prostitute, alongside these circus-like performers, signifies the voyeuristic spectatorship women are subjected to in the city under the male gaze, which transforms them into pseudo circus animals for voyeuristic purposes. The prostitute is also

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<sup>101</sup> Linda Camarasana. "Exhibitions and repetitions". (2009) p. 58.

<sup>102</sup> During the 1870s it was common for circuses to have what was called a "freak show", where human disabilities and abnormalities were exhibited for profit and the spectatorship and pleasure of an audience.

positioned in proximity to and thereby associated with the dirt of the ‘urinoir’ (p. 83), affirming their status as urban waste.

The aliveness of the personified pictures, ‘vivid’ canvases that are said to ‘resist’ and ‘curl up’ so as to avoid going ‘into their frames’ (p. 81), contrast explicitly with Sasha’s deadness; she is ‘empty of everything’ (p. 43), her face a ‘tortured and tormented mask’ that can be taken off whenever she likes and ‘hung up on a nail’ (p. 33). Sasha finds herself astonished by the vividness of the paintings in Serge’s studio, which trigger in her a rare and miraculous, albeit ephemeral, feeling of happiness. When the pictures leap off their frames and into the city so as to walk alongside her as part of her ‘protective armour’ (p. 83), they construct a community of outsiders that challenge colonialism’s historical erasure of imperial “others” as concretised by the exhibition's architectural segregation of the colonies.

Colonial natives were imported to labor for the profit of the Exhibition, under the constant surveillance of streams of visitors while they were also policed by organizers who made sure the profit from the products they produced went directly to the exhibition.<sup>103</sup> This commodification of the laboring body rehearses the colonial exploitation of native’s bodies for the profit of the empire. Similarly, Sasha is forced to commodify herself for the male gaze to ensure her financial stability. Her survival is almost entirely dependent on how she is perceived, particularly by men. Her employment both as a mannequin and subsequently as a saleswoman in a women’s clothes shop emphasizes the display of female bodies. Her only other source of income depends on her ability to successfully commodify herself to appeal to patriarchal aesthetic ideals. Men buy into her self-fashioned image by offering her financial support on the basis of an unspoken sexual contract.

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<sup>103</sup> Linda Camarasana. “Exhibitions and repetitions”. (2009).

Sasha is hyper-aware of her dependence on successful self-commodification, and makes increasingly desperate attempts to fit in, slowly realizing that this is impossible for her as a female colonial expatriate in Paris. Her claim to have ‘no pride, no name, no face, no country’ (p. 33) and most importantly no place of belonging (‘I don’t belong anywhere’ (p. 33)) articulates the estrangement and precarity of colonial outcasts living in the western metropolis in the early 20th century. Sasha, I argue, hovers, spectrally, between the roles of exhibition spectator and participant. When she visits the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* at the end of the novel her former nightmare becomes a reality. In the nightmare Sasha finds herself claustrophobically trapped in the London underground as she desperately searches in vain for an exit, only to be repeatedly and firmly directed towards the exhibition. The strangely prophetic fulfillment of what is foreshadowed in this initial nightmare, which rehearses the novel’s cyclical movement from London to Paris and back again,<sup>104</sup> indicates Sasha’s positioning as an exposition *participant* as well as spectator, because the exhibition seems to literally pull her in. Since all roads - literal and dreamlike - ultimately lead to the exhibition, this Sasha is situated as belonging in that space, even in spite of this belonging being experienced more like an entrapment.

Modern colonialism is particularly ocular in character. In “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”, Timothy Mitchell claims that the world exhibition contrived ‘not to make an accurate picture of the east but to set up the east as a picture [...] as an object on exhibit.’<sup>105</sup> Putting the world on display in this way not only represented cultural differences, but also worked to turn them into objects of modern consumption. The gaze of the colonizing

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<sup>104</sup> A journey which becomes mirrored in reverse in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* which is mostly set in London but begins and ends in Paris.

<sup>105</sup> Mitchell. “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”. (2002). p. 305.

west is a form of power and control that serves to objectify its colonies. Sasha is similarly entrapped by the male, imperial gaze which subjects her to constant, oppressive, and seemingly unavoidable surveyance throughout the novel. Representing the non-European “other” as a definable object of visual scrutiny also served Europeans in their establishment of a sense of cultural and scientific supremacy within an emerging global order.

Readings of *Good Morning, Midnight* have characteristically focused on the masochism of Jean Rhys’ protagonists who seem bound to recapitulate their past traumas in a vicious and inescapable cycle, without attending to historical context.<sup>106</sup> However, in this novel personal and historical trauma are intimately and inextricably bound up in one another. Sasha’s masochism; her abuse of alcohol as a narcotic for the suffering of everyday life, and her repeated, seemingly instinctive return to haunt the spaces of past traumas and spectacles, is bound up in the racial and sexual exclusions inherent in nationhood. Her inability to put an end to these masochistic spirals signifies a broader issue for colonial migrants in imperial metropolitan centers, where they are unable to settle or belong.

Christina Britzolakis’ depiction of the Paris Exposition brings dreams, the gaze, and an imperial global order into conversation:

The 1937 Paris Exposition sought to shore up the authority of a late imperial global order

through an imaginary dreamscape based on the commanding gaze. Mounted in the shadow of imminent world conflict, it could not help but reveal its staging of

‘international’ modernity as an ideology effect in crisis. It encoded, instead, a crisis in

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<sup>106</sup> Linda Camarasana. “Exhibitions and repetitions”. (2009).



the specular structure through which the metropole seeks to hold and taxonomize its colonized subjects within its gaze.<sup>107</sup>

The Exhibition rehearses the authority of an imperial global order through an imaginary dreamscape informed and affirmed by the segregation of the buildings representing the colonies, the objectified position of the natives working within them, and the colonial, or “commanding” gaze of its spectators. While spectators to the Exhibition were mixed, French nationals and other members of colonizing nations saw their superiority reflected back at them by the Exhibition

while colonial subjects were confronted with their inferiority and subjugation to *Grande France*, mirrored, for instance, in the Exhibition’s commodification of native labor and the architectural segregation of the buildings representing the colonies.<sup>108</sup> The Exhibition performs the conditionality of colonial belonging through a logic of reciprocity wherein colonized nations provide material goods in exchange for the benefits of French civilisation. As mentioned previously, Sasha first encounters the exhibition in a nightmare before visiting it on her last night before leaving Paris to return to London<sup>109</sup>:

‘I am in the passage of a tube station in London. Many people are in front of me; many people are behind me. Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition. This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t want the way to the

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<sup>107</sup> Britzolakis. "This way to the exhibition." (2007). p. 477.

<sup>108</sup> There were many dissenting voices of Exposition, including left-wing Paris newspapers *L'Humanité* and *Le Populaire* which criticized the “mission civilisatrice” for being merely a cover for exploitative foreign conquest. Surrealist writers such as Louis Aragon also distributed tracts entitled "Do Not Visit The Exposition."

<sup>109</sup> This is significant in itself because it marks her departure and also arguably serves as a catalyst for the violent assault that ends the novel. It is a precursor to her destruction.

exhibition - I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left but no exit sign. [...] I touch the shoulder of the man walking in front of me. I say 'I want the way out'. But he points to the placards and his hand is made of steel [...] The steel finger points along a long stone passage. This Way - This Way - This Way to the exhibition' (p. 6-7).

The claustrophobia of Sasha's nightmare is palpable; she is squeezed into the middle of a crowd, and the labyrinthine passages of the underground tube station all seem to lead back to the same place, as opposed to offering a possibility to escape from her entrapment. The way out and Exhibition increasingly blur together, signifying the impossibility for Sasha to escape the omnipresence of the colonial gaze, as represented by the exhibition. The nightmarish scene becomes her waking reality as she finds that passages 'will never lead anywhere', and doors 'will always be shut' (p. 23); exits for her cannot be found because they do not exist. The collapse of Sasha's dreamworld<sup>110</sup> into her reality and vice versa is epitomized when her initial exhibition nightmare is realized upon her visit to the Paris exhibition at the end of the novel. Sasha is haunted by the Exhibition throughout the novel, whose labyrinthine and dream-like form forces a confrontation with the exclusions and erasures inherent in European nationalism, and the precarity of deracinated migrants living in the metropolis. when she visits the exhibition, an instance that that can be read as 'unhomely'<sup>111</sup> because her personal trauma becomes bound up in the broader historical trauma of deracinated natives imported from the colonies to labor for the profit of the exhibition while under the watchful imperial

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<sup>110</sup> This dream-like quality to Jean Rhys' fiction has typically been discussed in relation to surrealism and surrealist fiction of the time, such as André Breton's *Nadja* (originally published in 1928).

<sup>111</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 11.

gaze of its spectators. Bhabha celebrates the negating activity in the unhomely moment because of its power to alter the present through an encounter with a past which leads to said present becoming temporally destabilized and altered, or “haunted” as he terms it.<sup>112</sup> Only through recognition and active engagement with historical trauma can there be a possibility to move beyond it.

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, however, unhomely moments lead us precisely back to where we started without the possibility for exit or escape. Sasha avoids living in the present by self-medicating with narcotics, alcohol, and men and subjects herself to a constant and seemingly uncontrollable recapitulation of her past traumas, as she is masochistically drawn to the Paris cafes where these traumatic events took place. The narrative structure can also be defined as traumatic as it is organized around triggers which result in involuntary and unavoidable returns to Sasha’s past in the present. As Sasha herself puts it: ‘there is no past, no future, just blackness [...] always the same’ (p. 143). As opposed to Bhabha’s hope for a present altered by the past, Sasha is trapped in a repeated backwards spiral that lands her in the past.<sup>113</sup>

According to Timothy Mitchell, the exhibition can be thought of as epitomizing the strange character of the early 20th century West: a place where one was continually pressed into service as a spectator by a world ordered so as to represent.<sup>114</sup> Echoing a phrase from Heidegger, Mitchell calls this the age of ‘the world *as* exhibition’ referring not to an exhibition of the world but to a world conceived and grasped as though it were an

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<sup>112</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>113</sup> The contributions of literary trauma theory are relevant here in explaining how the form of the novel is disrupted by triggers that bring up flashbacks, and ultimately a return of a traumatic past.

<sup>114</sup> Mitchell. “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”. (2002). p. 222.

exhibition.<sup>115</sup> *Good Morning, Midnight* dramatizes the blurred lines between where the exhibition ends and the world begins. The word ‘exhibit’, ‘exhibition’, and ‘exhibiting’ are used repeatedly throughout the novel. The so-called outside world is realized as an extension of the exhibition; its exits lead only to further exhibitions, challenging the idea of any separate or “real” world beyond it. This collapse of world and representation into one another by way of the exhibition is an example of what Guy Debord (1967) terms ‘spectacular society’ in which all that once was directly lived has become mere representation, signifying the central importance of the image in contemporary society.<sup>116</sup> Jean Baudrillard developed these ideas in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), where he argues that society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality.<sup>117</sup> The west becomes a mirrored labyrinth without exits organized as a system of commodities, values, meanings and representations.<sup>118</sup>

The novel’s sinister depiction of Sasha as an unwilling “performer” positions her as an unconsenting exhibition participant. Perhaps the most striking example of this unfolds after Sasha has been sexually assaulted by René, a gigilo she has been keeping company with. When Sasha is alone and crying in her hotel room she is positioned as a performer putting on ‘the last performance of What’s-her-name And Her Boys or It Was All Due To An Old Fur Coat’ (p. 153). Her suffering is presented as an entertainment piece for public consumption, even as her identity is being erased (‘what’s-her-name’) and she is heavily disassociating, as she perceives herself from outside of herself: ‘something has gone wrong. I am uneasy, half of myself somewhere else’ (p. 147). Sasha loses herself and becomes her

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<sup>115</sup> Mitchell. “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”. (2002). p. 296.

<sup>116</sup> Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle*. (Bread and Circuses Publishing, 2012).

<sup>117</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and simulation*. (University of Michigan press, 1994).

<sup>118</sup> Mitchell. “Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order”. p. 300.

own other in a traumatic manifestation of the divisive force of the imperial gaze, which sees women split into two parts: surveyor and surveyed.<sup>119</sup> This in itself is tied to the violence of the male gaze and the objectification of women as commodities or objects; Sasha describes herself as ‘an instrument, something to be made use of’ (p. 45).<sup>120</sup>

Above all, Sasha fears making an exhibition of herself by crying in public, but she finds herself becoming a public spectacle in spite of all efforts to ‘not to leave anything to chance’ (p. 8). She is consistently haunted by the eyes of the crowd (p. 39) and of the anthropomorphised rooms, houses, and other urban spaces that frown, leer, and sneer (p. 23) as she walks past. The city actively participates in Sasha’s marginalization, with ‘lighted eyes’ that recognise her precarity; they ‘know who to frown at’ (p. 23). Anthropomorphising the city as a living and hostile entity is an articulation of architecture’s complicity in imposing power relations in urban space.<sup>121</sup> As Deborah L. Parsons’ has argued, the urban landscape needs to be studied as a feature which brings the psychological and the material into collusion.<sup>122</sup> The intersecting patriarchal and colonial forms of oppression that Sasha repeatedly comes up against get mapped onto, and animate, London and Paris as hostile anthropomorphic figures with agency. These ‘living’ cities immediately recognise and reinscribe Sasha’s “outsider” status. Paris emerges as a hyper-masculine, white nationalist,

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<sup>119</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008).

<sup>120</sup> Dissociation is a common coping mechanism triggered by trauma that allows one to cut off from what is actually happening. For instance, people commonly report watching themselves from outside of themselves, and other symptoms of physical and mental splitting.

<sup>121</sup> Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman. *The sex of architecture*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996). *The Sex of Architecture* is a collection which explores the long history of the sexualisation of space and how architecture has been complicit in the control and exclusion of women recognising that race, nationality, values, politics and other such identifying features have spatial and architectural implications.

<sup>122</sup> Deborah L. Parsons. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity: Women, the City and Modernity*. (OUP Oxford, 2000).

surveillance state which exploits the double visibility of Sasha as a female, colonial expatriate in Paris, suggesting that male conquest is re-enacted in and through urban space.<sup>123</sup>

Society maintains watch over its citizens by using the architectural organization of space to enable assaults on individual and collective rights.<sup>124</sup> Sasha finds herself policed not only by the crowds but also by streets and rooms, who are always watching her. For instance, we open with an anthropomorphised hotel room which talks to Sasha like a familiar friend: ‘Quite like old times’, the room says. Yes? No?’ (p. 3). This phrase, echoed a hundred pages or so later (‘The room says: Quite like the old times. Yes? ... No? ...Yes?’ (p. 119)), is arguably answered by Sasha at the end of the novel (‘Yes - yes - yes...’ (p. 157)) confirming the room’s sinister assertion that this visit will be ‘quite like the old times’.<sup>125</sup> The room’s gesture to ‘old times’ carries a sinister familiarity that relates to Sigmund Freud’s description of the uncanny as everything that ought to have remained hidden and secret, yet becomes visible as a return of the repressed.<sup>126</sup> The vignette Freud uses to illustrate the uncanny is also eerily similar to the labyrinthine structures Sasha traverses in *Good Morning, Midnight*:

I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now,

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<sup>123</sup> Diana Agrest, Patricia Conway, and Leslie Kanes Weisman. *The sex of architecture*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

<sup>124</sup> For more detailed context on visual surveillance as a form of state power, see: Jeremy Bentham. *The panopticon writings*. (Verso Books, 2011). and Michel Foucault. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. (Vintage, 2012).

<sup>125</sup> It is important to emphasize that this “yes” is not in any way a sign of consent to the sexual assault at the close of the novel.

<sup>126</sup> Sigmund Freud. *The uncanny*. (Penguin, 2003). p. 4.

however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny [...] an involuntary return to the same situation.<sup>127</sup>

The ‘involuntary return’ described above explicitly relates to Sasha’s experience of haunting the streets of Paris where she is forced to repeatedly live out her past without any apparent agency to move beyond it. For Sasha, as in the above passage, navigating the city is a practice of ‘avoidance of certain cafes, of certain streets, of certain spots’ (p. 8) where she is destined to end up in spite of all her efforts. For instance, she becomes a spectacle in the Dome after adamantly insisting she will not end up there (p. 56).

While haunting describes the broader structure of this experience, the uncanny illuminates the feeling of claustrophobia and entrapment that are attached to it, feelings which Sasha also explicitly ascribes to her experience of the Exhibition in her nightmare. Ultimately, Sasha is doomed to repeat her past and tread the same pathways: ‘always the same stairs, always the same room’ (p. 23). These are instances of what Anthony Vidler calls the ‘architectural uncanny’ - a term coined by Vidler and inspired by Freud’s concept of the *unheimlich* (uncanny) - a strategy for ‘interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis’<sup>128</sup>. Importantly, Vidler suggests that the architectural uncanny ‘allows for a rewriting of [. . .] categories such as imitation (the double), repetition, the symbolic, the sublime’ so that ‘[q]uestions of gender and subject might be linked to the continuing discourse of estrangement and the Other, in the social and political context of racial, ethnic, and minority exclusion.’<sup>129</sup> This context is

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<sup>127</sup> Freud. *The uncanny*. (Penguin, 2003). p. 11.

<sup>128</sup> Anthony Vidler. *The architectural uncanny: Essays in the modern unhomey*. (MIT press, 1994). p. x.

<sup>129</sup> Vidler. *The architectural uncanny*. (1994). p. 12.

particularly apt given the centrality of the experience of female colonial deracination in *Good Morning, Midnight* where the anthropomorphised city rehearses gendered and imperialist exploitation, subjecting Sasha to unassailable voyeurism and marginalization.

The uncanniness of the novel is further emphasized by cyclical and repetitive phrases such as in Sasha's assertion 'I'm here because I'm here because I'm here' (p. 13). The echoing of the initial statement renders it meaningless. The sentence endlessly circles back on itself without the hope for an answer, explanation, or progression. These formal and navigational repetitions represent Sasha's impossibility to move beyond her past traumas and the all-encompassing marginalization she faces as a female colonial expatriate living in the imperial metropolis of Paris. The exhibition is positioned oxymoronically as both the thing to be escaped and the only means of escape in Sasha's nightmare, signifying her painful splitting as both an unwilling participant and spectator of the Exhibition.

Sasha comes to agree with the words first heard in a cafe ('Qu'est-ce quelle fout ici, la vielle?' (p. 42)) that echo and follow her throughout the novel. The novel's cyclicity formally echoes the labyrinthine urban passages from which Sasha cannot escape. Eventually she internalizes her own marginalization and turns these words on herself: 'what is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one? ...I quite agree too, quite. [...] I am asking myself all the time what the devil I am doing here. All the time' (p. 42), signifying her complete and utter subordination to the power of the gaze as she becomes resigned to being a spectacle of otherness and abjection.

The exploitation and commodification that underlies the exhibition are epitomized by the Parisian cafe Sasha is taken to by a male companion for the purpose of enjoying the spectacle of the poor and desolate who 'pay for the right to sleep' (p. 30) there. He notably



treats the cafe as an opportunity for voyeuristic entertainment: ““would you like to go in and have a look at them?” he said, as if he were exhibiting a lot of monkeys’ (p. 30). Casting a cold and calculating eye over the supposedly ‘curious’ and ‘interesting’ (p. 30) destitute poor sheltering in the cafe turns them into a spectacle for the consumption of comparably privileged people who come to survey them. This exposes the power dynamic of the watchers vs the watched. The poor are converted, metaphorically, into an ethnographic spectacle, forging a link between the cite’ indige`ne, the roped-off areas of artisanal activity within the world’s fair where the colonized become human exhibits, and Paris’ interwar working class and immigrant ghettos.<sup>130</sup> The animalistic imagery of the poor as ‘monkeys’ is important because of its explicit racialisation, and because discourse delineating the human from the inhuman is fundamental to the proliferation of colonialist exploitation.

The commodification of sleep as a conditional right that can be publicized and charged for by the state is reminiscent of the commodifying aspects of the exhibition, where natives work to facilitate and fund their own exploitation as a spectacle for public consumption. Like Sasha’s dreams, which are shaped by gendered and colonial dynamics, sleep is depicted as inherently bound up in systems of oppression - it is neither neutral nor free. Rhys pushes back against the Surrealist tendency to romanticize dreams as a means to escape reason by showing how sleep and dreams are implicated in oppressive power dynamics that, in this instance, are seen to disproportionately affect the unhoused, for whom no rights are unconditional, not even sleep.

Virginia Woolf’s famous 1930s essay, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” describes walking as a creative venture that offers pedestrians the chance to dip in and out of

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<sup>130</sup> Britzolakis. “This way to the exhibition”. (2007). p. 468.

people's minds in an imaginative act where they cast off the 'straight lines of personality' to 'put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others' as they move through the city.<sup>131</sup> For Woolf and her protagonists walking is 'the greatest of pleasures.'<sup>132</sup> For Sasha, however, street haunting is a fundamentally unpleasant and traumatic experience, involving not the escape of one's own mental and physical separateness to "haunt" other minds but rather the claustrophobia of *being* haunted by the eyes of the crowd, or, as in Sasha's case, the ghosts of her past and past selves, that resurface and rehearse her past traumas in the present.<sup>133</sup> Sasha cannot participate in the kind of pleasurable self-dissolution Woolf attributes to street haunting because she is the very antithesis of a ghost; her outsider status ensures her hyper-visibility. Walking therefore becomes a practice of avoidance, in direct contrast to Woolf's pleasurable directionlessness.

The personified city has agency in Rhys' fiction; it animates colonial and patriarchal forms of oppression by revealing how the city is organized in part to ensure the visual surveillance and policing of expatriate women. Sasha is plagued by a sense of watchful eyes on her and feelings of claustrophobia and unbelonging as she becomes an object for the consumption of houses whose lights become eyes that leer at her as she walks past (p. 23). Sasha's internalization of her own otherness ('I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed' p. 87) is a symptom of her exclusion which has grown into a form of self-alienation. Fanon describes physical and mental estrangement as a symptom of colonization on colonized natives in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

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<sup>131</sup> Virginia Woolf. *Street haunting: A London adventure*. (Read Books Ltd, 2017).

<sup>132</sup> Woolf. *Street haunting*. (2017).

<sup>133</sup> Sigmund Freud explains that returning to past trauma is a predisposition in all human beings in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*. (2003) however Sasha becomes stuck in these cycles without the potential to move beyond her personal and historical trauma.

‘completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood?’<sup>134</sup>

Fanon describes dislocation and dissociation (‘I took myself far off from my own presence’) and self-objectification (‘I [...] made myself an object’) as direct consequences of internalized racism. The violence of colonization is visualized through the visceral image of bodily mutilation: ‘an amputation [...] that splattered my whole body with black blood’. The pathological consequences of the male imperial gaze are dramatized in a vignette about a ‘mulatto’ mistress who, at first fairly unperturbed by the hateful eyes of people judging her on her race and unmarried status (‘it was worse that she wasn’t white’ (p. 78)), comes to a point where she will do anything not to see anyone. Delmar explains that the woman ‘hasn’t been out except after dark for two years’, prompting Sasha to experience ‘an extraordinary sensation, as if I was looking down into a pit’ (p. 78). Her identification with the woman, so scarred by the male gaze that she cannot bear to go out in daylight, speaks to the inescapability of the marginalized condition for deracinated migrants. The depiction of the woman as ‘no longer quite human, no longer quite alive’ (p. 79) illustrates the dehumanizing and depersonalizing impact of the male imperial gaze.

Despite the fact that women gained increased independence and public visibility in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the end of the war brought with it a backlash

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<sup>134</sup> Fanon. *Black skin, white masks*. (2008). p. 112.

against female emancipation. As Deborah L. Parsons points out in her book *Streetwalking The Metropolis* (2000), public women were associated with fallen women.<sup>135</sup> This speaks to the incongruence of the category of the female flaneuse. The only place where women can potentially achieve the flaneur's idleness is as consumers in the department store, otherwise they are only publically legible as prostitutes. Sasha is leered at in part because she is presumed to be a prostitute, the troubling and consumed object, rather than a subject with autonomy, agency and spatial rights.<sup>136</sup> The threat of violence, particularly sexual violence, finally gains materiality at the very end of the novel when the commis enters her hotel room and rapes her. While she tries to retreat into her mind as an escape from the violent trauma she is being subjected to, she finds herself increasingly internalizing the masculine hostility of the city and the crowd, so that even her mind offers her no escape or exit.

The liminal temporality of *Good Morning, Midnight*, which hovers between London and Paris, dreams and reality, and the past and present moment, becomes increasingly "haunted" as it goes along. This haunting only foreshadows Sasha's destruction, culminating when she is raped at the end of the novel, a scene which was touched on earlier in this section. As opposed to an altered and haunted present that encounters the past with the possibility of moving beyond what currently is, as in Bhaba's conceptualisation of the unhomely, as much as Sasha attempts to avoid her past it always catches up with her. Her present is a series of triggers that force Sasha to endlessly relive her past. The world fair tries to present the future of technology and of national "unity", but this is revealed to be a false promise predicated on the erasure of the exploitation of native peoples whom it

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<sup>135</sup> Parsons. *Streetwalking the Metropolis*. p. 125.

<sup>136</sup> Martínez. "Gendered urban spaces and strangeness." (2021).

simultaneously relies on to produce profit and represent *Grande France* as a great national power: a microcosm for colonialism. The singularity of Sasha's emotional experience thus also signifies a historical reality whereby the so-called 'future' actually constitutes a rehearsal of a traumatic past predicated on exploitation and abuse. Sasha's positioning as participant in and spectator of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* denotes the uncomfortable liminal situatedness of colonial subjects living in the metropole during the time of the French and British Empires. This liminality is particularly acute for Sasha, because Rhys hints at her identity as Creole, a position which is itself highly ambivalent, situated as it is between national, racial, and linguistic identities.<sup>137</sup> Despite their status as citizens of the Empire, the marginalization, subjugation, and exploitation of the native brought in to work for the profit of the Exhibition suggest their unassailable status of unbelonging within it. Sasha's liminal status as a Creole woman demarcates her positioning both as a participant and a spectator to the Exhibition. Her ethnic and geographical ambiguity mean she cannot be clearly considered as "native", but her experience of deracination nonetheless contributes to an understanding of the troubled relationship between migrant and metropole.

## **2. Purchasing Invisibility: Commodification and Disguise in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)**

Sasha functions as an object of spectacle and consumption in *Good Morning, Midnight*. Her

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<sup>137</sup> Judith L. Raiskin. *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota). p. 199.

ability to support herself depends on her self-commodification; both her employment as an ex-mannequin and a shop girl are tied up in the objectification of women as aesthetic objects. The novel exposes the irony of capitalism's tantalizing offer of purchasing 'power', revealing it to be an empty and destructive albeit ultimately inescapable process. Commodification can in no way assist Sasha in her project to become 'vacant, neutral' and above all else 'invisible' (p. 12). Consumerism is one of the novel's many labyrinths; it promises change, but ultimately binds Sasha within a structure of visibility that makes her into precisely the spectacle she wishes to avoid becoming.

The reification of the commodity<sup>138</sup> in *Good Morning, Midnight* is signified by objects becoming more alive than people. For instance, the dolls with 'satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart' are described as 'all complete' (p. 11), while Sasha is repeatedly compared to a machine and automaton, a culmination of artificial but disparate parts (her face is a 'mask' (p. 33) that can be taken on and off, hung up on a nail as if it were a coat), or a use object: 'an instrument, something to be made use of...' (p. 45). Sasha's repeated association of women with inanimate dolls, tools, and machines signifies the gendered violence and objectification women are subjected to in patriarchal society. In his book *Modernism, Technology, and the Body*, Tim Armstrong argues that in the modern period, the body is 're-energized, re-formed, subject to new modes of production, representation, and commodification.'<sup>139</sup> Rhys reveals these modes of production to be inherently gendered and foregrounded by patriarchal fantasies of control. In an alcohol-fuelled and apocalyptic

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<sup>138</sup> Karl Marx terms this reification 'commodity fetishism' in *Das Kapital*. (1867).

<sup>139</sup> Tim Armstrong. *Modernism, technology, and the body: a cultural study*. (Cambridge University Press, 1998). p. 4.

hallucination towards the end of the novel, Sasha imagines the end of the world as a feminized machine:

‘All that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel. It has innumerable flexible arms, made of steel. Long, thin arms. At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelashes stiff with mascara. When I look more closely I see that only some of the arms have these eyes - others have lights. The arms that carry the eyes and the arms that carry the lights are all extraordinarily flexible and very beautiful. But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me... And the arms wave to an accompaniment of music and song.’ (p. 155)

The machine’s mascara-clad eyes, flexible, thin arms, and beauty gender it as feminine. The surreal waving of the steel limbs to the accompaniment of ‘music and song’ mirrors the synchronous movements of chorus-line performers. The figure of the woman as machine can be read as the reaffirmation of a patriarchal desire for technological mastery over woman, expressed in the fantasy of a compliant female automaton.<sup>140</sup> The all-seeing omniscience of the machine, symbolized by its light and eye-adorned mechanical limbs, also recalls the all-seeing detachment of the flâneur, who watches without being watched.<sup>141</sup> The apocalyptic viewing machine invokes visibility as a technology of power, the likes of which is discussed

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<sup>140</sup> Rita Felski. *The gender of modernity*. (Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>141</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The flâneur” in *The arcades project*. (Harvard University Press, 1999).

in Bentham's panopticon and Foucault's work on surveillance.<sup>142</sup> Sasha's hyper-visibility as a female, colonial expatriate without her papers makes her vulnerable to exposure and deportation, the threat of which lingers constantly in the background of the novel. The exhibition spatially and architecturally concretises the visual policing to which natives and migrants are subjected in the city.

Upon deciding that she 'no longer want[s] to be loved, beautiful, happy or successful' and wants 'one thing and one thing only - to be left alone' (p. 32), Sasha turns to self-fashioning as a form of disguise and self-obliteration as she tries to buy an illusion of a respectable identity. Her 'transformation act' (p. 49) is organized around a desire to become invisible to the gaze that follows her around the city: 'Isn't there something you can do so that nobody looks at you or sees you?' (p. 12). She buys a hat hoping to avoid attention rather than attract it ('nobody stares at me, which I think is a good sign' (p. 56)), dyes her hair blonde cendré (p. 40) and repeatedly refers to her fur coat as a form of sartorial armor. Buying becomes a fundamental part of Sasha's masochism; like drinking, it is a way for her to momentarily numb herself to life as she loses track of whether it is 'yesterday, today, or tomorrow' (p. 119). However, the escapism and detachment that buying affords her is short-lived and ultimately circular and empty. As Sasha herself admits: 'just the sensation of spending, that's the point' (p. 119).

Sasha has also renamed herself from Sofia to Sasha<sup>143</sup> thinking it will 'change [her] luck' (p. 6). Naming, especially renaming, is a process associated with imperialist discourse

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<sup>142</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. (Vintage, 2012).

<sup>143</sup> A reference to Jean Rhys' own decision to change her name from Ella Williams to Jean Rhys, under the advice of Ford Maddox Ford.



and used to claim ownership over something, someone or some place.<sup>144</sup> While she desperately wants to use self-fashioning to fit in ('Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed but look how hard I try' (p. 87)), she is repeatedly exposed as 'other'. Her attempts to purchase an acceptable identity to alleviate her alienation are doomed because her context as an outsider to the imperial metropolis means such acceptance is impossible for her. The fact that Sasha's father continues to call her Sofia foreshadows the impossibility of her desired transformative act.

Despite her greatest efforts, Sasha becomes an object for the violent consumption of the male, imperial gaze; she cannot escape the exhibition or avoid becoming exhibited. The commodities to which she turns in order to foster her own invisibility are unable to help her alter her circumstances, revealing the empty promise of purchasing power. Instead, ironically, Sasha buys into her own exploitation and ends up exposing herself to a patriarchal and economic system that commodifies women: a symbol for the inescapability of the male gaze. Not only is the commodity futile in assisting Sasha's transformation, it actually traps her into exactly the system of visual spectatorship that she endeavors to escape. Instead of purchasing her own invisibility, Sasha becomes increasingly commodified. She is depicted as an object with waning 'market value' (p. 20) as an aging woman whose worth is determined by a patriarchal system that glamorizes youth. Her employer 'Mr Blank', who is said to 'represent society' (p. 20), represents the emptiness, omnipresence, and insatiability of capitalism.

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<sup>144</sup> Carla Martínez del Barrio. "Gendered urban spaces and strangeness in Jean Rhys' *Good morning, midnight* (1939)." *Odisea: Revista de estudios ingleses* 22 (2021): 137-149.C

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha's existence becomes mechanical, dissociative, and ghostly, while she simultaneously remains hyper-visible and held hostage to the male imperial gaze. Instead of assisting her in any transformation that might help her fit in, or else render her invisible, consumerism further binds Sasha within systems of imperialist domination that ensure her marginalization.

### **3. Lost Homes and Liminal Terrains: Traversing the Heart of Darkness in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* (1934)**

*Voyage in the Dark* (1934) is a novel that is also preoccupied with dreams, however, rather than states where we see oppressive structures recapitulated, as in *Good Morning, Midnight*, discussed above, they feature much more hopefully as forms of liminality which can go some way (albeit limited) to bridging the divide between London and Dominica, the young protagonist Anna Morgan's migrant home. The ambiguity of the sea, itself a liminal space functioning both as a possible passageway and a separating border between Anna and her colonial home, has a multitude of significations in the text, including fluidity, rebirth, and femininity on the one hand, but also annihilation, death, and impenetrability on the other. The novel is rich in Caribbean folklore and, while it is set in London, the narrative frequently travels back to Dominica through Anna's dreams and memories. By moving back and forth between Anna's respective homes in London and Dominica, *Voyage in the Dark* establishes a form of migrant modernism that narratologically unsettles spatial and ideological borders. Ultimately, however, Anna's attempts to access her lost home become more and more forced as the novel goes on, and signify the impossibility of her condition as a young female

colonial expatriate left to fend for herself in imperial London. Imagery of stunted rebirth, which foreshadow of Anna's blackmarket abortion at the end of the novel, ultimately suggest that liminality is not a generative existence according to Rhys. The impossibility for Anna either to assimilate or to return home demarcates an uncomfortable and near fatal in-betweenness from which she cannot escape or progress.

At only eighteen years old, Anna Morgan is by far Rhys' youngest protagonist. Initially sent away to London for schooling following her father's passing, upon finishing school she is cut off financially by her English stepmother, Hester, and attempts to support herself as a chorus girl, at which point she becomes involved with an older man named Walter. When he leaves her and rescinds his own financial support Anna begins a downward spiral into the world of prostitution that culminates in a nearly fatal blackmarket abortion.

The sea is a recurring motif throughout *Voyage in the Dark* that oxymoronicly signifies drowning, escape, femininity, fluidity, rebirth, and death, and ultimately demarcates the irretrievability of Anna's much longed for homeland, Dominica. The sea also has markedly colonialist connotations, most famously evoking the Middle Passage, the forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World, but also the mass migration of colonial natives to western imperial cities during the 1930s to 70s.<sup>145</sup> While Anna's migration involved a voyage across the sea from the island of Dominica to England, her relationship to colonialism and the middle passage is complicated by her identity as a descendent of the white settler community who has undoubtedly benefited from colonialism

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<sup>145</sup> Between 1948 and 1970, nearly half a million people moved from the Caribbean to Britain following severe labour shortages faced by Britain in the wake of the Second World War. Those who came to the UK around this time were later referred to as "the Windrush generation", after the HMT Empire Windrush, a passenger liner and cruise ship originally launched in Germany in 1930 and the boat on which they arrived. The so-called "windrush generation" will be the subject of the third chapter of this dissertation.

in spite of the discrimination she faces upon being perceived as “other” in London. By centering Anna as a colonial migrant without recognising her as coming from a community that has enacted violence against black people, Rhys somewhat elides and normalizes the violence of white settler history in the Caribbean, ultimately enabled by the enslavement of Black people. Anna’s longing to be around black people, even wishing she could become black herself (p. 54-8) are prime examples of the ways Rhys idealizes and romanticizes blackness in the novel. Anna is disliked by both her white stepmother, Hester and by Francine - the black servant girl she has such fond memories of from her childhood in Dominica - because she is neither black, nor white *enough* to be accepted in London. Her association of whiteness with aging, sadness, and death clearly showcases an internalized hatred and the painful liminality of her condition as a white settler Dominican, who destined always to be doubly unaccepted in London.

Imagery of the sea repeatedly conveys Anna’s annihilation and defeat in *Voyage in the Dark*. Water imagery emerges both when Anna thinks of drowning herself, as a sign of ultimate self-annihilation, but also when she fantasizes about her homeland in Dominica. The sea is paradoxically destructive and restorative. Anna’s powerlessness to make herself heard as she attempts to convince Walter to do ‘the only thing [she] know[s] perfectly well [he] won’t do’<sup>146</sup> and come home with her once more is depicted through water imagery. Sasha experiences herself ‘trying to speak from under the water’ (p. 79) as if she has already been drowned. However, as Bhabha has argued, the middle passage of contemporary culture, as with slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalise

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<sup>146</sup> Jean Rhys. *Voyage in the Dark*. (WW Norton & Company, 1968). p.79. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

experience, its significations are appropriately fluid.<sup>147</sup> Water imagery in the novel connotes the particular limitations faced by migrant expatriate women, while also functioning to unmask the dark underpinnings of supposedly progressive ideologies of nationhood during the time of the British Empire.

The liminality and fluidity of the sea also provides a model for the novel's meandering narrative, which proceeds through a series of dream-like episodes hovering between London and the West Indies, and various temporalities: past, present, and future. Anna's memories and dreams repeatedly erupt to disturb the linearity of the narrative. On the one hand these memories reconnect her to her migrant home, and on the other to the realities of colonization, which mean that home is not so easily recovered. The question of "home" is also a contextually troubled one, because although Anna is to some extent subject to colonialism in the Caribbean as a colonial site, her positionality as a white person in Dominica is bound up in a broader, violent historical context of white settlers in the Caribbean. Anna hovers in liminal terrain, split between the confrontational and unassailable worlds of Dominica and her current place of residence in imperial London, the "Two Tunes" referred to in the novel's original title.

Water is typically a symbol for rebirth. While Anna's seabound passage from Dominica to London is depicted as a rebirth, in order to be reborn her old self has to die. Liminality is not a generative existence for Rhys. Assimilation is represented as an annihilatory and ultimately doomed process, as Anna's old self is eviscerated in a failed attempt to assimilate to the so-called colonial "motherland".

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<sup>147</sup> Bhaba. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 5.

It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold. Sometimes I would shut my eyes and pretend that the heat of the fire, or the bed-clothes drawn up round me was sun-heat; or I would pretend I was standing outside the house at home, looking down Market Street to the Bay. [...] Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream, but I could never fit them together.' (p. 3-4).

While rebirth usually signifies hope for change, transformation, and renewal, here it signifies the opposite: Anna's birth is a death. Her migration from Dominica to London is tellingly depicted as a 'curtain' drawn over her past life and self; she no longer recognises the person she has become. Not only are colors, sounds, and smells different in England, but so also are who Anna is, how she thinks, and how she feels. The neutral tones she repeatedly uses to describe London are also significant because they directly contrast with Dominica's vibrancy, which is reflected in this particular passage by purple becoming gray. Such is the extent of Anna's longing for home that it is as if her current life in England is the 'dream' and Dominica is her reality. She cannot bring these two worlds into contact with one another ('I

could never fit them together'), which lands her in liminal territory between homes and temporalities. London is the cold, unreal world of her present, while Dominica is the vibrant and more tangible world of her past. Migration is depicted as an unnavigable journey of two halves that will never meet. Not only can Dominica and London never touch, but neither can the differential versions of Anna that inhabit them. In her displacement Anna becomes a stranger to herself.<sup>148</sup>

The imagery of rebirth used to describe Anna's migration to London at the beginning of the novel is also importantly bookended by the abortion at the novel's end, which literalises and concretises Anna's migratory birth as a death. In the original version of *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna also died during the procedure, but this bleaker ending was rewritten under advisement from Rhys' publishers to leave readers with a more hopeful ending. The blackmarket termination of her pregnancy at the end of the novel links back to the deathly birth with which the novel begins. As such it signifies the fundamental impossibility of assimilation for Anna, and for other female colonial expatriates who have made the journey to the so-called imperial "motherland" only to find that they too cannot be born.

Rhys' title *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) explicitly conjures up Joseph Conrad's master text of colonialism: *The Heart of Darkness* (1899). This turn-of-the-century novella reinforces a civilizing, colonial order by setting up a binary that positions whiteness, the West, work, and civilisation, against blackness, obscurity, disorder, and anarchy of Africa and the colony, associations which *Voyage in the Dark* endeavors to challenge. For instance,

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<sup>148</sup> Phrase borrowed from the title of Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to ourselves*. (Columbia University Press, 1991). In this book Kristeva argues that the foreigner is a symptom of the difficulty we encounter while living as an 'other' to ourselves.

Anna hates being white (p. 58), which she associates with being ‘cold and sad’ in contrast to blackness, which is ‘warm and gay’ (p. 24). However, this flip in associations sometimes leads to an idealization of blackness and an invisibilisation of the marginalization and oppression of black peoples by precisely those white settler communities Anna stems from. Anna’s longing for home in Dominica is bound up in longing for a certain kind of white privilege: to be in a house that is cleaned and cared for by a black servant.

In Conrad’s text the narrator, Charles Marlow, embarks on a voyage that begins on the River Thames in London and continues up into the heart of the Belgian Congo; the so-called ‘heart of darkness’. In Rhys’ novel we have the opposite trajectory: Anna travels from her home in the British colony of Dominica to London. The depiction of London as cold, dark, and foreboding in direct contrast to the vibrancy and light of Dominica suggests that it is European modernity, and not the West Indies, that represents the heart of darkness. On the one hand, Rhys disputes racist associations of whiteness with justice, civilisation, and morality that underpin colonial modernism, exposing the brutality of imperialist European ideology. However, this is also an example of a primitivist move, associated with figures like Picasso and Gauguin, wherein the colonies are positioned as a refreshing antidote and counterpart to the corruptions of European civilization.

The relationship of the imperial power to the colony epitomizes the untraversable terrain between Anna’s experience in England and Dominica, which she fundamentally cannot ‘fit [...] together’ (p. 4). Fredric Jameson depicts the impossibility of grasping the connections between the metropolis and the ‘absent’ space of the colony as the spatial dilemma at the heart of early modernism:



colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and lifeworld remain unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as

its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole

[...] Pieces of the puzzle are missing; it can never be fully reconstructed.<sup>149</sup>

The colonial modernist project simultaneously both requires a more immediate understanding of the colonies, which represent a ‘significant structural segment of the imperial economic system’, while also necessitating their erasure. This erasure is reflected in the blurry, surrealist prose of Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o and others have critiqued the novella for its erasure of the colonized subjects, depicted as subhuman and rendered voiceless in the text<sup>150</sup> where they feature only as objects and tools for colonial exploitation.<sup>151</sup> As Britzolakis has argued, Rhys’ novels foreground ‘spatial disjunction’ as their very condition of possibility.<sup>152</sup> Her hyphenated location between

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<sup>149</sup> Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward W. Said. *Nationalism, colonialism, and literature*. Vol. 1. (U of Minnesota Press, 1988). p. 50-1.

<sup>150</sup> Chinua Achebe. "An image of Africa: racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." *The Massachusetts Review* 57.1 (2016): 14-27. Achebe emphasizes the racism of *Heart of Darkness* and its depiction of the natives as non human.

<sup>151</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. (East African Publishers, 1992). Wa Thiong’o discusses the suppression of language and culture under colonialism as a form of violence of colonialism that goes beyond the physical exploitation of the body. The voicelessness of the native characters in *Heart of Darkness* is a symptom and example of this cultural and linguistic oppression.

<sup>152</sup> Britzolakis. "This way to the exhibition". (2007).

colonial and metropolitan spheres affords her a unique insight into the perceptual dilemma described by Jameson. The novels construct an essentially syncopated, ironic relation to metropolitan periodization, marking a dual predicament of creolization and exile.<sup>153</sup>

The liminality of *Voyage in the Dark*, which hovers between temporalities and between the worlds of the Empire and the colony, resists the demarcation of borders between spaces. On the one hand this illustrates ‘the disorienting power of modernity’<sup>154</sup>, and on the other a resistance to the Empire’s insistent mapping of boundaries (such as the demarcation of the colonial periphery from the imperial center) that function to bolster the imperial power through an erasure of the colonial “elsewhere”. Anna’s reflection: ‘I’m in a nice, clean English room with all the dirt swept under the bed’ (p. 23) signifies this erasure.

While the novel to some extent works to expose the dirt under the British Empire’s bed by describing the disenfranchisement Anna experiences as a deracinated migrant living in London, it also obscures the positionality of black Caribbean natives. Anna’s comment on the dirt swept under her bed also constitutes a longing for a certain kind of privilege she enjoyed as a white person in Dominica: to be in a nice room, one that someone cleans. *Voyage in the Dark* does some work to expose the constructedness of Englishness around racist delineations of black from white, and center from periphery, but it also contributes to them by eliding the black experience. In this way it is more like *The Heart of Darkness* than it would originally appear. On the one hand, Conrad exposes the horrors of colonialism through brutal imagery of exploitation, however he also silences the native characters in his novella, where they are represented as inhuman ‘savages’. *Voyage in the Dark* complicates

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<sup>153</sup> Britzolakis. “This way to the exhibition”. (2007).

<sup>154</sup> Andrew Thacker. *Moving through modernity: Space and geography in modernism*. (Manchester University Press, 2003). p. 204.

these issues by centering Anna's experience of colonial exploitation in London, the heart of darkness of Rhys' text. However, Anna's entrenchment in the violence of white settler history means she is implicated as an agent and beneficiary in colonialism, which complicates the novel's anti-colonialist sentiment.

Modernist London is a racially heterogeneous, cosmopolitan and xenophobic space in *Voyage in the Dark*:

London - hundreds thousands of white people white people rushing along and the dark

houses all alike frowning frown one after the other all alike all stuck together - the streets

like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down - oh I'm not going to like

this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place - you'll get used

to it Hester kept saying I expect you feel like a fish out of water but you'll soon get used

to it' (p. 12).

The repetition of 'all alike' and 'I'm not going to like this place' coupled with the almost complete lack of punctuation mimic the claustrophobia, monotony, and terror that Anna associates with life in London. This association of London with sameness is repeated as a refrain at the close of the novel: 'everything was always so exactly alike - that was what I

could never get used to [...] the houses all exactly alike, and the streets going north, south, east, west, all exactly alike' (p. 148) confirming Anna's initial and foreshadowing suspicions that she will not like or be able to assimilate to life in London. She will always be a 'fish out of water'.

Anna's transgressive and mobile identities (racial, sexual, national) always already render her stranger in the metropole. The spaces of the 'airtight biscuit tin' and the 'high, dark wall' that Anna equates with England signify her sense of entrapment and claustrophobia while the former also recalls imperial trade and exports: the biscuits are 'as fresh in the Tropics as in the motherland' (p. 123). Anna's refrain of 'you've only got to make up your mind that things are going to be different, and they will be different' (p. 145), while it might provide fleeting reassurance, is logistically and practically untrue. When she loses financial support first from her white and racist stepmother, Hester, and then from Walter Jeffries, an older man and the father of her unborn child, she is forced to turn to prostitution to support herself.<sup>155</sup> She has very little control over her everyday existence and limited options to support or advocate for herself.

Rhys exposes the violences of European imperialism through Hester, Anna's cold, snobbish, and xenophobic stepmother who epitomizes the racist hostility of England. Hester's inability to smell the Dominican 'pop flowers' (p. 73) without fainting, and her attempts to ship Anna back to Dominica upon failing to adequately Anglicanize her ('I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a n\*\*ger and of course I couldn't do it' (p. 52)) signify her sense of superiority over Anna and her antagonistic

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<sup>155</sup> Prostitution functions as a metaphor for the wider position of women in 1930s England, who - married or unmarried - are ultimately dependent on men, and their ability to perform their own commodification, as indicated above with Sasha.

relationship with the colonies more broadly.<sup>156</sup> Much to Hester's disdain, Anna is happiest when spending time with Francine (p. 54), the black servant girl who Hester repeatedly tries to fire during her time working at her late husband's house in Dominica, where they all lived prior to his death. Anna comes to realize that her affection for Francine is not reciprocated due to their racial differences ('she disliked me [...] because I was white'), something which causes Anna great dismay, for she herself longs to be black like Francine: 'I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white' (p. 58). Anna associates whiteness with the aging, sadness, and misery Hester embodies to her. Her inability to find acceptance with either Francine or Hester connotes her liminal identity as a white-passing Dominican woman, who is destined to be doubly unaccepted. She will never be "white enough" in London, since assimilation and acceptance go beyond racial presentation<sup>157</sup>, and her white privilege ensures she will also be unable to foster a close relationship with Francine.

Anna finds Hester's xenophobia proliferated in every aspect of her life in London. At work, Ethel, another chorus girl with whom she works, expresses her disgust that a 'dirty foreigner' (p. 91) is able to perform onstage. In characteristic Rhysian fashion, the anthropomorphic city participates in the marginalization and exclusion of colonial outsiders. Even at home, where she should expect to find privacy and reprieve from the outside world, she instead finds herself watched by spots on the ceiling, which become animated as huge looming black eyes (p. 105).<sup>158</sup> On the streets she is territorialized by policemen who regard

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<sup>156</sup> Discrimination of this kind was familiar to Jean Rhys, who was denied acting work on the basis of her West Indies accent.

<sup>157</sup> Jean Rhys was white passing but faced discrimination as a result of her creole accent, for example.

<sup>158</sup> This moment recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's seminal feminist short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which follows the first person narrator's psychological decline upon being subjected to the 'resting cure'. Such is the extent of her deprivation that she begins to experience the wallpaper as alive. In both instances the anthropomorphism of the wallpaper represents the protagonist's feelings of entrapment as a result of patriarchal dominance.

her as a subhuman animal. One policeman stares at her ‘like a damned baboon - a fair baboon too, worse than a dark one every time’ (p. 122). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that language plays a primary role in the discursive construction of ‘the orient’ as an object of colonial knowledge.<sup>159</sup> Animalism, specifically the comparison of racialised colonial natives to “monkeys”, is explicitly bound up in the imperialist delineation of civilized, western, national subjects from uncivilized and inhuman native peoples in order to justify colonialism's “civilizing mission”.<sup>160</sup> Anna is already othered when she is perceived as an inhuman animal, but then she is further othered as a ‘fair baboon [...] worse than a dark one’ (p. 122). This image is a problematic one because while it evokes Anna’s liminal positioning as a white-passing colonial expatriate in London, it also conflates this experience with the experience of black and indigenous native peoples, even implying it is somehow worse than the violence they have been subjected to.

While Rhys’ privileging of whiteness complicates the anti-colonialist sentiment in the text, she does challenge readers to consider their complicity in systemic racism and patriarchy by positioning them as voyeurs. Anna is introduced reading a ‘dirty’ book ‘about a tart’ (p. 5), which functions both to foreshadow her entry into world of prostitution later on and to mirror the reader, who, in crass terms, is also reading a book about a tart. Anna also frequently rehearses lines and scenes from characters in books she has read. For instance when she tells Joe, one of the men who becomes her client: ‘Ca sera pour un autre soir’ [...] ‘A girl in a book said that. Some girl in some book.’ (p. 105), a metafictional moment where Anna (a girl in a book) quotes another girl from a book. Anna increasingly perceives herself

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<sup>159</sup> Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. (Vintage, 1979).

<sup>160</sup> For further discussion of how humanness is produced and policed across intersections of nationality, race, security, environment, and sexuality, see: Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies*. (Duke, 2012) and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. (New York University Press, 2020).

as a *character* as opposed to a person with agency as the novel progresses. For instance, Anna watches herself write a letter to Walter after he has abandoned her from ‘a long way off’ (p. 140), as if she has lost touch with her own body. Her dissociation is symptomatic of the way the male gaze functions to split its objects into two as they are forced to internalize their visual objectification.<sup>161</sup>

In a later scene, Laurie (Anna’s flatmate and the person who initially exposes her to the world of prostitution), Anna, and one of their Johns look at a book of Aubrey Beardsley erotic sketches together.<sup>162</sup> Beardsley also painted young women as the audience to these sketches, aligning the pleasures of reading with sex.<sup>163</sup> The representation of reading as a sensual and subversive act again begs the question of what the reader of *Voyage in the Dark* hopes to gain from delving into Anna’s story. Anna’s first flatmate Maudie’s assertion that “a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies [...] all books are like that - just somebody stuffing you up” (p. 5) associates reading and the circulation of knowledge with forceful, anonymous, and unconsensual sex, which summons the reader to consider their positionality as a (potentially sexually loaded) voyeur of a textual body.

The frightening casualness and callousness of the gaze is epitomized by Anna’s description of the ‘glassy eyes that don’t admit anything so definite as hate. Only just that underground hope that you’ll be burnt alive, tortured, where they can have a peep’ (p. 99). The word ‘peep’ evokes the titillating pleasure of the faceless ‘they’ who watch the torture of other human beings with vacant, ‘glassy’ eyes. This visceral image encapsulates the anonymous yet omnipotent force of the male imperial gaze, which consumes exploitation as

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<sup>161</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008).

<sup>162</sup> Beardsley is a late-Victorian erotic artist.

<sup>163</sup> Jonathan Jones. “Too filthy to print - Aubrey Beardsley and his explosions of obscenity”. *The Guardian*. (2020).

a form of entertainment. The reader's complicity in this systemic voyeurism and the commodification of women and their bodies as objects for instrumentalizing pleasure forces a direct and uncomfortable confrontation with the violence of heteropatriarchy.

As a means to escape the many forms of liminality she experiences in London, Anna attempts to liminally traverse the unassailable physical distances between Dominica and London by conjuring up memories in her mind's eye. This imaginative gaze, described as 'two eyes' that 'open inside your head' (p. 125), is an inward-looking form of perception that functions through memory and counter the male imperial gaze's reliance on the external and visual. Anna mentally navigates the pathways of home back to her former home on Constance Estate in striking visual and sensuous detail; she recounts 'the feeling of the hills', 'the smells', 'the sounds' and 'the positioning of the sea in relation to the state' (p. 125). Dominica's vibrancy is emphasized through the use of sensuous language and an assorted color palette that directly contrasts with the neutral tones - blacks, whites, and grays - used to describe London. The mixing of the senses, such as 'the smell of green' (p. 125) evokes those alternate modes of perceiving and experiencing the world that Anna left behind in Dominica, and which are fundamentally incompatible with her life in London. In a confirmation of her assertion 'sometimes it is as if I were back there and as if England were a dream' (p. 4), these imaginatively conjured memories of home are much more vivid than the comparable dullness of London life, which she increasingly moves through like a ghost (p. 94). Her ghostly and dissociative existence is another symbol of the dissonance she feels in London, where it is not only her surroundings but her own self which feel unfamiliar and strange.



Anna's (day)dreams of home are paradoxical in the sense that they function both to connect her with a sense of home, while also reminding her that this home is fundamentally unrecoverable to her in England. There are fundamental limitations to Anna's imagination, which ultimately cannot bridge physical divides to transport her home. This particular paradox recalls Salman Rushdie's statement in "Imaginary Homelands": 'it's my present that is foreign [...] the past is home, albeit a home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.'<sup>164</sup> Rushdie describes how migrants are often 'haunted' by a sense of loss and an urge to recover their homeland and past, even at the risk of 'mutation', and even though their physical alienation from home ensures that only a fiction - an 'imaginary homeland' as he terms it - can be retrieved.<sup>165</sup> Retrieval becomes an act of creation which cannot take place without a close encounter with what has been lost. The nightmarish imaginative sequence interspliced with Anna's abortion at the end of the novel epitomises the waning effectiveness of her imagination to connect her with a sense of home:

*'do you turn to the right or the left - the left of course - and then that turning where  
the  
shadow is always the same shape - shadows are ghosts you look at them and you  
don't  
see them - you look at everything and you don't see it only sometimes you see it like  
now I see - a cold moon looking down on a place where nobody is a place full of  
stones*

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<sup>164</sup> Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. (Penguin Books, 1992). p. 9.

<sup>165</sup> Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. (1992).

*where nobody is*  
*I thought I'm going to fall nothing can save me now but still I clung*  
*desperately*  
*with my knees feeling very sick*' (p. 154).

All the vibrant colors, scents, and sounds that featured in previous dreams have dissipated into ghostly shadows that eschew visual recollection: 'you look at everything and you don't see it'. The only things that Anna can identify through her shadowy vision are 'a cold moon' and 'a place full of stones', both scenes entirely empty of people: 'where nobody is'. The barren, cold, and lonely impression these visions cast on Anna is more reminiscent of her experience of London than Dominica, which suggests that her memories of home have begun to fade and no longer provide her the comfort they did previously.

The breakdown in punctuation in the passage formally recapitulates Anna's liminality. Home is increasingly inaccessible to her but she also feels disconnected from her present, particularly while dissociating to cope with the immediate trauma of her abortion. Anna finds herself caught in limbo between temporalities and places, which is experienced through the sensation of falling and nausea at the end of the passage (I'm going to fall nothing can save me now [...] I clung desperately with my knees feeling very sick'). Unsteadiness, nausea, and dizziness are symptoms commonly associated with being seabornd, which is pertinent given that sailing often appears as a metaphor for the imaginative process in *Voyage in the Dark*. Anna's experience gestures to the contradictory signification of the sea, which can be regarded either as a passage or barrier to the passage of

nations; while she can imaginatively sail back to Dominica in her mind, she is unable to literally set sea and return.

Even Anna's imaginative sea voyages home have their limitations. In one particular imaginative sailing venture home, for instance, she discovers that the island trees are 'all wrong' (p. 136) because they have been replaced with English trees. Her memories of home have become tainted by England as if by some kind of contagious entity. While the insertion of English trees signify her waning memory, they also signify an elision of British colonialism, since British colonialism in Dominica involved imported crops. Anna tries to catch a branch and step ashore but the deck of the ship expands, trapping her on the boat, a symbol for her unassailable liminal entrapment between her past in Dominica and her present in London. The priest and bishop whose rings Anna will supposedly kiss are imperial symbols because Christianity was the state religion of European colonial powers brought over to the colonies by Christian missionaries; Christianity is fundamental to ideologies and practices of colonization.<sup>166</sup> Anna's repeated reference to her own drowning throughout the novel make it likely that she is the anonymous somebody who has fallen overboard in the dream (p. 136). The sea again emerges both as a passageway and a barrier between Anna and home which is ultimately impossible to traverse, signified by the dream's 'climax of meaninglessness' and the sense of 'fatigue and powerlessness' (p. 137) it leaves her with.

Rhys' anti-imperialist sentiment is affirmed in *Voyage in the Dark* through a refusal to draw spatial and ideological boundaries. Dream and reality blur together as Anna's dream infects her life. The experience of 'heaving up and down' that Anna feels when aboard on the

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<sup>166</sup> For further information regarding colonialism's impact on language, culture, and the minds of colonized subjects see: NgugiWa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. (East African Publishers, 1992).

deck of her dream ship is still there when she wakes up: ‘everything was still heaving up and down’ (p. 137). However, both Anna’s nausea and her foreboding return to imagery of the sea (‘after that, I kept on dreaming about the sea’ (p. 137)) connote the impossibility of her condition as a female colonial expatriate residing in London. She cannot let go of home, nor can she retrieve it, and the more she struggles to delve into her memories of home the more they slip through her fingers, like water.

#### **4. “It was the hour between dog and wolf”<sup>167</sup> : Animalism and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1997)**

In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1997) Julia Martin’s proximity to her dying mother’s abject and animalistic body stirs up memories of her mother’s childhood memories of Brazil in her as if they were her own. Similarly to Anna Morgan’s attempts to use her mind’s eye to traverse the irrevocable distance between London and her irretrievable homeland of Dominica above, the temporal and spatial destabilizations produced by Julia’s contact with her dying mother have the effect of challenging imperialism’s insistent drawing of borders and boundaries.

Wildness is the form of liminality tackled by this section of the chapter. Julia’s association with the wild and animalistic demarcates her on the one hand as the prey of imperialist patriarchal society which strive to domesticate and marginalize her, however her “wildness” is also imbued with the potential to disrupt and challenge this positionality and

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<sup>167</sup> Jean Rhys. *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. (WW Norton & Company, 1997). p. 138. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

her oppressors. José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam have considered the possibility of a postcolonial rendering of the wild in spite of its colonial roots and etymologies. Using wildness to theorize ‘a terrain of alternative formulations that resist the orderly impulses of modernity and as a merging of anticolonial, anticapitalist, and radical queer interests’<sup>168</sup>, as Halberstam puts it, is theoretically enlightening because it opens up possibilities for reading Julia’s proximity to wildness not only as a mode of imperial persecution but also as a form of resistance to precisely the patriarchal and imperialist structures that aim to isolate her by positioning her as such. Over the course of the novel, Julia’s interactions both with other people and with urban space are depicted in the terms of predator and prey dynamics, the likes of which expose the machinations of the white, imperial gaze. The power of the gaze is rehearsed and reanimated through the anthropomorphic city, whose ‘cold, accusing, jaundiced eye[s]’ (p. 13) become Julia’s cage. On the one hand, Julia’s positioning as a ‘wild’ woman designates her as a colonial outsider and ensures her displacement. This sense of ‘wild’ is informed by binary logics that set the wild in opposition to the modern, the civilized, the cultivated, and the real; wildness emerges as the chaos that civilization comes to tame, according to colonial mythology.<sup>169</sup> On the other hand, however, wildness constitutes Julia’s potential to threaten, expose, and destabilize imperialist ideologies the likes of which would strive to neatly delineate the domestic/tame/civilized from the foreign/wild/barbaric according to binarist racist and colonialist ideologies.

While responses to this novel frequently emphasize the title’s irony - it is Mr Mackenzie who has left Julia Martin rather than the other way around - I argue that while

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<sup>168</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. x.

<sup>169</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. ix.

Julia is initially left by Mr Mackenzie, she is able to regain some power over him upon their second meeting and final departure at the end of the novel. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is the inverse of *Good Morning, Midnight* in that it follows a cyclical journey from Paris to London and back again. Having been left by Mr Mackenzie with limited financial support, Julia travels back to London to visit her dying mother and sister. Proximity to her mother unlocks in her a mental passage to Brazil and her broader family history, as well as a wildness that she then harnesses to extort Mr Mackenzie at the novel's close.

Mr Mackenzie explicitly fears the 'wild lengths' (p. 25) to which Julia will go, associating her voice with 'a flood which has been long damned up suddenly pouring forth' (p. 23) aligning womanhood with the destructiveness of unleashed floodwater. Always teetering on the edge of spectacle, Julia threatens the 'sane and normal atmosphere' (p. 23) that her ex-lover Mr Mackenzie is desperate to establish. Sanity and normality as defined by Mr Mackenzie here represent the stifling "order" of patriarchal society and the objectifying force of the male gaze, which are threatened by public expressions of emotions and agency by women.

Jean Rhys' heroines are all plagued by the fear of becoming public spectacles. However, in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* it is Mr Mackenzie who fears this kind of public exposure, reversing the gendered associations of spectacle. When he proposes to buy her off with one final payment she is roused to rebellion, reversing the patriarchal delineation of predator and prey when she confronts him in a local restaurant to publicly refuse his check. It is Julia who makes Mr Mackenzie 'look a fool' (p. 21) with an absurd gesture of romance which sees her lightly strike him with her glove, as she calmly asserts: 'I despise you' (p. 26). While Mr Mackenzie believes Julia to be a 'female without the instinct of self preservation'

(p. 20), Julia is able to externalize her own destructiveness and use it to challenge the patriarchal and oppressive orderly impulses of modernity that are embodied and represented by Mr Mackenzie. Unlike Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, who is rendered a spectacle when she bursts into tears before her employer Mr Blank, similarly representative of an empty and damaging patriarchal order, Julia is able to flip this scenario and expose Mr Mackenzie as a fool.

Julia's extortion of Mr Mackenzie disrupts predatory power dynamics in which she is restricted to the gendered role of prey. While this moment cannot be read as any assertion of independence in that she cannot free herself from her dependency on the financial support of men or the broader patriarchal frameworks that establish this structure of dependency, there is something strangely hopeful about this ending. The close of the novel in 'the hour between dog and wolf' (p. 138), a liminal threshold between day and night when the domestic turns wild, signifies a hopeful metamorphic potential. This ending fundamentally differs from the traumatic endings of *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. The blackmarket abortion of the former and the rape of the latter unambiguously position the protagonists as victims at the hands of men, and a sense of hope is entirely absent.

The transition between dog and wolf at the end of the novel represents the potential for wildness that resides within even the most domesticated of creatures. Domestication is a highly gendered concept that functions to position women as the "naturally" submissive counterparts to male dominance. Donna Haraway's work on interspecies relationality unsettles these assumptions as she argues that human and animal relations are by bidirectional: nonhumans domesticate humans as much as this happens vice versa.<sup>170</sup> The

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<sup>170</sup> Donna J. Haraway. *When species meet*. Vol. 3. University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

transition from dog to wolf realizes this bidirectional potential and disrupts the binary association of women with the private sphere, and men with the public. The metamorphosis connotes womens' "wild" potential to break free from these architectural and social confines and to become the domesticators.<sup>171</sup> Mr Mackenzie's fearful response to the expression in Julia's eyes just before she strikes him, as he realizes 'my God, she's going to attack me' (p. 26) and the frantic repetition of 'Oh God, Oh Lord, she's come here to make a scene' (p. 22) realize Julia's predatory potential: she is not simply a dog, but also wolf. Julia's life is described early on in the novel as 'the life of a dog' (p. 9) but her eventual shaming of Mr Mackenzie into literally paying his dues at the end of the novel signifies her own transition from prey at the hands of an ex-lover on whom she is dependent to predator actively extorting him for more than he has even been asked for (p. 138). Although the title of the book *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* defines Julia by her ex-lover, I would argue that while we start and end the novel in cyclical form with Julia leaving Mr Mackenzie, the second departure that closes the novel feels much more final and on the protagonist's own terms, realizing her progression from dog to wolf.

However, while Julia's wildness has destructive potential, ascriptions of wildness are also a colonialist strategy which foregrounds the imperialist and patriarchal power structures which ensure her marginalization. The claustrophobia that Julia experiences in the underground, the hotel room, and the streets of London act as a kind of cage for her. While night offers her the potential to embrace her 'wild', undomesticated side, and provides her welcome cover from the watchful eyes of men and the anthropomorphised city, the darkness

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<sup>171</sup> The binary associations of men with the public, political sphere and women with the private, domestic sphere are well traced (and challenged) by feminist theory. One example from the fields of literary urbanism would be Sharon Marcus. *Apartment stories: City and home in nineteenth-century Paris and London*. (University of California Press, 1999).



also makes her vulnerable to gendered violence. Julia is constantly aware of men walking alongside her, and all the more so at night. In one particular instance she and an anonymous man are described 'walking on side by side - tense, like two animals' (p. 135) imbuing this moment with a predatory context that depicts the male presence as a violent, animalistic force. While this scene is ultimately anticlimactic in that no assault actually occurs, the 'deadly and impartial criticism' (p. 135) that directs the man's ultimate decision to give up his pursuit is another form of patriarchal violence, as it reduces women's value to their aesthetic appearance as decreed by and for the male gaze. Nature is also depicted in predatory terms during this scene; the pale moon is described 'like a claw' which looks down 'through the claw-like branches of dead trees' (p. 135). The repetition of claw-like imagery represents the threat of violence for metropolitan women walking alone at night, particularly for those deracinated migrant women like Julia. However, the wildness of nature at night also portends the transformative power of that liminal period between day and night where Julia can embrace her own wild side, as it precedes her final leaving of Mr Mackenzie.

Fur coats are an interesting recurring motif in Rhys' novels because they oxymoronically represent both wildness (of the former living animal) and domestication (of the animal killed for its fur). Fur coats evoke commoditization and violence against animals. The fur coats worn by the protagonists, represented as sartorial armor that they use to 'fight the world' (p. 14), signify both the power of animalism and wildness, as well as the marginalization and domestication Rhys' protagonists are subjected to as a result of colonialism and patriarchy: they are both hunted and hunter. The fur coat functions as a kind of second skin without which the protagonists become naked and vulnerable, but which also signposts their vulnerability. When read through the lens of wildness, however, the fur coat

takes on the radical potential to refute civilization and resist the order of things in favor of what Halberstam calls ‘unpredictable and undead refusals to the regimes of representation that seek to swallow up difference altogether.’<sup>172</sup> The fur coat is attributed a power that is not attributed to other commodities in Rhys’ novels. The difference that ensures the protagonists’ marginalization as female colonial expatriates living in western imperial cities here becomes reconfigured with the potential to disrupt and destabilize normalizing regimes.

Giving up one’s fur coat is always a bad omen in Rhys’ fiction. Julia’s self-proclaimed deepest regret is the selling of her own fur coat: ‘of all the idiotic things I ever did the most idiotic was selling my fur coat [...] it was protective colouring as it were’ (p. 57). Typically, it foreshadows the protagonist’s ensnarement in a systemic web without the possibility for escape. Such is the case, for instance, when Anna sells her fur coat in *Voyage in the Dark*. The exchange of the fur coat for money can be read as Anna’s first instance of prostitution; exchanging part of her body for money. The sale of the fur coat becomes a catalyst for Anna’s descent into prostitution and foreshadows her eventual abandonment by Walter. Julia’s fur gives her a sense of power and seeming self-possession, but when she gives it up she finds herself to have ‘slipped down the food chain to resemble a meek herbivore’<sup>173</sup>. In other words, giving up her fur ensures that she will become prey. The temporal liminality encapsulated by the hour between dog and wolf frees her once again to embrace her wild side, symbolized by the fur as a kind of second skin. The language used to describe their final encounter - Julia ‘advances’ towards Mr Mackenzie, whose impulse is to ‘shield his face’ (p. 136-7) in a protective gesture - signifies Julia’s predatory position. She is

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<sup>172</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. 178.

<sup>173</sup> Lorna Sage. “Introduction” in Jean Rhys. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. (1997). p. v.

ultimately able to regain her self possession enough to leave Mr Mackenzie for the second and final time.

However, Julia also internalizes the patriarchal Eurocentric gaze that wishes to categorize her as “other” according to colonialist logics that isolate her from western civilization. It is important to signpost Julia’s particular positioning as a white woman cast as “other” for coming from a colony, because she will be treated differently by Europeans than racialized native peoples would be. Nonetheless, Julia is situated as a “wild” counterpart to western imperial “civilized” subjects, which lends itself to a critique of colonialism and its marginalization of deracinated migrants living in imperialist cities. The representation of London as a theater that makes Julia prey to the gaze dramatizes this internalization. Julia describes being unable to open the window of her hotel without finding several pairs of eyes glued upon her: “we’re like mites in a cheese in that damned hotel” (p. 130). The use of mites, tiny insects from the tick and spider family, as an analogy for her exposure is interesting because of their association with dirt and uncleanness, discourses which have been central to the marginalization and exclusion of migrant communities according to nationalist “logics” of hygiene, which I explore in the next chapter.

Julia becomes increasingly unable to recognise herself as anything other than an object for the appraisal of the gaze. In order to achieve financial stability she is entirely dependent on her own objectification; she lives ‘principally [...] on the money given to her by various men’ (p. 20) and her additional employment as an artist’s model and a mannequin are likewise tied up in her aestheticization. Julia self-fashions herself ‘elaborately and carefully’ but this process, which has ‘ceased to be a labor of love and become partly a mechanical process’ (p. 11), no longer brings her any pleasure. The use of the word ‘mechanical’ to

describe the process indicates a blurring of women into machine in a possible reaffirmation of the patriarchal desire for technological mastery over woman as agentless automatons.<sup>174</sup>

Julia's identification with the reproduction of a Modigliani nude in the studio of a woman for whom she sits as an artist's model epitomizes her internalization of the male imperial gaze:

'This picture is of a woman lying on a couch, a woman with a lovely, lovely body. [...] A sort of proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a mask, a long, dark face, and very big eyes. The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman.' (p. 40).

Julia recognises a 'real [...] live woman' in the mask-like, vacant expression of the Modigliani nude, a depiction which recalls the way she regards her dying mother. In *Ways Of Seeing*, Berger describes how women internalize the male gaze by turning themselves into objects of vision.<sup>175</sup> This process of objectification is fundamental to the nude, as a naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become one.<sup>176</sup> The presumed spectator of nudes is absent and male, and it is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity. Women's erotic desires are traditionally absent from the representation of nudes; they are there to feed

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<sup>174</sup> Felski. *The gender of modernity*. (1995).

<sup>175</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008).

<sup>176</sup> Berger. *Ways of seeing*. (2008). p. 54.

an appetite, not have one of their own. Thus Julia's association of the mask-like absence of the nude with a 'real [...] live woman' somehow 'more real' (p. 40) than her own self becomes an ironic commentary on the objectification of women in patriarchal societies, in a similar vein to Sasha's depiction of a shop window doll as a 'complete' woman, discussed above.

I felt that it was awfully important that some human being should know what I'd done and why I'd done it. [...] But I know when she spoke that she didn't believe a word. [...] I didn't quite believe myself either. I thought: After all, is this true? Did I ever do this? I felt as if the woman in the picture were laughing at me and saying: "I am more real than you. But at the same time I am you. I'm all that matters of you." (p. 40-1).

Julia's desire for human connection and understanding is met with denial and disbelief, reactions which she immediately internalizes ('is this true? Did I ever do this?'). She turns this disbelief on herself, unable to fully believe her own life story to be true. The painting's anthropomorphic assertion that it is simultaneously more real than and actually *is* Julia represents the evisceration of agency and aliveness that are the extreme consequence of internalizing objectification. The painting is 'all that matters of [Julia]' because she is an object for voyeuristic consumption, and no more than that. Unable to find tangible evidence for her existence when she searches her photographs, marriage-book, and passport in vain,

Julia becomes ‘like a ghost’ (p. 41), composed of nothing more than a series of disparate objects. Julia’s inability to access herself, even as a series of fragmented parts, relates to Sasha’s inability to recognise her own ghost in *Good Morning, Midnight*, discussed above. These are moments where the liminality of the women root them in an uncomfortable present, unable to assert their own agency to move beyond it. Each of the objects also has a distinct patriarchal or imperialist symbolism: the photographs suggest the primacy of aesthetics to ascertain a woman’s value, the marriage-book certifies the contractual ownership of women by men, and the passport signifies a person’s relative il/legality as decreed by inequitable imperialist ideologies of belonging and unbelonging.

Rhys’ short story “Let Them Call it Jazz” (1962), also set in London, describes how the gaze strives to make the “other” into an animal. Selina, the female protagonist, is subjected to the white gaze. Her white neighbors look down upon her as if she were ‘a wild animal let loose,’<sup>177</sup> an example of how the discourse of wildness can function to re-inscribe and affirm colonial mythologies that justify the “taming” of native peoples as a civilizing mission “for their own good”, rather than to challenge them. Theorising wildness risks a reinstatement of an order of rationality that depends completely upon the queer, the brown, and the marginal to ‘play their role as mad, bad, and unruly’.<sup>178</sup> This is further signified both by Julia’s identification with the nude as a ‘lovely animal’ (p. 40) and her use of whipping as a metaphor for her emotional abuse at the hands of the artist she models for: ‘she thought me stupid and would say little things to hurt me. Like somebody flicking at you with a whip’ (p. 39). Whipping, a means to tame wild animals through forceful submission and subjugation,

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<sup>177</sup> Jean Rhys. “Let Them Call It Jazz” in *Let Them Call It Jazz and Other Stories*. (Penguin, 1973). p. 47.

<sup>178</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. 145.

can be read as a metaphor for the myth of colonialism's civilizing mission, used to justify the violent exploitation of native peoples.

In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* people are repeatedly depicted in animalistic terms. Julia, for instance, is aligned with various zoo animals such as the zebra, giraffe (p. 57), and monkey, the latter of which carries explicitly racially-charged associations. These wild associations are particularly significant because zoos are a guardian institution of imperial civilization. The world exhibition, discussed above, mirrors the zoo because it ships in natives from "exotic" lands to the imperial metropolis for the voyeuristic pleasure of its spectators. Julia's culture-shock upon returning to London recalls some of Jean Rhys' own horrors upon moving to London from the Caribbean, some of which are described in her autobiography *Smile, Please* (1979):

'Westminster Abbey, Saint Paul's, the zoo... We saw the lions first and I thought the majestic lion looked at me with such sad eyes, pacing, pacing up and down. [...] The birds were flying around in a bewildered way. Trying desperately to get out, it seemed to me. Even the colours were dim. I got such an impression of hopeless misery that I couldn't bear to look'.<sup>179</sup>

Her references to cathedrals and zoos, institutions which encapsulate imperial civilisation, evoke Rhys' colonial heritage and her sense of isolation in the imperial metropolis. Julia's sense of being an exotic animal pacing up and down in London's voyeuristic cage further

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<sup>179</sup> Rhys. *Smile please*. (Penguin UK, 2016).

exposes this colonial context. Her conviction that ‘animals are better than we are [...] not all the time pretending and lying and sneering, like loathsome human beings’ (p. 97) challenges the anthropocentric and racist underpinnings of the delineation of human from inhuman.

Julia’s dying mother embodies liminality because she hovers on the thresholds between life and death, and the human and the animal, calling into question the boundaries between states of being and non-being and challenging what it means to be human. She is repeatedly described in animalistic terms, as ‘an animal in pain’ (p. 61) with ‘bloodshot, animal eyes’ (p. 71), ‘beautiful as an animal would be in old age’ (p. 70). In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva uses the corpse as an example of utmost abjection, a force of death infecting life that challenges the border of what it means to be human, threatening subject/object collapse.<sup>180</sup> The boundary-threatening abjection embodied by Julia’s mother is imbued with the wild potential for undoing, un-building, and unmaking the world.<sup>181</sup> Her liminality challenges what it means to be human and destabilizes temporal order manifesting as a disorderly orientation to time and to life remapped by death, the likes of which Halberstam prescribes to an ‘untamed or wild ontology’ as a form of being that lies beyond and challenges the orderly dictates of modernity.<sup>182</sup> This intervention from the beyond takes on its most macabre manifestation towards the end of the novel, when Julia experiences a ghostly encounter with ‘someone dead [...] catching hold of my hand’ (p. 120) while ascending the stairwell to her room. The ‘someone dead’ that catches her hand likely refers to the ghost of Julia’s late mother, who she perceives contacting her from beyond the grave. Despite the fact that it is actually Mr Horsfield and not Julia’s mother who touches her hand

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<sup>180</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. Vol. 98. (University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982).

<sup>181</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. 180.

<sup>182</sup> Halberstam. *Wild things*. (2020). p. 12.



in the stairwell, this touch nonetheless becomes a catalyst for a transgressed threshold that transports Julia from the world of the living to come into contact with the world of the dead. Julia's mother's intercession from beyond the grave destabilizes the present by bringing it into contact with a ghostly past, unsettling temporality and the fixity of death and life in a manner which reorients Julia's present.

As well as bridging memories and histories, wildness resists regimes of representation that seek to swallow up difference and fosters ephemeral moments of connection in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. For instance, when Julia meets a South African man on a platform in the London underground, the two strangers share a moment of recognition which is generated by their mutual estrangement: 'I thought you looked a bit as if you were a stranger, too' (p. 102). Their recognition of one another as fellow strangers in London fosters intimacy between them and they become, simply for this brief moment, outsiders together. This ephemeral collectivity in strangeness realizes the potential for wild entanglements in difference.

Notably, Julia's encounter with her own ghost has the complete opposite effect; it provokes unrecognition, disavowal, and a fundamental undoing of the self:

'She walked on through the fog into Tottenham Court Road. The houses and the people passing were withdrawn, nebulous. There was only a grey fog shot with yellow lights, and its cold breath on her face, and the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her.

The ghost was thin and eager. It wore a long, very tight check skirt, a short dark blue coat and a bunch of violets bought from the old man in Woburn square. It drifted up to her and passed her in the fog. And she had the feeling that, like the old man, it looked at her coldly, without recognising her.’ (p. 49)

The whole description of this moment, from the ‘withdrawn, nebulous’ people and houses, to the ‘grey’ tones and enshrouding fog, and the ‘cold’ unrecognition in Julia’s own eyes is deeply haunting, but does not allow for the kind of movement *beyond* that Bhabha ascribes to the unhomely or haunted moment.<sup>183</sup> Julia’s encounter with the ghost of herself who is unable to recognise her literalises her splitting and self-alienation which trap her in a cycle of misrecognition, resulting from an internalization of the male, imperial gaze. When Fanon writes ‘the black man is not a man’<sup>184</sup> he is referring to the impossibility of overcoming the ongoing trauma of racism due to the omnipresence of white supremacy: the racialized other is positioned in a state of ‘nonbeing’ because they are not allowed to recognise themselves as human in a colonial society that positions them as inhuman and other. While Julia is a white colonial native, and therefore cannot be seamlessly read into Fanon’s theory, which explicitly addresses black colonial natives, his description of the fundamental estrangement of the colonial subject is relevant to the cold absence with which Julia meets herself as well as to her repeated association with nonhuman animals through the text. These instances connote her precarious existence as a female, colonial expatriate in London.

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<sup>183</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>184</sup> Fanon. *Black skin, white masks*. (2008). p. 1.

The phantom memories stirred up in Julia as she monitors her mother's ever-declining health can be connected to Bhabha's concepts of unhomeliness and haunting. Proximity to her mother regularly sends Julia into 'a confusion of memory and imagination' (p. 9) in which she channels her mother's childhood memories of Brazil; 'a dark purple sea, the sea of a chromo or of some tropical country she had never seen' (p. 9) as if they were her own. As Julia's mother's condition deteriorates, so do the boundaries between her and her daughter; their memories and temporalities repeatedly collapse into one another, reflected in the non-linearity of the novel's narrative. Julia's mother's presence is unhomely because it has the power to upset and disrupt the fixity of borders so as to open up a space of negation which "haunts" the present through an intervention of the beyond, which is literalised towards the end of the novel when Julia experiences her mother touching her from beyond the grave.<sup>185</sup> In contrast to the inherent trauma of Kristeva's abject embodied by Julia's mother whose corpse-like existence is seen as a form of death infecting life, the temporal disjuncture of the unhomely moment offers the potential to see the present in new ways through historical and temporal disjunctures that alter the present by way of a return to the past.<sup>186</sup> Despite the fact that Julia has never been to Brazil, her and her mother's shared memories transgress physical borders and stake out a shared mental and biological history. The fact that these memories are triggered by Julia's mental and physical proximity to her mother's animalistic wildness signifies the disruptive and possibly contagious power of her abject body to unsettle notions of time and place so that repressed histories can resurface and become retrieved.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>186</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>187</sup> For Homi Bhabha, retrieving repressed histories is part of both a process of healing and practice of resistance for subordinated peoples. It functions as a counter-colonialist act.

The eruption of the barrel-organ's song at various instances in the novel is another symbol of this temporal destabilization.<sup>188</sup> Julia sets the words 'Go rolling down to Rio' (p. 90) to the barrel-organs tune, connecting it to the process of migration and the memories of Brazil stirred up in her by and through her mother. This link is strengthened through Rhys' comparison of both Julia's mother's voice and the barrel organ's song to the crying of an animal. The death of their mother does not bring Julia and her sister Nora any personal resolution; their relationship remains as fraught as ever. However, the surfacing of their shared history by way of the liminality and un-settlement stirred up by their mother's abjection serves as a broader connection between the sisters and their mother, even while they remain interpersonally fraught.

The liminality that defines Rhys' protagonists is shaped by colonial logics that underpin the male gaze's mode of objectification. However, it also complicates these logics by destabilizing boundaries between temporalities, places, and peoples. Julia's wildness and her mother's abjection are examples of liminality that is on the one hand de-personalising and potentially annihilating, while also being imbued with the possibility to challenge and complicate marginalizing ideologies of self/other, civilized/savage, metropole/colony. Rhys' fictions are situated in a particular historical moment; while they expose and unsettle colonialist divides, they also often rely on these binaries for critique. The liminality that shapes the protagonists is ultimately not generative. Even Julia, whose story is decidedly more hopeful than the other Rhysian protagonists discussed in this chapter, has limited

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<sup>188</sup> The barrel-organ is a recurring symbol in Katherine Mansfield's work (discussed earlier in the chapter), where it symbolizes a revelation or epiphany that is just beyond the protagonist's grasp. This epiphany either only just evades the protagonist or else provides a brief, but fundamentally ephemeral, moment of clarity.

agency to bring about change in her own life, connoting a painful reality for female deracinated migrants living in Europe during the time of the British Empire.

## Chapter Two: City Bodies, Urban Texts: Race, Empire, and Residential Politics in Immigrant Council Estate Fictions

### **Introduction: The Windrush Generation & Council Housing**

During the mid-20th century, waves of Commonwealth citizens were brought to London to combat labor shortages and rebuild after World War II. The building of council housing was crucial in the restructuring of Britain's urban centers post WWI and II, with the so-called "Windrush generation"<sup>189</sup> representing a large proportion of the building force. Social housing policy and allocation intersects with class inequality, white supremacy, and imperialism. Housing is also a major determinant of access to social resources, voting rights, and public services which establish the minimum rights of citizenship.<sup>190</sup> The disproportionate challenges faced by immigrants attempting to access social housing assert the fundamentally conditional nature of citizenship, limiting the access to supposedly public resources for these communities. Without a permanent address, there is little chance of establishing these rights,

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<sup>189</sup> The "Windrush generation" emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain between 1948 and 1971. They are named after the Empire Windrush, the ship that brought one of the first groups of West Indian migrants to the UK in 1948.

<sup>190</sup> David Madden and Peter Marcuse. *In defense of housing: the politics of crisis*. (Verso books, 2016). p. 89.

which offer inclusion into the host society for immigrant populations.<sup>191</sup> As Doreen Massey points out in *Unsettling Cities*, citizenship is a spatially constituted form rendered exclusive rather than inclusive by increased privatization and surveillance.<sup>192</sup> British imperialism continues to structure the built environment of the city and influence the socio-political and cultural landscape of institutional racism that underscores policy and housing allocation in the UK. The postcolonial bildungsroman<sup>193</sup> analyzed in this chapter depict the spatio-social navigations of windrush migrants. These navigations taken together with their establishment of residential coalitions carve out alternative visions for what I will term urban citizenship: an alternative to legal or nation-state citizenship which centers the city dweller as an agent rather than an object of their rights, enacted through their active engagement in the city.<sup>194</sup>

Etienne Balibar's work in *We the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2004), which addresses the exploitation and exclusion of transnationals in Europe, is also fundamental to my theorisation of urban as opposed to legal or nation-state based models of citizenship. Balibar points to the increasingly widespread precarity of emigrant communities living in Europe without the benefits associated with being European, and argues that this precarity will continue to proliferate until a new model of European citizenship divorced from ideas of 'ethnic' and 'racial' belonging is founded. Particularly

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<sup>191</sup> M. Pearl and R. Zetter. "From refuge to exclusion: housing as an instrument of social exclusion for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK." in *Race, Housing and Social Exclusion*. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers (2002): 226-44. p. 226.

<sup>192</sup> Doreen Massey, John Allen, and Michael Pryke. *Unsettling Cities: Movement, Settlement*. (Routledge, 1999).

<sup>193</sup> "Postcolonial bildungsroman" refers to a very particular and divergent form of the bildungsroman which centers the experience of immigrant women who have migrated to England during their formative years as they attempt to navigate and assimilate to their new home(s). The bildungsroman genre originated in the 19th century western tradition and typically concerned the coming of age of a young white male protagonist, dealing in particular with their psychological development and moral education. The trajectory of these protagonists' lives typically resulted in a successful integration into broader capitalist society.

<sup>194</sup> The idea that the city dweller has a fundamental right to shape, change, and build the city and transform urban space as they see fit is inspired by and borrowed from Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities* 63181 (1996).

pertinent is Balibar's assertion that this new model must include a redefinition of national sovereignty that would alter the traditional constitutions of 'national' states so that new forms of social and political belonging can materialize.<sup>195</sup> Urban citizenship unsettles these nation-state based models in order to realize new forms of belonging in the city. Immigrants' experience seeking placement and living in council housing provides a lens into the structural and legal impediments they face in London, but the estate is also simultaneously mobilized as an arena for active resistance to their conditional status.

Construction of council housing took place mainly from the Housing Act 1919 to the 1980s, with the 20 years following 1919 seeing the erection of 1.1 million council houses.<sup>196</sup> Immigrant communities are underrepresented in the council housing sector, despite the fact that they are typically more likely to live in deprived areas, have low incomes, be unemployed, live in inadequate or unsuitable housing, experience poor health and be the victims of crime and as such make ideal social housing candidates.<sup>197</sup> Despite their under-representation in council housing more broadly, immigrant families - particularly ethnic minorities and women with dependents - are over-represented on so-called "problem estates"<sup>198</sup> and disproportionately at risk of eviction.

While the relationship between council housing and Britain's class system is well established and widely discussed by John Boughton, Lynsey Hanley, and others, the research

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<sup>195</sup> Étienne Balibar. *We, the people of Europe?: Reflections on transnational citizenship*. Vol. 18. (Princeton University Press, 2009). p. ix.

<sup>196</sup> Boughton. *Municipal dreams*. (2018). p. 30.

<sup>197</sup> David Robinson. "Missing the Target?." Discrimination and exclusion in the allocation of social housing, in P. Somerville, A. Steele (ed.) *Race, Housing and Social Exclusion*. (London, Jessica Kingsley 2002): 94-113. p. 101-2.

<sup>198</sup> The "problem estate" or "sink estate" is a British colloquial term used to describe council housing estate with high levels of social problems, particularly crime. Often these problems are blamed on the (typically racialised and impoverished) people who live on these estates, as opposed to the sociopolitical and architectural conditions they are living in.

on council housing, immigration, and race remains fairly sparse.<sup>199</sup> This is especially true of the experience of black, asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women in council housing, whose experiences are largely underrepresented and will therefore be focal to the work in this chapter.

Council housing began as a commitment to provide affordable housing for all that needed it, yet it was only made available to immigrant and minority ethnic families in the 1960s.<sup>200</sup> Even once social housing was made available to foreign nationals, their eligibility was limited by various statutory regulations. By the time immigrant and minority ethnic families were finally able to be accommodated in the council housing sector, the standards set up by the 1918 Tudor Walters Report<sup>201</sup> had long been abandoned and most immigrant and minority ethnic families were housed in Brutalist Tower Block estates erected cheaply and carelessly during the 1950s. These disparities expose housing allocation policy as an extension of the border which is mobilized as a form of social control on immigrant communities that works to affirm and maintain the nation state and signal the proliferation of the British Empire in “post-colonial” Britain.<sup>202</sup>

The sparse research that *has* been conducted on the experience of minority women, immigrants, and refugees in council housing emphasizes the role of institutional racism in

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<sup>199</sup> It is important to note that immigration is tied to racial prejudice in Britain: immigrants are racialised in the British imagination despite the fact that many immigrants are white and many black people are born and bred in Britain. For more in depth readings on the relationship between immigration and race in Britain see Salman Rushdi's "The New Empire Within Britain" (1982) and Ian Baucom's *Out of place: Englishness, empire, and the locations of identity*. (Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>200</sup> Harold Carter. "Building the divided city: Race, class and social housing in Southwark, 1945–1995." *The London Journal* 33.2 (2008): 155-185.

<sup>201</sup> The Tudor Walters Report was a housing report produced by the Tudor Walters Committee of the United Kingdom Parliament in November 1918 and its recommendations set the standards for council house design and location for the next 90 years, before they were subsequently abandoned in favor of building higher quantity council housing at a faster rate with cheaper materials.

<sup>202</sup> For further discussion of the ubiquity of the border see Étienne Balibar's essay "What is a Border?" in *Politics and the other scene*. (Verso Trade, 2012).



local and national housing policy and procedure, the stigmatization of single parent households, and the use of housing as an instrument of social exclusion and control as driving factors in the exclusion of these populations from the sector.<sup>203</sup> While the Race Relations Act of 1968 outlawed more overt forms of housing discrimination such as ‘whites only’ notices, more covert versions remain.<sup>204</sup> For instance, although there have been increasing numbers of evictions due to racial harassment on council estates, it is still more common for the victim to be moved rather than the offender. The myth that the housing crisis stems from the preferential treatment of immigrants and refugees also remains widespread.<sup>205</sup> While migration can be considered a contributing factor in the increased demand for housing because it contributes to population growth,<sup>206</sup> immigration increases housing supply, because migrant workers contribute to the housebuilding labor force in the UK, where not enough British-born nationals are trained or interested in careers in construction.<sup>207</sup> The privileging of whiteness in housing allocation coupled with the unfounded racialized myths regarding preferential treatment for migrants signal clear white nationalist underpinnings within social housing.<sup>208</sup>

This chapter reads a set of 20th and 21st century postcolonial bildungsromane including Buchi Emecheta’s *In The Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974), Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2007), and Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012), which center the experience of first and second generation minority ethnic immigrant women attempting to navigate social housing environments in London. The novels draw attention to and problematize the false

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<sup>203</sup> M. Pearl and R. Zetter. "From refuge to exclusion". (2002).

<sup>204</sup> Robinson. "Missing the Target?". (2002).

<sup>205</sup> Dawn Foster. "Is immigration causing the UK housing crisis?". *The Guardian*. (2016).

<sup>206</sup> *The Migration Observatory*. (University of Oxford). Accessed via <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/>.

<sup>207</sup> Foster. "Is immigration causing the UK housing crisis?". (2016).

<sup>208</sup> Richard Skellington. *'Race' in Britain Today*. (Sage, 1996).

idealism of integration and multiculturalism by revealing their intersections with oppressive nationalist and colonial discourse and practice. The social and structural impediments to movement or access which these characters repeatedly come up against reflect the territorialisation of immigrants by the nation state, the conditionality of their inclusion, and the difficulty in gaining access to supposedly public services.<sup>209</sup> For Adah, the Nigerian immigrant protagonist of *In The Ditch* (1972), for example, social inclusion is conditional upon an ‘appropriate performance on the part of the ‘other’, underlying and unspoken contract of compliance with imposed norms; ‘if you were black and ignorant, you were conforming to what society expected of you’<sup>210</sup>.

The physical, social, and political navigations embarked upon by the protagonists of the novels are assertions of their urban citizenship. They denote a form of political action and engagement which Henri Lefebvre termed ‘a renewed access to urban life’<sup>211</sup> a call to action for the city dweller to reshape, reform, and reclaim the city as their own. For instance, when Natalie Blake, one of the ex-council estate dwellers whose trajectory *NW* follows, ventures out on a long evening walk through the old estate, the boundaries between her past self, Keisha, a member of the minority working class, and her present self, Natalie, a middle class minority “success story” are broken down for a night. This return to the past is what motivates a transformative shift in Natalie's present. Similarly, when Nazneen, first-generation Bangladeshi protagonist of *Brick Lane*, ventures out into the dizzying streets of East London she asserts her freedom to re-map the city and carve out the fundamental

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<sup>209</sup> Étienne Balibar explains that the border no longer simply refers to a boundary separating nations, but also to a series of controls, surveillance, and policing against which immigrants repeatedly come up against in Europe. For more on this see: Étienne Balibar. “What is a Border?”. *Politics and the other scene*. (Verso Trade, 2012).

<sup>210</sup> Buchi Emecheta. *In the ditch*. (Random House Business Books, 1972), p. 20.

<sup>211</sup> Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities* 63181 (1996).

place that immigrant women of color have in defining the Bangladeshi community centered in and around Brick Lane today. Their movements disrupt any easy delineation of those “in” groups who are invited to move freely through the city from those “out” groups who are policed and excluded by the state, revealing these distinctions to be as precarious as their physical manifestation on the border. In these contexts, navigation becomes an act of resistance.

Council estate fiction makes up a highly popular and distinctive sub-genre of literature concerning the contemporary urban working class which has maintained a popular readership among the black working-classes since the 1990s.<sup>212</sup> It has so far gone under-explored in literary and critical theory, with the exception of Susanne Cuervas’ work on council estates as cultural enclaves in *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+ New Perspectives in Literature, Film and the Arts (2008)*. Cuervas argues that council estate novels can be read as part of a broader literary tradition of fiction written by and about the urban lower classes, identifying close connections with both 19th century portrayals of the urban working classes, as well as with contemporary literary analyses of white urban subcultures.<sup>213</sup> I hope to expand on and contribute to this theoretical conception of the estate novel by bringing race and immigration to the forefront of my analysis, and showing how they intersect with class based oppressions.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Susanne Cuevas. "‘Societies Within’: Council Estates as Cultural Enclaves in Recent Urban Fictions." *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+*. (Brill Rodopi, 2008). 383-395. p. 384.

<sup>213</sup> Cuevas. "‘Societies Within’." (2008). p. 385.

<sup>214</sup> My intersectional approach in the chapter is indebted to black feminist theory, the work of Kimberle Crenshaw in particular. Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” to explain how systems of oppression are interconnected and overlap to create interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage that are particularly impactful to people with multiple identity categories (ie. race, gender, class, sexuality). Kimberle Crenshaw. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1241.

The immigrant estate novels discussed in the chapter are also examples of postcolonial bildungsromane which challenge the form and tenants of the nineteenth century western bildungsroman as laid out by Franco Moretti in *The way of the world: The Bildungsroman in European culture* (2000). According to Moretti, the form of the traditional western bildungsroman was crucially influenced by the rise of market capitalism alongside which it developed.<sup>215</sup> By adopting minority ethnic immigrant women as their protagonists, the novels discussed in this chapter work to destabilize this logic of capitalist assimilation to varying degrees. The texts show that the assimilation of these women is contingent on their wilful submission to white supremacy, nationalism, and capitalism, exposing the violence that lingers behind ideologies of multiculturalism and assimilation.

The chapter opens with Buchi Emecheta's *In The Ditch* (1972), which problematizes the 'problem family' stereotype by elucidating complicated power dynamics between tenants, the council, and social workers in the novel. The residential coalition set up by and made up of tenants living on 'The Pussy Cat Mansions' estate is an example of urban companionship, which denotes a lateral and active mode of connection as opposed to one conferred in a top-down fashion, for instance by the state. Urban companionships are made up of a collectivity of individuals who come together as a result of and to combat conditions of precarity. These companionships are not "communities" because they are made up of diverse sets of individuals and do not carry the positivist connotations of community as they often necessitate in-group violence and tension. Urban companionships encompass political potentiality in their resistance to structural oppression, however they often also recapitulate

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<sup>215</sup> For a more in depth analysis of the impact of early capitalism on the development of the nineteenth century bildungsroman, see: Franco Moretti. *The way of the world: The Bildungsroman in European culture*. (Verso, 2000).

these oppressions from within. In spite of the violence and tensions stirred up in urban companionships, the building of diverse collectivities and encounters with difference are vital to building models of urban citizenship positioned as an agent of their rights through active engagement in the city.

A discussion of Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) follow. The two novels provide starkly different approaches to the postcolonial bildungsroman. Adah, the female Nigerian protagonist of *Second Class Citizen*, is unable to integrate into British society, while Nazneen of *Brick Lane* successfully assimilates and goes on to live independently from her husband, who returns to Bangladesh. In *Second Class Citizen*, the segregation of the council estate building signifies the territorialisation and exclusion of immigrants in London. In *Brick Lane*, however, Nazneen experiences the council estate both as a space of domestic confinement as well as a site for further exploration and freedom. Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), which concludes the chapter, charts the interwoven paths of characters who grew up on a council estate together. The interweaving pathways of these former estate residents are a socio-spatial articulation of difference that reveal relationships across difference to be altogether painful, messy, and often unequal in a contemporary multicultural London.

The novels present the city and the body as immediately and intimately related, in line with Lefebvre's argument that 'each living body is space and has space, it produces itself in space and it also produces that space'<sup>216</sup>. Public housing is often imagined as an object provided to its inhabitants, however the ways that immigrant characters navigate their

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<sup>216</sup> Henri Lefebvre and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The production of space*. Vol. 142. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1991). p. 170.

environments disrupts this narrative, as it shows how inhabitants shape public housing as much as it shapes them, in line with Lefebvre above. The western concept of the body politic, which considers the city, realm, or state as a metaphorical physical body, shapes my understanding of urban embodiment, which is another key term for this chapter. The theory of the body politic originated in ancient Greek philosophy, and was developed into a modern theory of the state as an artificial person by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century.<sup>217</sup> However, the body politic still remains a relevant concept today, where immigrants are imagined as possible invaders to the permeable body of the nation state. Roberto Esposito's *Immunitas* draws ideological parallels between immigration and global epidemics, both of which threaten to violate borders between inside and outside, self and the other, individual and the common at a 'crossroads of biology, law, politics, and communication'.<sup>218</sup> Immigrants are characterized as diseased, dirty, and highly contagious in nationalist strains of conservative discourse, which position them as possible threats to the health and hygiene of an otherwise "pure" embodied nation, with uncomfortable undertones of ethnic cleansing under white supremacy.

Urban embodiment refers to moments where the city is imagined as a metaphorical body, as well as the way that urban space becomes embodied in literary texts. The estate novels envisage the council estate as a representative urban "body" that stands in for and visualizes the structural inequities to which minority ethnic immigrant communities are disproportionately subject.<sup>219</sup> The embodiment of urban spaces in relation to their

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<sup>217</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan: or, the matter, forme & power of a commonwealth, ecclesiasticall and civill*. (University Press, 1904).

<sup>218</sup> Roberto Esposito. *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life*. (Polity, 2011).

<sup>219</sup> It is important to note that the immigrant is an explicitly racialised figure in the British imaginary, despite the fact that many immigrants are white and many black people are born and bred in Britain. For more in depth readings on the relationship between immigration and race in Britain see Salman Rushdi's "The New Empire

marginalized communities as a micro body-politic makes visible the impact structural violence and marginalization have on migrant communities living in London.

The ways that the city is embodied in relation to its “outsiders” unsettles the us/them logic of the body politic and re-configures London’s immigrant communities from “threat” to rightful urban subjects.<sup>220</sup> This conception of urban embodiment is indebted to the broader field of urban geography, and specifically to Chris Philo’s theory of urban wounding, which uses the city-body metaphor as a means to visualize the impact that structural violence has on marginalized communities in the city. The aim here is to rethink the idea of the ‘vulnerable community’ to emphasize the structural inequities that work to make certain communities vulnerable, rather than locating this vulnerability within the communities themselves.<sup>221</sup> These moments of urban embodiment challenge nationalist logics of exclusion which conceive of immigration as a “threat” to the nation state. This serves in turn to reframe the topic of immigration around the question of retribution and repair for the structural violence these communities are subjected to as a result of an ongoing legacy of imperialism that continues to work to make these communities disproportionately vulnerable.

The council estate is oxymoronically positioned both as a space of painful isolation and of possible community in the immigrant council estate fictions. Council estates, particularly “mixed estates” which see the purposeful housing of families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and belief systems together on one council estate, are often a catalyst for conflict and crisis due to clashes. However these encounters with difference can also encourage the fostering of a radical urban politics of difference shaped

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Within Britain” (1982) and Ian Baucom’s *Out of place: Englishness, empire, and the locations of identity*. (Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>220</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

<sup>221</sup> Chris Philo. "The geographies that wound." *Population, Space and Place* 11.6 (2005): 441-454. p. 442.

around and motivated by shared conditions of precarity.<sup>222</sup> Henri Lefebvre's city dweller is a new political subject with the tools to reshape, reform, and reclaim the city as their own. The immigrant council estate novels forward this strategy for revolutionizing urban life because they offer the potential for urban residential belonging that begins in the home but extends beyond it, working to problematize the stereotype of the 'problem family' and 'problem estate'. New urban collectivities - imperfect, messy and conflictual - emerge, offering some hope for urban co-existence across differences. Because housing is bound up in other forms of political and social access to the community, by centering the experience of immigrant protagonists battling for residential belonging, the council estate fictions critique nationalism and fight for a redefinition of citizenship that aligns with Lefebvre's centering the city dweller as an agent rather than an object of their belonging.

### **1. Problem Families, Problem Estates: Buchi Emecheta's *In The Ditch* (1970)**

Buchi Emecheta's semi-autobiographical novel *In The Ditch* (1970) unsettles the 'problem estate' stereotype and sheds light on the structural racism that underpins the negative associations of black minority ethnic segregation with 'high levels of social deprivation, poverty, exclusion [...] and threats of civil disorder' by embracing the problematics of class solidarity in relation to race.<sup>223</sup> The novel follows Nigerian-born single-mother Adah as she attempts to build a life for herself and her children on 'The Pussy Cat Mansions', a mixed

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<sup>222</sup> This conceptualisation of a 'politics of difference' is in part inspired by Iris Marion Young's work in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. (Princeton University Press, 1990) which critiques participatory frameworks for their failure to account for those who are not culturally aligned or identified with white Euro- and male-centric civilizing norms and advocates for affirming rather than suppressing social group difference.

<sup>223</sup> Harrison and Phillips. "Housing and Black and Minority Ethnic Communities." (2003). p. 36.



community estate in North London.<sup>224</sup> The diverse group of families housed on The Mansions form resident collectivities grounded in gender and class solidarity, but these are not free of racial tension, revealing the limitations of community. The building of these residential communities on ‘The Pussy Cat Mansions’ is an example of urban companionship because it is partly motivated by a desire to actively and politically participate in the shaping of their housing environment. The collective agency they foster allows the residents to more effectively combat conditions of precarity in their housing environments.

Adah is first driven to seek council housing because she is being exploited by her landlord, a fellow Nigerian who takes advantage of Adah by charging her double the normal rent and refusing to fix her rat and cockroach problem in the knowledge that, as a black single mother, it will be incredibly difficult for her to find alternative housing. This financial exploitation is a symptom of the increased commodification of housing, whereby housing and urban development have become ‘some of the main forces driving contemporary global capitalism.’<sup>225</sup> The commodification of both corporate and state housing as a profitable market shatters any possible affinities Adah and her landlord might have shared due to their shared ethnic and cultural heritage, because this capitalist framework transforms their relationship into pure financial exchange. Capitalism shatters the possibility for human relationality because it affirms and exacerbates the other forms of structural power with which it intersects, such as white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and class superiority.

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<sup>224</sup> There are broadly two strains of thought on best practice for housing allocation in the UK: mixed, integrated housing (favored by the Labour Party) or housing clusters.

<sup>225</sup> Madden and Marcuse. *In defense of housing*. (2016). p. 8.

When Adah is rehoused to an estate on The Pussycat Mansions, ‘a separate place individualized for ‘problem families’<sup>226</sup>, she is subjected to racial profiling at the hands of the white estate tenants. Adah is told to ‘go back to her country’ by a tenant who is herself an immigrant from Greece, and The Smalls, a white family who believe themselves to be superior because they are rich by mansion standards, repeatedly single Adah and her children out for noise complaints. Their repeated insistence that they ‘don't mind [her] color’ (p. 18) make the racial undertones of these complaints all too clear. However, Adah quickly learns how to navigate everyday interactions on the estate. She learns never to apologize - ‘a sign of weakness.’ (p. 19) that opens you up to suppression in the language of the estate - and discovers that she can secure friendships with even the most prejudiced tenants by feigning ignorance, because ‘if you were black and ignorant, you were conforming to what society expected of you’ (p. 20). This reveals how social inclusion is conditional upon an ‘appropriate performance on the part of the ‘other’, assimilation into dominant culture through compliance with its norms, and, in this instance, stereotypes.<sup>227</sup> Adah is forced to engage in these social performances in order to navigate life on the estate, revealing how residential politics recreate and recapitulate nationalist logics of assimilation as a manifestation of conditional forms of legal-based citizenship.

While mixed estate living is undeniably a source of conflict and tension between the residents, they are also able to put aside their differences in ‘culture, color, background [...] in the face of greater enemies - poverty and helplessness’ (p. 71). As the novel progresses, we see the tenants of the Pussy Cat Mansions form a racially mixed feminist collective of

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<sup>226</sup> Buchi Emecheta, *In the ditch*. (Random House Business Books, 1972). p. 17. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

<sup>227</sup> Pearl and Zetter. "From refuge to exclusion." (2002). p. 232.

women united in their struggle against poverty and unfair housing conditions. These women become what I term “urban companions”. The tenants association becomes a place where residents can be united in their shared pursuit of better housing conditions, an example of the democratization of housing that Madden and Marcuse advocate for because it is a space where they can regain voice and agency in regards to their own housing conditions. The active participation in this collective to change the conditions of their housing is what allows Adah to feel ‘like a human being again’ because it gives her a sense of purpose, a ‘definite role to perform’ (p. 61).

By presenting the possibility for a coalition of residents to be formed in spite of the conflicts and tensions that arise as a result of their differences, Emecheta concentrates on the structural inequality and poor housing management that these tenants face together while also not shying away from the violence that mixed housing can force to the surface. Urban companionships are not “communities” because they are made up of diverse sets of individuals and do not carry the positivist connotations of community as they often necessitate in-group violence and tension. In spite of the racism she has faced from within the companionship, Adah also comes to miss the intimacy she shared with the women of the Pussy Cat Mansions. When she is rehoused in objectively nicer council housing by Regents Park the flats are more closed off from one another; they are on the one hand ‘peaceful and private’ but with this comes ‘the isolation which is the debit side of privacy’ (p. 129). The architectural separatism of Adah's new estate stands in direct contrast to the interactive porosity embodied by The Mansions, signifying the potential for urban companionships to

mitigate alienation and loneliness in a close-quartered mixed estate environment that mirrors London as a global, multicultural city.<sup>228</sup>

Emecheta's novel is situated in opposition to the architectural determinism that has been used to target council estates and stigmatize estate residents since Margaret Thatcher's time in office. Geographer Alice Coleman's 1986 report "Planned Housing as a Social Trap" was highly influential on this point. The report makes the argument that it is the built environment of estates, rather than broader structural and systemic inequities, that are to blame for 'antisocial behaviors' and crime on the estate. In the report Cooper cites 'anonymity' and 'a lack of surveillance and control' as important design flaws that contribute to 'social breakdown' on the estate.<sup>229</sup> However, Emecheta's novel reveals quite the opposite: that the built environment of estates can actually foster closeness (sometimes uncomfortably so) and social interaction as opposed to the anonymity and anti-socially laid out in Coleman's report.

The idea that council estates are to blame for the drug abuse, vandalism, crime, and gang violence that are often found on them also conveniently sidesteps the question of structural inequality in favor of urban renewal, social cleansing, and a burgeoning property market. Emecheta's novel, on the other hand, positions the estate as a microcosmic city which becomes a portal for the intersections of systemic problems such as racial and class tension, economic decline, unemployment, and the lack of stable and affordable housing. While the conditions of mixed social housing may exacerbate racial tensions and make visible the wider structural inequalities, council housing is not itself the agent of social

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<sup>228</sup> Walter Benjamin introduces the concept of urban porosity in his essay "Naples." in *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

<sup>229</sup> Alice Coleman. "Planned Housing as a Social Trap." *The London Journal* 12.2 (1986): 172-181. p. 176.

exclusion, in fact we see the tenants on The Mansions come together in a joint fight against organized power in spite of their conflicts, tensions, and differences. Emecheta's emphasis on tenant collectivity in a shared fight for fair housing conditions foregrounds the role of structural inequality in shaping the built and lived conditions on the estate.

Council tenants are increasingly being forced out of their homes due to estate renewal, welfare reforms, poverty, and the precarity of low-income work. Loretta Lees and Hannah White estimate that 135,658 households that have been displaced in London since 1997, citing urban regeneration/state-led gentrification, austerity urbanism, poverty, low pay, the vagaries of zero hour contracts, and the bureaucratic failures of the benefits payment system as key factors at play in London's current housing precarity.<sup>230</sup> Disproportionately at risk of eviction in South London are women with dependents and ethnic minorities. Displacement can therefore be considered an 'insidious form of socio-spatial injustice'<sup>231</sup> which brings various aspects of housing inequality to the surface. The displacement of the 'problem families' that make up The Pussy Cat Mansions due to rebuilding on the estate in *In The Ditch* represent those disproportionately targeted by processes of gentrification and urban renewal.

Adah has the ability to reject the alternative housing she is offered by the council, but she cannot oppose her rehousing or advocate for her right to remain at The Mansions. In other words, her agency is doubly restricted: she cannot resist her physical relocation and has no platform to voice her concerns to the council or advocate for her right to stay put.<sup>232</sup> These

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<sup>230</sup> Lees and White. "The social cleansing of London council estates." (2020). p. 1702-3.

<sup>231</sup> Adam Elliott-Cooper, Phil Hubbard, and Loretta Lees. "Moving beyond Marcuse: Gentrification, displacement and the violence of un-homing." *Progress in Human Geography* 44.3 (2020): 492-509. p. 503.

<sup>232</sup> This is a phrase inspired by Henri Lefebvre's right to the city and coined by Chester Hartman in "The Case for a Right to Housing" (1998) in which he discusses anti-displacement efforts against urban renewal in the US. Similarly to Lefebvre's right to the city, is not simply a cry and demand to remain in an area, but asserts a

limitations reveal the tenants association to be both vital to the story, because it gives the tenants a platform to voice and share concerns among one another, but also ultimately futile, because they are unable to exactly exert any agency in regards to their forced exit from The Mansions.

However, while Emecheta reveals the limitations placed on estate residents, she also complicates and subverts the trope of the 'exploited council estate' resident through Adah and Carol's relationship. Carol, the social worker assigned to the 'problem families' of The Mansions, maintains complicated relationships with its residents, whom she genuinely cares about but fails to see as equal. As a result, her effort to support the families are always received as patronizing assaults on their dignity and personhood. The Christmas party is a perfect example of this; while the residents are thankful for the free food and gifts for their children, they despise being made into a cause. The residents rely on Carol, because she is 'employed to let them know their rights', but they struggle with the fact that 'Carol handed them their rights, as if she was giving out charity' (p. 98) and become increasingly suspicious that Carol actually wants them to remain 'in the ditch' so that she can continue to brag about her 'cases' (p. 125). Adah initially believes she is the one using Carol for access to financial support, however her reflections on Carol upon leaving The Pussy Cat Mansions reveal a less linear relationship of exploitative exchange:

'She thought she had been using Carol to get easy money, but in the process, she realized that Carol had been using her too. They were both at fault. No malice.

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resident's agency to move or remain. It represents a demand that urban development processes recognise the property and use rights of urban dwellers.

No offense. But

one thing about which she was determined was that she was not going to lower herself anymore for anything.’ (p. 127)

Adah realizes that both her and Carol have been using one another, and this realization allows her to let go of some of her contempt about being looked down on by Carol. Adah’s recognition of the dynamics of superiority and inferiority as an underlying context of their interactions, coupled with her knowledge that she is able to use Carol in spite of the fact that she looks down on her, allow her to accept mutual fault and overcome resentment. Their relationship suggests that exploitation is an unavoidable context in estate relations, but this exploitation need not be top-down or one-sided. Emecheta’s novel subverts the more conservative stereotype of the ‘problem family’ who are the cause of their own deprivation while it also undermines the liberalist stereotype of the ‘victim’ who needs help from the state, which is especially active in relation to public housing, revealing and rejecting both the “othering” tendencies inherent in both of these approaches.

## **2. Formal Dysfunctions and Strange (Un)settlements in Multicultural London: Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974)**

*Second Class Citizen* (1974) by Buchi Emecheta details Adah’s experiences prior to her time as a single mother on ‘The Pussy Cat Mansions’ in *In The Ditch*, discussed above in the section on ‘problem estates’. Taken together, the two novels make up a postcolonial

bildungsroman which brings the question of race, colonialism, and nationalism to the fore. Traditional 19th century western bildungsromane typically follow the trajectory of a young, white, male protagonist's maturation and eventual assimilation into normative society as a productive contributing member.<sup>233</sup> The black, female, African protagonist of Emecheta's novel has a different story to tell. Rather than becoming socially integrated as a 'productive' member of society by the end of the novel, Adah finds herself among the ranks of those "undesirable" members of British society: a separated, single mother struggling to maintain her job while looking after her four young children on a council estate resembling slum conditions.

*Second Class Citizen* resists the spirit of capitalism integral to the traditional western Bildungsroman and undermines its logics of integration and assimilation.<sup>234</sup> Emecheta offers no resolution at the novel's end, instead assimilation into mainstream English society is fundamentally impossible for Adah. The reader is left with a scene where Adah takes a taxi ride paid for by a male acquaintance from Nigeria. Emecheta emphasizes that the man only pays for the taxi 'because he thought [Adah] was still with her husband.' (p. 186), a symbol of the fact that while Adah may have escaped her husband Francis, she has not fully escaped the patriarchal context of her marriage. *Second Class Citizen* emerges as a postcolonial bildungsroman that challenges the logics of capitalist assimilation upon which the traditional western bildungsroman is constructed.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Franco Moretti. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. (1987).

<sup>234</sup> For a more in depth reading of the Western Bildungsroman's formal influences see Franco Moretti's *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987) which connects the development of the Western Bildungsroman to various burgeoning capitalist modes of production and consumption in the nineteenth century.

<sup>235</sup> Moretti. *The Way of the World*. (1987).



As a postcolonial bildungsroman, *Second Class Citizen* challenges and stretches the conventions of a traditionally Western, middle class form to new dimensions. In *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991) Fredric Jameson examines the impact of late stage capitalism on the architecture of the city and on human perception of the city. Jameson bridges form, embodiment and urban space when he states that postmodern urbanity ‘stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps impossible, dimensions.’<sup>236</sup> This description depicts the impact of postmodern architecture through an image of uncomfortable expansive embodiment that mirrors the physical expansion of the city. *Second Class Citizen* formally embodies this imperative to ‘grow new organs’ by stretching the formal dimensions of the bildungsroman. Its protagonist embodies the inherent possibility and discomfort implied by growing ‘new organs’: she feels a hopeful presence growing inside of her that subsequently abandons her upon her arrival in London, signifying the impossibility for her to assimilate, let alone undergo any kind of hopeful transformation following her migration. This impossibility is solidified by the destruction of the manuscript she describes as a ‘child’<sup>237</sup> at the end of the novel. This metaphorical infanticide is violent symbol for the ungenerative and self-annihilating existence she experiences as a migrant woman in London. The new formal dimensions the novel ‘grows’ do not “work” within the western bildungsroman’s logic of capitalist assimilation, because they challenge and critically dismantle the intersecting systems of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism. The repeated obstacles that Adah comes up against throughout the novel, and the

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<sup>236</sup> Jameson. *Postmodernism*. (1991). p. 80.

<sup>237</sup> Buchi Emecheta. *Second-class citizen*. (Heinemann, 1994). p. 170. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

fundamental impossibility of her integration by its end, indicate that capitalism and nationalism are themselves broken systems that mobilize dis(function), mal(production) and un(safety) as opposed to the hyper-productivity and security they promise.

Adah's story is positioned in opposition to the immigrant 'success story', a cliché that fuels the logics of multiculturalism and assimilation by emphasizing the emancipatory potential of displacement. As Susheila Nasta states: 'focus in contemporary postcolonial criticism on the celebratory elements of exile and displacement, the heroic potential of migrancy as a metaphor for a "new" form of aesthetic freedom' has a number of significant limitations which often 'dehistoricize and elide important questions of class, gender and cultural difference'<sup>238</sup>. Similarly, while multiculturalism on the surface appears to be an ideology liberal cultural acceptance, this is false propaganda, because both corporations and the state practice and profit from racism in Britain. In practice, multiculturalism becomes a form of social control designed to mask social injustice and dilute social protest, creating a bustling and profitable industry that solely works for white people.<sup>239</sup>

Adah grows up dreaming of moving to Britain, which represents to her a world of opportunity beyond the restrictions and male supremacy of Igbo culture. Nurtured secretly by Adah, this dream grows into her companion; it 'assume[s] substance' and 'live[s] with her, just like a Presence' (p. 11). But upon Adah's arrival to a 'cold welcome' (p. 33) in Britain she finds herself abandoned by the Presence, which signifies the impossibility for her dream

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<sup>238</sup> Susheila Nasta. *Home truths: fictions of the South Asian diaspora in Britain*. (Macmillan International Higher Education, 2001). p. 4.

<sup>239</sup> Rajeev Balasubramanyam. "The Rhetoric of Multiculturalism." in Lars Eckstein, Barbara Korte, Eva Ulrike Pirker, and Christoph Reinfandt ed. *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+ New Perspectives Literature, Film and the Arts*. (Brill Rodopi, 2008). 33-42.

to be realized in Britain, where, contrary to multiculturalist propaganda, cultural diversity is not welcomed, but suppressed.

Adah repeatedly comes up against structural obstacles that inhibit her mobility as a result of her identity as a black, migrant woman in Britain. Despite finding employment in a library ‘doing a first-class citizen’s job’ (p. 43) she realizes will always be regarded ‘a second class citizen’ (p. 37), destined to be triply marginalized due to her class, race, and gender. Finding better housing is a struggle because nearly all the notices ban ‘coloreds’ (p. 70) from applying.<sup>240</sup> She also struggles to get a prescription for birth control, for which she needs her husband’s signature, a patriarchal extension of her increasingly precarious home-life where she is subjected to the repeated perpetration of physical and sexual assault at the hands of her husband. These structural divides becomes manifest in the architectural separatism in and around the estate:

‘There was a mighty building curving right into the middle of the street shutting away the cheerful side from the gloomy one, as if it were determined to divide the poor from the rich, the houses from the ghetto, the whites from the blacks. The jutting end of this building was just like a social divide; solid, visible and unmovable.’ (p. 90)

The architectural divide which serves to separate groups of people into clear binary oppositions in the passage is both physical and socio-cultural. The solidity and unmoveability of the building that forms the divide represents just how deep-rooted racism and classism are

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<sup>240</sup> This overt racism in housing allocation was banned by the UK Race Relations Act of 1965.

in the UK, so much so that these institutions are written into the urban landscape of London. The council estate is also anthropomorphised as a feeling and agential being in this passage, moving beyond the human-centric tradition of the bildungsroman genre. It has a ‘cheerful’ and a ‘gloomy’ side, and its instigation of divisive boundaries is informed by a ‘determin[ation] to divide the poor from the rich [...] the white from the blacks’. The council estate is anthropomorphised as an agent of a nation which is oppressive and hostile towards its migrants, signifying architecture’s complicity in systemic forms of oppression which become written into the architecture of the city as forms of urban segregation.

The structural and systemic oppression to which Adah becomes triply subject entails not only a material and spatial dimension, but also a mental, psychological one. In *Decolonising the Mind, The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes that the most important arena of colonial domination was ‘the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world’<sup>241</sup>, without which economic and political control can never be entirely complete or effective. After a repeated confrontation with her triple oppression across the intersections of race, class and gender, Adah begins to internalize the inferiority society prescribes to her, which signifies the completion of the colonial mission: mental as well as physical exploitation.<sup>242</sup> As a result, her social participation becomes even more limited; she ‘who only a few months previously would have accepted nothing but the best, had now been conditioned to expect inferior things’ (p. 71). She automatically goes to

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<sup>241</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o. *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*. (East African Publishers, 1992). p. 16.

<sup>242</sup> Angela Y. Davis. *Women, race, & class*. (Vintage, 2011). p. 17.

the counter carrying ‘soiled and discarded items’ (p. 71) in a clothing outlet, an act of self segregation that conveys the impact of her internalized inferiority on her everyday behaviors.

Despite Nigerian independence being declared 14 years before *Second Class Citizen* was published, the ramifications of British rule in Colonial Nigeria continued to impact the country after its declaration of Independence in 1960.<sup>243</sup> Adah is subjected to various forms of mental colonization at the hands of white missionaries during her upbringing. They teach her, among other things, to believe that ‘the white man never lied’ (p. 51). The impact of colonialism also continues to be felt within her own home, where her daughter’s verbal development has been stunted because she fears being beaten by her father if she is caught speaking Yoruba at home. Reflecting on her first year in Britain, Adah realizes that she has experienced just as much, if not more, prejudice from her ‘fellow countrymen’ as from white people, and speculates that perhaps if the ‘West Indian landlord could learn not to look down on the African [...] there would be fewer inferiority feelings among blacks’ (p. 70). While society simply views all of these populations as ‘black’, and therefore second class, they grapple amongst themselves for in-group superiority, a symptom of the racial supremacy mirrored in white society.

Writing is an important creative outlet for Adah because it represents her defiance of cultural and familial expectations around what it means to be a wife and mother in a feminist, counter-patriarchal act of self-reproduction. Adah's completion of the manuscript she terms a ‘child’ (p. 170) constitutes an act of creative self-reproduction, definition and determination. Therefore, Francis’ destruction of the manuscript is an act of patriarchal subjugation which signifies not only a destruction of their family but of Adah’s independent personhood. While

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<sup>243</sup> Nigeria was colonized by Britain in 1901 and remained a British colony until 1960.

the intra-textual manuscript is destroyed, Emecheta's meta-fictional account of her life and experiences in Britain survives in the form of *Second Class Citizen*. The novel can be read as a 'failed' Bildungsroman because it does not end with the protagonist's integration into productive society. The impossibility for Adah to be integrated into British society reveals the extensive ways that British society fails immigrant women. The council estate and its segregating walls become a microcosm and portal for the territorialisation of black immigrant subjecthood in Britain.

### **3. Home-bodies, Familiar Strangers & Home Away from Home: Monica Ali's Brick Lane (2003)**

*'my present is foreign and the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time'* - Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands"<sup>244</sup>



<sup>244</sup> Salman Rushdie. "Imaginary Homelands" in *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. (Random House, 2012). p. 9.

Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) depicts the interwoven lives of a Bangladeshi immigrant community living on a council estate in the Tower Hamlets borough of East London, an area of popular settlement for Bangladeshi immigrants since the 1960s.<sup>245</sup> *Brick Lane* refers not only to the title of the novel but to a famous street in East London at the heart of its Bangladeshi community, which is sometimes colloquially referred to as 'Banglatown'. The street signs for Brick Lane are always listed in both English and Bengali, as depicted in the photograph above. East London is an area that has seen the settlement of many immigrant communities and has therefore been at the center of various violent conflicts, racial tensions, and riots.<sup>246</sup> However, the borough of Tower Hamlets has also been central to Bengali antiracist politics and black radicalism in Britain. The London rent strikes of the 1970s are a key example of how participation in housing can be a tool in anti-colonial struggle.<sup>247</sup>

Despite the prevalence of Bangladeshi people living in this pocket of East London, a 1988 report by the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) found that Tower Hamlets Council had been discriminating against the borough's Bengali population. The report found that the housing department had systematically allocated its South Asian applicants to poorer quality housing over a period of 10 years spanning the time in which the novel is set.<sup>248</sup> These discriminatory allocation practices are directly addressed in the novel, in which Chanu

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<sup>245</sup> Angelia Poon. "To know what's what: Forms of migrant knowing in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45.4 (2009): 426-437. p. 429.

<sup>246</sup> For detailed information on various East London riots that targeted immigrant communities, please refer to: Geoff Dench, Kate Gavron, and Michael Young. *The new East End: kinship, race and conflict*. (Profile books, 2011).

<sup>247</sup> The withholding of rent of 11,000 London households between 1968 and 1973, along with lobbying and demonstrations lead to the passing of legislation limiting rent rises in London.

<sup>248</sup> Boughton. *Municipal Dreams*. (2018). p. 215-6.

informs his young wife that the ‘Tower Hamlets official statistic’ for Bangladeshi families living in council housing is ‘three point five Bangladeshis to one room’, ‘all crammed together [...] like little fish in a tin.’<sup>249</sup> Notably, Chanu blames this on his community’s endless childrearing, rather than placing the onus on the council to provide for larger families.

*Brick Lane* is another example of a postcolonial bildungsroman, sharing many similarities with the structure of *Second Class Citizen*, discussed above. The novel follows Nazneen, the young, female, Bangladeshi immigrant protagonist who is sent to London in 1985 at the age of eighteen for an arranged marriage to Chanu, an older member of the community who works in the civil service and lives on the estate. However, Nazneen experiences a very different trajectory to Adah, in spite of the novels’ structural similarities. Postcolonial criticism has critiqued Ali’s novel for its affirmation of an individualistic and liberalist perspective and reductionist depiction of the immigrant experience. The novel *does* emphasize individual agency, assimilation, and productivity, fundamental pillars of the western bildungsroman, as well as normative expectations of legal “citizenship”. It also ends with Nazneen’s assimilation to British society and the productive workforce when she makes the choice to stay in London and make a living as a garment worker when her husband returns to Bangladesh. However, a reading of the particularities of the novel, specifically the ambiguities inherent to the council estate and the embodiment of the city in relation to its Bangladeshi community, serve to nuance this view. Nazneen is not seen to cast off her cultural values in the name of assimilation to British society, for instance she repeatedly turns

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<sup>249</sup> Monica Ali. *Brick lane*. (Simon and Schuster, 2008). p. 49. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.



to prayer as a source of solace and guidance throughout the novel. The protagonist's quest for agency, envisaged through a series of painful embodiments, ultimately does not lend itself to any neat narrative of capitalist integration and multicultural assimilation that it may, on the surface, appear to present.

In direct contrast to Adah's comforting dream-companion discussed earlier in the chapter, Nazneen's nascent agency is embodied as a sinister host that takes over her body like 'a case of tapeworm' (p. 131) that '[poisons]' her from within (p. 102). The foreboding depiction of the 'shameless, nameless thing' which sets up home inside her 'burrow[ing] deeper into her internal organs' (p. 102) and breeding 'discontents', bellyaches' and 'intemperate demands' (p. 131) negates any simplistic reading of ease or empowerment onto Nazneen's assimilation to Western society. These moments of painful embodiment literalise the physical discomfort of Jameson's imperative to 'grow new organs'<sup>250</sup> discussed in the above section, symbolizing the pain and difficulty involved in Nazneen's integration to London society, her separation from her sister, and her loss of her homeland in Bangladesh.

Nazneen's physical discomfort counteracts and problematizes Ali Rezaie's argument that 'as far as women from traditional non-Western cultures are concerned, dislocation from one's culture may, in fact, amount to freedom and empowerment'<sup>251</sup> and that they 'may see the survival of their traditional cultures as the perpetuation of their oppression and subordination.'<sup>252</sup> While Nazneen's sister Hasina's story of exploitation, sexual assault, family estrangement, and eventual prostitution certainly support the reading that oppression and patriarchy are an aspect of Bangladeshi culture that needs to be addressed, Nazneen also

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<sup>250</sup> Jameson. *Postmodernism*. (1991).

<sup>251</sup> Ali Rezaie. "Cultural dislocation in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*: Freedom or anomie?." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51.1 (2016): 62-75. p. 67-8.

<sup>252</sup> Rezaie. "Cultural dislocation". (2016). p. 68.

undeniably suffers at the hands of the patriarchal structures that are recreated in her London home. Rezaie's argument ultimately doesn't represent the nuances of the text and it denies immigrant women their own agency and emancipatory potential by placing the source of their oppression and disenfranchisement within their culture, negating the wider structural forces, such as patriarchy, that shape these cultural practices. The construction of gender oppression as integral to the Bangladeshi community is also racially motivated and charged, because 'culture is invoked to explain forms of violence against Third World or immigrant women while culture is not similarly invoked to explain forms of violence that affect mainstream Western women.'<sup>253</sup> When immigrant women are positioned as 'victims' of their own cultures, Western culture logically emerges as their emancipatory savior, disregarding the sexism indigenous to Western cultures and denying the immigrant woman emancipatory potential.<sup>254</sup> Not only can this approach not account for the Nazneen's complicated relationship to her culture, it invisibilizes her subjecthood and precludes her agency because it positions her as the victim of her culture who can only be 'saved' by assimilating to the Western cultural practice.

Theoretical approaches to *Brick Lane* have often been filtered through a western-centric gaze the likes of which are evident in Rezaie's reading, discussed above. This frequent mis-reading and projection reveals that, as Gayatri Spivak asserts: 'the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read'.<sup>255</sup> Spivak holds that knowledge-production is never innocent

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<sup>253</sup> Leti Volpp. "Feminism versus multiculturalism." *Colum. L. Rev.* 101 (2001): 1181. p. 1187.

<sup>254</sup> Volpp "Feminism versus multiculturalism" (2001). Similar arguments have been made by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist assemblages* (2007) in which she reveals how liberal politics realign sexuality, race, gender, nation, class, and ethnicity in relation to contemporary forces of securitization, counterterrorism, and nationalism homonationalism.

<sup>255</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Graham Riach. *Can the subaltern speak?*. (London: Macat International Limited, 2016). p. 104.

and that it expresses the interests of its producers. The intellectual west often treats subaltern women as a commodity that can be utilized for theoretical and financial gain. The so-called ‘objectivity’ of the western scholar is inherently sinister because "research" and "knowledge" have served as a prime justification for the conquest of other cultures and their enslavement, as part of the European colonial project in which this scholar is necessarily implicated. The subaltern cannot speak from within the western academy because it repeatedly positions non-western subjects as objects and “others” for study in a colonially implicated project. The intellectual is complicit in the constitution of the subaltern as the ‘Other’ because the academy repeatedly constructs and mediates the subaltern in relation to imperial and colonial history.<sup>256</sup> Spivak uses the example of sati or suttee<sup>257</sup> to exemplify the trope of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’<sup>258</sup>, the logic of which has been used to justify colonial interference in India by Britain.<sup>259</sup> The way that criticism on *Brick Lane* has constructed Nazneen is a symptom of this epistemic violence perpetrated against subaltern women, because it implies that Western interference or assimilation to Western values is the logical emancipatory solution for subaltern women oppressed and victimized by their own culture.

Monica Ali has also faced widespread critique on the grounds of her supposed ‘inauthenticity’, showcasing a similar racially motivated double standard.<sup>260</sup> The argument

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<sup>256</sup> Spivak. *Can the subaltern speak?*. (2016). p. 75.

<sup>257</sup> Sati or suttee refers to a historical practice found chiefly among Hindus in the northern and pre-modern regions of South Asia, in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre. It was outlawed in India under British imperial rule, and helped the British to secure this rule in India.

<sup>258</sup> Spivak. *Can the subaltern speak?*. (2016). p. 93.

<sup>259</sup> In "Rethinking homonationalism." (2013) Jasbir Puar shows how homonormativity colludes with hegemonic forms of nationalism and neo-imperialism to authorize imperialism, warfare, and torture in the Middle East. Homonationalism reflects and reinforces racial, cultural, and other hierarchies within queer communities, with significant consequences on local, national, and transnational levels.

<sup>260</sup> Protests about supposed misrepresentations came to a head during the filming of *Brick Lane* when a small number of activists (mainly residents and traders) threatened to block Brick Lane road and to publicly burn the

that Ali is unqualified to represent the immigrant perspective because she herself moved to England from Dhaka in 1970 at the age of three elides the very nature of fiction, and aims to delegitimize the author's claim to Bangladeshi heritage. Rushdie describes the various contradicting ways that Britishness is used to undermine immigrant citizenship as a complex web. On the one hand 'British-Bangladeshi Ali is denied her heritage and belittled for her Britishness', while on the other 'her British-Bangladeshi critics are denied that same Britishness, which most of them would certainly insist was theirs by right.'<sup>261</sup> Both parties are "othered" and neither are accepted. This reveals the fallacy at the heart of the ideologies of assimilation and multiculturalism: for these immigrant populations, being accepted as British is never really an option.

The embodiment of Nazneen's agency as an uncomfortable stranger is analogous to the splitting she experiences as a result of her immigration from Bangladesh to England; [her body is here but her heart is back there' (p. 32). While at first she can conjure a picture of her home village that is so clear she experiences it sensuously ('she could smell it' (p. 217)), as time wears on, her memories of her home village slowly but surely begin to leave her. Increasingly her home becomes available to her only in fragments, or in dreams. Her painful embodiments in the novel signify this estrangement from her home village back in Bangladesh and the parts of herself she has left there, as well as the uncomfortable reorientation she undergoes as she adjusts to her new home in Britain.

Karim, the young British-born Bangladeshi leader of the Bengal Tigers whom Nazneen has an affair with in the novel, experiences a similar sense of displacement despite

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book, which stopped on-site filming. For a further discussion of the question of authenticity and the resistance surrounding the making the novel into the 2007 film by the same name, see: Monica Ali. "The outrage economy." *The Guardian* (2007).

<sup>261</sup> John Singh. "Brickbats fly over Brick Lane." *The Guardian*. (2006).

having grown up in the UK and never having been to Bangladesh.<sup>262</sup> Nazneen mistakenly assumes Karim has everything she seeks, a solid ‘place in the world’ (449), but comes to realize that Karim was ‘born a foreigner’ (p. 448) in London. Both Karim and Nazneen’s husband Chanu construct their idea of home by projecting patriarchal fantasies onto Nazneen, who they see as the ‘unspoilt girl’ (p. 385) from Bangladesh, a ‘real thing [...] A Bengali mother. An idea of home’ (p. 454). Nazneen eventually comes to realize Karim’s projections for what they are: ‘an idea of himself that he found in her’ (p. 454). But this realization is coupled with the recognition that it is not only Karim who has created an ideal in her, she too has tried to make a home in him. They have ‘made each other up’ (p. 455).

Writing is another way that Nazneen attempts to bridge the divide between herself and the home she has left behind. She attempts to counteract the pains of displacement by exchanging letters with her sister Hasina, a relationship which represents Nazneen’s broader relationship to home in the novel. This exchange functions as a practice of spatial navigation and border-crossing that allow the sisters to transcend and transgress spatial and temporal borders and establish closeness across distance. However, while the letters establish closeness on one level, they also fragment the narrative, which serves as a formal embodiment of Nazneen’s displacement from home and reveals the limitations of their exchange. Ultimately, while their letters transcend distance, traveling across borders to reach one another, they cannot actually restore the sister’s physical proximity to one another, nor can they preserve or restore Nazneen’s sense of home. Salman Rushdie’s “Imaginary

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<sup>262</sup> The Bengal Tigers is a racially mixed muslim group on the estate made up of residents of all different ages and genders, that come together with the aim of counteracting the islamophobia and racism experienced by the community in and around the estate.

Homelands” considers the particular pull as well as the limitations of writing for immigrant subjects:

‘It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt, But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge - which gives rise to profound uncertainties - that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely that thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind’<sup>263</sup>

Rushdie points out the tragic irony of immigrant writing: immigrants have an especially deep pull to write due to the urge to reclaim and restore a lost past, yet the act of writing can offer only profound uncertainty; a fiction instead of the desperately sought after lost past. In the end, writing cannot actually transgress spatio-temporal boundaries to restore one's homeland or past. This sheds light on why while the ‘thought of writing [is] always pleasant’ for Nazneen the process itself is ‘painful’ (p. 142); it cannot bring back her home or her sister. Rushdie depicts immigrant writing as an act of reclamation that comes at the expense of epistemological certainty. Hasina’s desire to ‘feel’ and ‘eat’ her sister’s letter, to make them ‘part of [her]’ (p. 222) represent a desire for embodied, sensuous connection and knowledge that would supersede this epistemological uncertainty.

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<sup>263</sup> Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. (2012). p. 10.

Nonetheless, something is created in response to this divide: a fiction, an ‘imaginary homeland’, a mental home.<sup>264</sup> Rushdie’s depiction of immigration is a form of *translation* with something to be gained rather than simply lost provides a possible lens through which to read Nazneen’s decision to reject Karim’s proposal but remain in London with her daughters. This decision allows her to move beyond patriarchal constructions of womanhood and form a healthier bond with the agency that had previously manifested as a sickness: these are her something gained. However, Nazneen’s employment with ‘Fusion Fashions’, a British-run company selling Asian-inspired clothes to an upmarket British clientele, reveals the restrictions and limitations on these possible gains for minority ethnic women. The idealism at the end of the novel, which sees Nazneen ends dancing to ‘shout’ (p. 489) before skating on the ice in her sari as Razia proclaims ‘This is England [...] you can do whatever you like’ (p. 492) proposes entrepreneurialism in feminized spheres of work as the ideal integration strategy for BAME women. Nazneen’s integration into ‘productive’ British society lines up with 19th century assimilationist and capitalist logics for the bildungsroman genre. Nazneen’s “progress” is limited because it is revealed to be inextricably bound up in the patriarchal constraints that she sought to cast off when she declared independence from her husband and lover.

However, Nazneen’s struggles to adapt to life in London disrupt any idealist assimilationist reading for her trajectory. The protagonist’s journey to arrive at her eventual assimilation is far from smooth, and her vexed and multifaceted relationship to the council estate is a model for the difficulties this integration generates. Nazneen’s primary experience of her council flat is one of domestic claustrophobia. As has long been established in feminist

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<sup>264</sup> Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. (2012). p. 10.

theory, there is an intimate connection between the home and patriarchy, and patriarchal controls often organise domestic life for women. While the domestic space is still frequently regarded as a space of rest, privacy, and femininity, the home is actually a masculine domain organised by heterosexual imperatives<sup>265</sup>. Nazneen is expected to cook, clean, and perform other domestic labor for her husband at home. Her home is not a place of rest and relaxation, it's where she works. The loneliness she experiences in the long hours she spends alone in her council flat manifest in various images of spatial confinement; at one point she imagines 'the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress' or else that 'she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered by nobody heard.' (p. 24) and fantasies of escape. In a moment that recalls Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899), Nazneen shares a brief affinity with another woman on the estate who has purposefully thrown herself from her window. Nazneen's attitude towards her fellow estate residents' suicide, which she regards a 'happy' act of bravery that defied 'everything and everyone' (p. 40) exposes the impact of her claustrophobia, which becomes manifest as a projected suicidal ideation.

However, while housing can be a source of structural and patriarchal oppression, feminist theory has increasingly advocated for the home as a prototypically political institution. Housing discrimination and segregation are central to intersectional struggles for racial justice and feminist liberation.<sup>266</sup> The small resistances Nazneen launches against her husband Chanu as she places chillies 'like hand grenades' in his sandwich, refuses to eat with him, and purposefully folds his clothes unevenly, are all realizations of the political

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<sup>265</sup> Sharon Marcus. *Apartment stories: City and home in nineteenth-century Paris and London*. (Univ of California Press, 1999).

<sup>266</sup> Madden and Marcuse. *In defense of housing*. (2016). p. 213.



potentiality of the home. Here the council estate emerges as a microcosmic city where tensions and conflicts can lead to retribution and resistance, unsettling the dichotomy of the public and private realm. The depiction of Nazneen's actions as 'small insurrections designed to destroy the state from within' (p. 63) realize the home as a microcosmic state unto itself, so that action within the home becomes a means to enact counter-state resistance and overthrow the patriarchal system that structures relationships to power within the home as well as on a state-wide level.

The council estate emerges as a prototypically political institution which can become a tool in anti-patriarchal struggle. The culmination of these small resistances in her affair with the young, radical, second-generation Bengali Londoner, Karim, is also imbued with political potentiality because it directly corresponds with Nazneen's introduction to and increased participation in The Bengal Tigers. The Bengal Tigers represents an urban companionship because it is made up of diverse members of the council estate who come together to promote social advocacy, community work, and activism. Most importantly, the organization endeavors to provide shelter from and oppose the nativist groups who are spreading racist propaganda around Brick Lane. Nazneen's political and personal worlds begin to converge on the council estate when she becomes a member of an urban companionship that works to counter refugee-exclusion.<sup>267</sup>

The council estate straddles the urban, public and private, domestic spheres in *Brick Lane* in a manner that complicates the binary division of these categories and reveals them instead to be interactive and inter-relational. Sharon Marcus' reading of the apartment house as a liminal space that embodies the intersections of city and home, public and private, and

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<sup>267</sup> This phrase was popularized by an article written by Carol Hanisch. "The Personal is Political." (1970)

masculine and feminine and poses major obstacles to the creation of a private domesticated city that would securely transmit patriarchal power in *Apartment Stories* sheds light on the political significance of Nazneen's acts of rebellion within her home.<sup>268</sup> These domestic actions disrupt the symmetry of the supposed 'privacy' and anti-publicity of the home and counteract the 'normalizing, pastoralising and individuating techniques of modern power and police' that we see re-capitulated within the home.<sup>269</sup> The porosity<sup>270</sup> of the estate is another fundamental aspect of its liminality. Unlike in detached or semi-detached housing, close interactions between residents are necessitated by the immediate proximity of the homes on the estate. Similarly to Adah's experience on The Pussy Cat Mansions discussed earlier in the chapter, Nazneen feels comforted by the 'new kind of community' she forms with the other tenants, her 'the unknown intimates' (p. 182) who she can hear through the thin walls of the estate.

In *Brick Lane* the spaces in and around the dogwood estate become representative "bodies" that metonymically represent Nazneen and the wider Bangladeshi community that live there. When racial tensions between The Bengal Tigers and The Lion Hearts reach a head in rioting on Brick Lane the road is visualized as the 'main artery' (p. 470) at the heart of the city of London. The resilience of the Bangladeshi community in the face of these violent riots is communicated through the anthropomorphism of the neighborhood as a healing body, having suffered 'nothing that would not heal after a few weeks' (p. 485). In "The Geographies the Wound", Chris Philo takes up the bodily metaphor of wounding to emphasize the 'interconnected geographies (and histories) that *create* vulnerability for certain

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<sup>268</sup> Marcus. *Apartment stories*. (1999).

<sup>269</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012). p. 11.

<sup>270</sup> Walter Benjamin. "Naples." *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

peoples and places rather than others.<sup>271</sup> His work counteracts the placement of vulnerability *within* individual people or groups in order to bring the issue of responsibility that rhetorics of vulnerability often assuage back into the equation. Brick Lane contributes to and works within this configuration of urban wounding. Ali's depiction of Brick Lane as a wounded body with 'no visible scars' (p. 485) maps the struggles of the Bangladeshi immigrant community on to the invisibly wounded, but healing, city-body of Brick Lane. Urban embodiment functions to visualize, in bodily terms, how the Bangladeshi community is made vulnerable by the political and architectural forces that mandate their marginalization. However, it simultaneously conveys the illegibility of this urban wounding to those outside of the community; the scars are there, but none of these scars are *visible*.

On the one hand, imagining *Brick Lane* as a kind of Bangladeshi micro body politic has political potentiality because it centers the Bangladeshi community as fundamental to the greater urban body of London. To some extent, urban embodiment participates in Jameson's vision of cognitive mapping as a practice of dis-alienation through which city dwellers can reconnect to their surroundings and restore their political and social engagement with/in the city.<sup>272</sup> It also advocates for a re-thinking of white nationalist ideologies that define British nationalism in ever narrowing terms. Iris Young's work critiques inclusive participatory frameworks like liberalism and multiculturalism for their logics of normativity and normalization. Young advocates for a politics of difference which does not shy away from or attempt to neutralize conflict, recognising that community can become a violent construct if it does not recognise the difference, alterity, and cultural pluralism of contemporary urban

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<sup>271</sup> Philo. "The geographies that wound." (2005). p. 442. *emphasis mine*.

<sup>272</sup> Jameson argues that what is need to inform radical politics is 'a new kind of spatial imagination capable of confronting the past in a new way and reading its less tangible secrets off the template of its spatial structures - body, cosmos, city' in *Postmodernism*. p. 364-5.

life.<sup>273</sup> While Nazneen's assimilation in *Brick Lane* does not support Young's celebration of 'city life as an openness to unassimilated otherness'<sup>274</sup> moments of urban embodiment in the text realize the impact of the violence of multiculturalism and assimilation on the migrant city-body, where they are written as tears, wounds, and scars.

However, the emphasis on the partial *invisibility* of Brick Lane's wounded body complicates the issue of wounding and responsibility. The double signification of the city-body, which works to reveal as well as conceals its scars, speaks to the impossibility for the struggles of the Bangladeshi community to become legible or recognised from the outside; as with Spivak's subaltern, it cannot be heard, read, or in this case, seen.<sup>275</sup> The riots do, however, trigger reparations on the Dogwood estate. Politicians, with their 'hands behind their backs to show that they were not responsible, leaning forward slightly to show that they were looking forward to the future' (p. 484), photographers, a television crew, reporters, and councilors flock to the estate to make a show of their reparative intent. The implicit bias of council members and politicians is evident in the leading questions they pose to the Bangladeshi tenants and their immediate assumption that Nazneen has more children than she does. The superiority, distance, and performativity that define their interactions with the local residents on the estate showcase the limitations of the logics of liberalism and assimilation for understanding or recognising the needs of London's immigrant communities. However, the signs erected in both English and Bengali on the estate carve out a space for co-existence in difference the likes of which will necessarily stir up tensions but also

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<sup>273</sup> Young. *Justice*. (2011).

<sup>274</sup> Young. *Justice*. (2011). p. 227.

<sup>275</sup> Spivak. *Can the subaltern speak?*. (2016).

challenge white nationalist logics that strive to divide and segregate groups from one another across racialized logics of belonging and unbelonging.

#### **4. Re-Mapping the City: Walking as Political Urban Praxis**

The intersecting lives of the four racially and ethnically diverse Caldwell estate residents: Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan in Zadie Smith's council estate novel *NW* make up a shared city-text of interwoven pathways imbued with political potentiality. Each of these individuals who grew up together in Willesden, North West London embarks on a very different path beyond their childhood on the estate. While Nathan and Felix become involved in life on the 'streets', including drugs, crime, and women, Leah and Natalie take the educational track of university and eventual employment; they constitute estate 'success stories'. Their respective positions in relation to the estate are telling because they symbolize their relationship to and dis/comfort with their pasts. Leah is situated in close proximity to Caldwell; she can see the estate 'from her back yard', passes it 'every day on the walk to the corner shop'<sup>276</sup> and even finds her home intruded upon by its ivy, which signifies the ongoing influence of the estate on Leah. Natalie, on the other hand, 'lives just far enough to avoid it.' (p. 70). Natalie's house ownership is particularly relevant as property ownership is often considered a trajectory of "success" beyond public housing. Home ownership is often cited as a concrete sign ex-estate dwellers have escaped the estate, and all the class based assumptions this life carries, for good. As a black woman, her threshold for acceptance is also higher than most. Now a home-owner and high-flying barrister, she is so deeply invested in casting off her past

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<sup>276</sup> Zadie Smith. *NW*. (Penguin Books, 2012). p. 70.

that she even changes her name from Keisha to Natalie Blake. This is especially interesting as an inversion of Zadie Smith's own name change from Sadie to Zadie at the age of fourteen. Unlike Smith, Keisha's name-change is motivated by her comparative unease with her Jamaican origins and her wish to even out her difference by creating a more neutral identity for herself to fit in as a newfound member of upper middle class society.<sup>277</sup>

While the novel is separated into four separate sections, each with a shift in narrative voice, the lives of these and other characters from the estate interweave and intertwine in multiple ways, creating a shared urban text. In "Walking in the City" Michel De Certeau depicts the city as a legible text that can be rewritten by pedestrian activity. Walking is a political intervention because it counterbalances the totalizing eye of panoptic voyeurism by charting new and alternative paths through urban space that escapes these power structures and produces a 'walking rhetoric.'<sup>278</sup> The pedestrian's language is fundamental to political action in the city because it creates 'liberated spaces that can be occupied'<sup>279</sup>. The novel's section titles: 'visitation', 'guest', 'host', 'crossing', 'visitation' are representations of the characters' various pathway-crossings in the novel, which are imbued with the political potential of the pedestrian laid out by De Certeau.

One of the most notable pathway-crossings in the novel happens between Shar, a young, black, drug-addict, and Leah, a fellow Willesdener of Irish descent who is the only white employee at a local non-profit agency. Leah first encounters Shar when she knocks on her door in a purported act of desperation to ask for money to get to the hospital to see her sick mother, which turns out to be a front for drug money. After this point, Leah and Shar

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<sup>277</sup> Vanessa Guignery. "Zadie Smith's NW or the art of line-crossing." *E-rea*. Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone 11.2 (2014).

<sup>278</sup> De Certeau. "Walking in the City." (1984). p. 101.

<sup>279</sup> De Certeau. "Walking in the City." (1984). p. 105

cross paths in a number of eerie ways that mobilize a complicated socio-spatial articulation of difference and reveal the limitations of cosmopolitan empathy across race.<sup>280</sup> Leah's repeated offers to "help" Shar never escape a problematic and patronizing power dynamic that precludes true allyship and ultimately works to limit Shar's agency. Their interactions, framed by otherness, instead reveal the limitations of socio-cultural agency and ethical idealism in relating to the lives of others, especially those across intersections of difference. Empathetic practice is never neutral and often serves to widen rather than narrow the divide. The history shared by Shar and Leah ultimately can't match up to a present in which they live vastly different lives: they cannot recognise one another.

There is something almost ghostly about Leah and Shar's unlikely meetings. This brings to mind Homi Bhabha's reading of the haunted or unhomely moment which is brought about by inhabiting the temporal liminality of the border.<sup>281</sup> For Bhabha, a boundary is not 'that at which something stops but [...] from which something begins its presencing.'<sup>282</sup> The act of moving *beyond*, whether spatial or ideological, is unknowable and unrepresentable without a return to the present, which, in this process of repetition becomes disjunct and displaced.<sup>283</sup> The temporary position that materializes from this process of displacement emerges haunted, as the 'unhomely moment' that relates 'the traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunction of political existence'<sup>284</sup>. When Leah opens her door to Shar she also opens up a door to their shared pasts: an unhomely present that continues to haunt her as her section unfolds. Their interactions reside in liminal ghostly

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<sup>280</sup> Kristian Shaw. "'A passport to cross the room': cosmopolitan empathy and transnational engagement in Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012)." *C21 Literature: journal of 21st-century writings* 5.1 (2017): 1-22.

<sup>281</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>282</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 1.

<sup>283</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 4.

<sup>284</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 11.

territory between a shared past and a future that can never be reached due to their inability to navigate their differences without falling into the power dynamics that organize them. Leah is unable to see Shar as anything other than her inferior, so her offers of help are necessarily shrouded in patronizing and ableist forms of charity and aid.

Natalie Blake's confrontation with her past self Keisha Blake is another of the most notable encounters in the novel. Natalie runs into her past self while she is out on a long evening walk to escape her husband after he uncovers an act of infidelity that she has undertaken first under the virtual alias 'wildinwembley', and later the name Keisha Blake. Her long walk through the old estate up to Hornsey Lane constitutes an act of self-annihilation and denial in which walking becomes not simply what she does, but 'what she [is] [...] nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking [...] no name, no biography, no characteristics.' (p. 360). In other words, Natalie walks to cast off herself. This self-denying desire manifests in spatial terms, too; she heads for Hornsey lane precisely because it is the 'middle of nowhere' (p. 384). However, while Natalie partially succeeds in getting out of her own head, even if getting out of her *self* is overly ambitious, when she retraces the old estate she comes into inevitable contact with her past self Keisha Blake. This unhomely encounter with her past is triggered when she runs into Nathan Boyle, an old crush of Leah's who has 'known [her] from time' (p. 364) as Keisha when they grew up on Caldwell estate together. As the pair walk through Caldwell together, Natalie tries in vain to conjure up a connection to her past, but finds herself unable to bridge the divide:

'as she walked she tried to place the people back there in the house into the present current of her thought. But her relation with each person was now unrecognizable to



her,

and her imagination [...] did not have the generative power to muster an alternative future for itself. All she could envision was suburban shame, choking everything. She thought to the left and thought to the right but there was no exit' (p. 364)

Natalie cannot find a way to *move beyond* the spatiotemporal and figurative boundary represented by the old estate walls.<sup>285</sup> Natalie's present moment has become irrevocably changed by her act of infidelity. The displacement this act incurs is realized as a splitting: Natalie cannot recognise herself in Keisha, who *is* herself. She becomes someone with no past. Without a return to her past as Keisha, Natalie has no hopes of understanding her present, and, unable to conjure up this past, she becomes stuck in a painful liminality from which it is impossible to imagine an alternative future for herself. She finds herself with nowhere to go, no way to move forward or beyond. Her acute sense of confinement is mental more than it is physical; she 'thinks' for the exit rather than searching for it or physically moving towards it, which signifies her inability to escape the sense of unfamiliarity she feels with her own self. The past - materialized in the un/familiar buildings of the estate - is therefore a country she cannot return to, instead she is split into two selves that cannot be consolidated. This splitting becomes epitomised at the end of the novel, when Natalie calls the police to enter Nathan as a suspect in Felix's murder, but it is Keisha who speaks on the phone 'disguising her voice with her voice' (p. 294), the image of ultimate self deception.

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<sup>285</sup> Bhaba. *The location of culture*. (2012).

However, when Natalie's search for 'some sign of perforation in the brick' (p. 361) is met with the discovery of a partial destruction to the boundary wall of the estate 'torn apart [...] brick by brick' (p. 367) this indicates the mutual constitution of her body and the estate. Not only does the broken boundary wall signify the breakdown of the boundary between her and Nathan when she gives in and agrees to smoke a joint with him, it also indicates that Natalie and Keisha are not as separable as Natalie may have wanted to believe. The estate emerges as porous rather than totally bounded; it has cracks through which the past can filter and begin to show. The connection to the old estate that could not be retrieved mentally is here realized physically.

While Natalie finds it impossible to get 'any sense of the whole' when she eventually arrives at her destination ('nowhere'), it is telling that the tower blocks of the estate hold some sense of logic for her. They are even described as the 'only thing she could see that made any sense' (p. 384). These tower blocks, 'separated from each other, yet communicating' (p. 384) give physical, architectural form to her split selves: Natalie and Keisha, separate, but communicating through her body memory of her old home on the estate. It is here that the unhomey moment, inspired by her trip back down memory lane, finally triggers a changed present via a return to the past.<sup>286</sup>

Natalie's traversal of the old estate allows her to establish a connection to her past, which in turn inspires a changed awareness about herself and her marriage that allow her to move towards an altered present. This is an example of the ways that mediations of urban space function as a form of temporal and emotional negotiation in *NW*. However, the novel also sees characters constituted in relation to the estate in much less liberating ways. When

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<sup>286</sup> Bhaba. *The location of culture*. (2012).

Keisha renames herself Natalie Blake this constitutes part of a metaphorical death for her. Natalie puts her past self to rest in order to assimilate to the pressures for middle-class, home-owning society, which are especially intense for an ex-estate resident and black woman. Smith's only other black former estate resident and protagonist, Felix, is literally murdered as a result of racially motivated violence. Felix's death only becomes visible to larger society when it is sensationalized as an 'estate tragedy' by the news, which focuses predominantly on his upbringing on the Garvey House project 'a mix of squat, halfway house and commune' (p. 121) of the estate, as if this were itself a death sentence. The racism, prejudice, and fear that permeate this report as well as Felix's interactions with fellow Londoners on the tube just before his subsequent murder upon leaving the station have a dark story to tell about late-twenty first century relations in the UK. It is no coincidence that Leah and Natalie receive news of Felix's death on the day of Notting Hill Carnival. The reference to the festival accentuates the violent racial undertones at play in Felix's murder because of Notting Hill Carnival's own origins in racial tension and rioting.<sup>287</sup> In this way, *NW* grapples with the impact of globalization on local politics, discourse, and everyday urban relationships.

The novel shows that cultural engagement requires a constant negotiation of difference which is sadly often doomed to fall short. Confrontations with difference can see the widening of a divide between self and other, or, at worst, institute fatal violence, as in the case of Felix. The 'optimistic line of plane trees' planted by the council at intervals along the pavement on the estate, one of which as already been 'pulled up at the roots' and another

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<sup>287</sup> The Notting Hill Race Riots were a series of racially motivated riots during which Caribbean Commonwealth citizens were violently attacked by white nationalist groups that took place in Notting Hill between 29 August and 5 September 1958.

‘snapped in half’ (p. 373) is an analogy for the conflict and violence that persists on the mixed estate of Caldwell and beyond. Urban belonging in *NW* is complex, messy, and often violent, but there is hope to be found in the ongoing commitment to the attempt to negotiate difference. Cross-cultural navigations must pivotally involve a recognition of the value of diversity and difference in contemporary cities. It is only in the commitment to a continual mediation of the conflict difference stirs up and the understanding that this mediation will never be complete or “finished” but always ongoing and changeable, that there will be the possibility of relationships across difference that do not result in the annihilation of one or both parties. Otherwise, these interactions are destined to fall into the “othering” logics carried over from the British Empire, under the influence of which equality and mutual respect become fundamental impossibilities.

Chapter Three: “The City of Exiles”: Dirt, Waste, and Gentrification in Margaret Thatcher’s  
London

**Introduction: Waste, Race, and the “New Empire” in Britain**

Racial hatred and police brutality made the 1980s a particularly turbulent time for immigrants. Tensions culminated in the rioting of the mid-80s in public protest to challenge the precarious political position of black settlers. Writing in the 1980s, Salman Rushdie describes Margaret Thatcher’s term as prime minister a critical phase of Britain’s post-colonial period; a ‘new empire’ in Britain.<sup>288</sup> Thatcher’s incitement of racial hatred and anti-immigration legislation are symptomatic of this ‘new empire’, a crisis that extended beyond the economic or political to ‘society’s entire sense of self’ with racism its most visible part.<sup>289</sup> Rushdie describes imperialism using a lexicon of dirt and sanitation, depicting

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<sup>288</sup> Salman Rushdie. “The New Empire in Britain”. *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. (Random House, 2012). p. 129.

<sup>289</sup> Rushdie. “The New Empire”. (2012). p. 129.

the ‘filth’ of imperialism as a ‘stain’ that has seeped into culture, language, and daily life, without great effort being made to wash it out.<sup>290</sup> Imperialism is imagined as a dirty entity with viral potential: ‘breeding lice and vermin’. These species are associated with filth, disease, and rapid reproduction rates, damning marginalizing attributes that immigrants are also frequently diagnosed with by the right-wing media. What is especially interesting about Rushdie’s particular framing is that it twists the language and ideology of imperialism to undo and oppose it, so that the racist logic which positions immigrants as dirty, foreign entities threatening to invade/transgress Britain’s borders and multiply is applied instead to imperialism as a doctrine.<sup>291</sup> In other words, it is imperialism, rather than immigration, that poses the threat.

In the context of immigration after WWII, conservative MP Enoch Powell’s infamous 1968 “Rivers of blood” speech was particularly influential in stirring up and circulating the commonplace anti-immigration stereotypes of swamping and disease. The speech, which laid the intellectual foundations for the Thatcherite project which followed him, is particularly memorable for its divisive appeal to racial hatred in order to fuel widespread opposition to immigration. It rehearses various familiar racist tropes depicting immigrants as ‘aliens’ and the black community as ‘charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies’, many of which are symptomatic of immigration’s ties to racial prejudice in the British imaginary.<sup>292</sup> Powell’s insistence that although a black man may be a British citizen, he can never be an Englishman was a sentiment later solidified by Margaret Thatcher’s 1981 British Nationality Act, a

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<sup>290</sup> Rushdie. “The New Empire”. (2012). p. 30.

<sup>291</sup> This language is frequently notable in political discourse, and its exclusionary ideologies traversed in critical race and post-colonial theory and in contemporary bio-political theorisations such as in Roberto Esposito’s *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*. (Polity Press, 2002)

<sup>292</sup> Enoch Powell. "Rivers of blood." *Birmingham Post* 22. (1968).

notorious piece of legislation designed to deprive black and Asian Britons of their citizenship rights and which abolished citizenship as a birth-right in the United Kingdom. Now the question that would establish one's right to "Britishness" was not "where were you born" but "who are your parents", with clear racist implications.

Powell also tells the story of a white woman, who, upon denying two "Negroes" a request to use her phone to contact their employer, finds excreta pushed through her letter box. In Rushdie's account of "The New Empire in Britain" (1982), however, black families living in the run-down housing estates of Thatcher's Britain are the ones who receive human and animal excrement through their letter-boxes. I mention these two cases because they demonstrate how cross-ethnic encounters are depicted as passing on filth as a means of protest. The exchanges are racialised in both cases. In Powell's formulation, the exchange of excreta is used to illustrate immigrants' proximity to uncleanliness, and in Rushdie's, receiving human and animal excreta through the letterbox similarly denotes black families' "dirtiness" while also serving as a message of exclusion: you do not belong here.

This chapter takes the waste, dirt, and filth that Rushdie attributes to the new manifestation of the empire in 1980s Britain as its starting point and examines the impact of Thatcherite racist policies against immigrants. It looks at racialised cultural myths regarding hygiene and waste in the context of the migrant communities 'swamping' the UK in an effort to unsettle the dehumanizing associations of waste and dirt with immigrant groups.<sup>293</sup> The racialization of hygiene as both a discourse and labor practice is an explicitly

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<sup>293</sup> The language of 'swamping' was explicitly proliferated by Margaret Thatcher prior to her term as prime minister in a 1978 television interview for *Granada World in Action* in the lead up to the 1979 General Election. When the then conservative MP was asked, amidst a backdrop of racial tensions brewing in the UK, about how she would curb immigration were she to be appointed to power, she stated: 'people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture', conveying a nation threatened by the inundation of a "swarm" of immigrants.

anti-immigration ideology as it establishes false ideological binaries that serve to justify the exclusion of racial “others”. Françoise Vergès challenges and undermines stereotypes that position Europe as a clean and civilized standard, pointing to archival evidence to the contrary:

White supremacy creates a clean/dirty divide that posits a clean/civilized Europe against a dirty/uncivilized world, even though archives testify to the fact that non-European peoples were aghast at the uncleanness of whites, at their disregard for personal hygiene. Europeans were often in awe of the cleanliness of cities they entered but then destroyed, and of the peoples they subsequently massacred. By the nineteenth century, building on ideologies of race developed under slavery and colonization, Europeans drew a strong contrast between, on the one hand, a clean Europe and clean European bodies, and on the other, dirty indigenous dwellings, bodies, and sexuality.<sup>294</sup>

Representations of cleanliness/dirtiness construct a racial spatialization that enables the militarization and gentrification of cities, with poor people of color blamed for their innate

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<sup>294</sup> Françoise Vergès. "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender." *e-flux journal #100* (2019).



dirtiness and driven out of their neighborhoods in order to make the city “clean.”<sup>295</sup> Rushdie's formation of imperialism as ‘filth’<sup>296</sup>, and Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams’ claim that ‘waste is a sign of capitalism's success’<sup>297</sup> further contextualize waste as a byproduct of racial capitalism.<sup>298</sup> Vergès points us to the phrase “laying waste” to consider how slavery, colonialism, and capitalism have laid waste to indigenous lands and people.<sup>299</sup> The dual sense of waste as both ‘rubbish’ and as systematic forms of domination and enslavement such as colonialism that have ‘laid waste’ to lands reveals waste to be a sign, symptom, and after-product of organized power.

Ideologies of waste and dirt, and their figurative counterparts of purity and impurity, are used to justify the exclusion of immigrant groups as a form of necessary ‘cleaning’ with obvious connotations of ethnic cleansing. This hygiene-centered ideology is enforced through external controls, such as policing the border, as well as internal ones, including the control and management of space, as in the process of gentrification.<sup>300</sup> I connect the urban management of dirt to the gentrification and ethnic cleansing that began to transform the urban landscape of London, as well as to the production of the white, heterosexual male subject: the standard on which the boundaries of civic acceptability are framed, and against which otherness takes shape. I also think queerness in proximity to dirt in the context of the similarly viral metaphors of homophobic rhetoric surrounding Aids as the “gay plague” in

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<sup>295</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

<sup>296</sup> Rushdie. “The New Empire”. (2012).

<sup>297</sup> Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams. *Creating an ecological society: toward a revolutionary transformation*. (NYU Press, 2017).

<sup>298</sup> Cedric J. Robinson. *Black Marxism, Revised and Updated Third Edition: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. (UNC Press Books, 2020).

<sup>299</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

<sup>300</sup> Étienne Balibar. *Politics and the other scene*. (Verso Trade, 2012).

the early 1980s<sup>301</sup>, both of which have been retrospectively explored in the recently released BBC series *Small Axe* (2020)<sup>302</sup> and *It's a Sin* (2021).<sup>303</sup>

In particular the chapter hones in on the “second generation” of children born in the UK but not considered to be English, following/according to the twisted logic of Powell. I analyze artifacts produced by immigrants that concern this second generation experience in the 1980s, including Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dr. Stephen Frears, 1985), “The Tale of the Turd” and *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), all of which are nuanced in their approach to dirt as signifying both marginalization and transformation, the latter with creative and destructive potential.<sup>304</sup> While these artifacts trace traditional understandings of dirt and waste as what need to be excluded/discarded, they also showcase the creative and destructive potential of dirt and how it can be deployed against the exclusionary logic of hygiene discourse. In these films and novels, dirt is frequently shown as challenging heteropatriarchy and white nationalism from within, muddying the binary that separates dirty from clean, pure from impure, legal from ‘illegal’.

These cultural artifacts are examples of dirty utopias. By “dirty utopia” I mean an instance where dirt is used in a transformative fashion that opens up alternative ways of living and being in the world that are grounded in a recognition of the filth and hardship of everyday life. I use “utopian” in Avery Gordon's sense in *The Hawthorne Archive: Letters*

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<sup>301</sup> Paula A. Treichler. "AIDS, homophobia and biomedical discourse: An epidemic of signification." *Cultural studies* 1.3 (1987): 263-305.

<sup>302</sup> *Small Axe* (2020) is a British anthology film series, created and directed by Steve McQueen consisting of five short films concerning the lives of West Indian immigrants in London from the 1960s to the 1980s.

<sup>303</sup> *It's a Sin* (2021) is a five-part British television drama written and created by Russell T Davies and developed by Red Production Company. It depicts the lives of a group of gay men and their friends who lived during the HIV/AIDS crisis in London between 1981 to 1991.

<sup>304</sup> The creative and destructive potential of dirt as a transgressive entity is addressed in Mary Douglas. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. (Routledge, 1966).

*from the Utopian Margins* (2017), where utopia operates as a practice for the present — a way of coming to terms with our current conditions and developing strategies of resistance rather than according to dominant terms of order.<sup>305</sup> This approach to utopia lies outside of the racialized historiography and narrow discourse of its dominant Western conceptualisations. Dirty utopias concern the communal ways in which people gather against oppressive systems of power. In certain contexts, they also involve a physical encounter with biological human waste such as feces, vomit, sweat, and so on. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou describe ‘dispossession’<sup>306</sup> as a condition of precarity and vulnerability which simultaneously characterizes a form of political action that opposes this very disenfranchisement, as in the case of the 1981 Brixton riots.<sup>307</sup> Dirty utopias arise from conditions of dispossession - both a condition of precarity and a state of political agency - to uncover and attempt to make reparations for these histories of colonialism and systemic racism which have often been driving forces of migration and the subsequent exclusion of migrants in cosmopolitan cities.

I highlight particular spaces, including the toilet and the laundrette, which simultaneously evoke the racialised labor of cleaning and offer ephemeral visions of dirty utopian potential in the texts I study. In *Wildness, Loss, Death* (2014), Jack Halberstam writes that theorizing wildness opens up the possibility for building a new critical vocabulary for

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<sup>305</sup> Avery F. Gordon. *The Hawthorn Archive: Letters from the Utopian Margins*. (Fordham Univ Press, 2017).

<sup>306</sup> Athena Athanasiou and Judith Butler. *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013). “Dispossession” describes the condition of those who have lost land, citizenship, property, and a broader belonging to the world.

<sup>307</sup> The 1981 Brixton riots, or Brixton uprising, were a series of clashes between mainly black youths and the Metropolitan Police in Brixton, London, between 10 and 12 April 1981. It resulted from racist discrimination against the black community by the mainly white police, especially the police's increased use of stop-and-search in the area.

thinking race, sexuality, and the undercommons together<sup>308</sup> but at the same time ‘risks the reinstatement of an order of rationality that depends completely upon the queer, the brown, and the marginal to play their role as mad, bad, and unruly’<sup>309</sup> due to its entrenchment in colonial history. Theorizing with and through dirt carries a similar possibility and risk. On the one hand, theorizing creatively with dirt may expose and critique racialised, hygiene-centered ideologies which underpin the exclusion of migrants in western cities by challenging our conceptions of what or who is seen to be “dirty”. However, on the other hand, since dirt is tied up in colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and gentrification, theorizing the dirty may simply re-inscribe, or even re-invigorate, white nationalist “us-them” thinking. An acknowledgment of this risk is at the very fabric of my theorizing on dirt: its destructive potential cannot be realized without first acknowledging its murky colonialist history, and the ways that racist ideologies still foster the exclusion of migrants in cosmopolitan cities.

In an attempt to recognise the varied scope of the creative output and cultural contribution of the black and south asian diaspora in 1980s London, this chapter discusses film, visual art, and literature. *The Sankofa Film and Video Collective* (1983) and *The Black Audio Film Collective* (1982-1998) require particular mention because they were fundamental in establishing an independent Black British film culture as a response to social unrest in Britain in the 1980s. Black British cinema in the 1980s shifted from old preoccupations with conventional race-relations between black and white people towards a more diasporic and archival approach that conveys complex depictions of the nature of contemporary black experience in post imperial Britain.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> This was work started by José Esteban Muñoz, whose life and theoretical contributions Halberstam honors in this paper.

<sup>309</sup> Jack Halberstam. "Wildness, Loss, Death." *Social Text* 32.4 (2014): 137-148. p. 145.

<sup>310</sup> Hall. *New ethnicities*. (2006). p. 185.

Both migration and dirt are caught up in processes of boundary formation and transgression. Migration involves border-crossing in a literal sense. It destabilizes state power as it is a practice that undermines the supposed fixity of national borders. Dirt also conveys a transgressed system as it implies ‘a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order.’<sup>311</sup> Donna Haraway’s statement that ‘to be one is always to become with many’<sup>312</sup> in *When Species Meet* has implications for reconsidering how to *become with* immigrants as the designated “others” of the nation state. The story of ‘significant otherness’, of co-constituted selfhood, is also the story of colonialism, imperialism, and postcolonial migration and the boundaries of clean/unclean, pure/impure, those that “belong” from those that threaten invasion.<sup>313</sup> The contextual nature of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ extends to social, political, and spatial conceptualisations of dirt and the dirty.<sup>314</sup> Those people who fall outside the bounds of supposed social acceptability according to white and heteropatriarchal standards embody human dirt, whose exclusion from society is legitimized through a discourse of contamination regulation.

Dirt is simultaneously derogatory and transformative. Anthropologist Mary Douglas’ description of dirt as ‘creative formlessness’ in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) conveys the radical potential for dirt to disrupt existing systems of order and force us to rethink boundaries of hygiene and convention.<sup>315</sup> The inherently transgressive nature of dirt can also be harnessed by those hybrid figures deemed “dirty”. For instance, the homosexual relationship formed between Johnny, a young,

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<sup>311</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966). p. 44.

<sup>312</sup> Donna J. Haraway. *When species meet*. Vol. 3. (U of Minnesota Press, 2013). p. 4.

<sup>313</sup> “Significant otherness” is a term used by Haraway in *When Species Meet*. (2013).

<sup>314</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>315</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

working-class white man, and Omar, a young, queer, second-generation Pakistani man in *My Beautiful Laundrette* threatens to destabilize the binary logic of white male imperialism, heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy on which the boundaries of “normal” and “other” come to be constructed.

Dirt also has cultural and material significance. I follow Mel Chen in moving away from and beyond the initial wave of new materialism and its focus on the vitalism of objects<sup>316</sup> to consider how matter that is considered dirty, abject, or otherwise “wrong” intersects with certain marginalized figures and “animates”, to use Chen’s term, cultural and political life. Chen’s investment in opening up new ways of thinking racially and sexually about biopolitics in *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012), particularly their work on citizenship and governmentality, provides fertile ground for my reflections on the relationship between immigration, waste, and urban exclusion. Chen’s work is itself indebted to Julia Kristeva’s articulation of the abject, which deals intimately with the visceral bodily reactions to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other, topics similar to formulations of dirt as a boundary transgressor.<sup>317</sup> Rosie Cox connects human waste production to abjection, suggesting that our own waste forces us to confront something inside ourselves we are not comfortable to engage with, triggering such visceral responses as disgust and anxiety.<sup>318</sup> While for Julia Kristeva an encounter with the abject is inherently traumatic because it throws the subject into a state of ‘ambiguity’ and ‘sublime alienation,’<sup>319</sup> its transgressive nature has disruptive and political potential. The decaying, corpse-like body

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<sup>316</sup> Jane Bennett. *Vibrant matter*. (Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>317</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. Vol. 98. (University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982).

<sup>318</sup> B. Ralph et al. *Dirt: The filthy reality of everyday life*. (Profile Books, 2011).

<sup>319</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1982).

of Jamila's father in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, for instance, becomes a catalyst for the realization of dirty utopia. The materiality of the corpse is fundamentally abject because it forces an intense encounter with one's own mortality, with death.

This chapter examines how migrants become mapped onto sites, locales, or engagements with refuse. These delineations, despite their generally boundary-policing mechanisms, also have creative and transformational potential. Theorizing with waste and dirt "animates" a critical approach to immigration that redirects the othering logic of dirt and cleanliness against racism to convey both resistance and endurance in the face of violence and persecution.<sup>320</sup> The dirty utopias imagined in the cultural artifacts of analysis in this chapter work to expose, critique, and, in some cases, begin to make active reparation for histories of colonialism which have driven postcolonial migration to western cosmopolitan cities.

### **1. Dirty Enactments in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990)**

Dirt has been used in film and theater as costume makeup for actors to perform in blackface. Blackface, which was popularized in minstrel shows such as "The Black and White Minstrel Show"<sup>321</sup> across the United Kingdom dating back to the early to mid-19th century, describes the racist practice whereby white people painted their faces black and mocked enslaved

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<sup>320</sup> The term "animacy" is borrowed from Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies* (Duke University Press, 2012) in which she describes the "animacy" of certain materialities. The concept is comparable to "vitalism" and suggests a series of forces, swerves, and surprises inherent to matter. Unlike vitalism, however, animacies emphasize associations between humans and non-human animals, and between the organic and the inorganic.

<sup>321</sup> "The Black and White Minstrel Show" ran on the BBC from 1958-78 to overwhelming popularity. By the 1960s, it was getting audiences of 16 million. Its stage-show spin-offs were breaking box-office records. In 1961, it won the prestigious Golden Rose of Montreux. For further context on blackface and minstrelsy in Britain, refer to Michael Pickering. *Blackface minstrelsy in Britain*. (Routledge, 2017).

people for the entertainment of white audiences. Blackface became commonplace across theater, TV, film, cartoon, advertising and other media representations by the mid- 20th century.<sup>322</sup> The use of dirt for blackface is explicitly racialised and functions to “other” enslaved people in performances which diminish their humanity.

The protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Karim, who is a mixed-race, dual-ethnicity, queer adolescent born to a Pakistani father and a white mother, is forced to engage in the practice of blackface when his director asks him to lather himself in dirt in order to perform as Mowgli in a stage adaptation of Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* in London.<sup>323</sup>

‘It turned out that on stage I would wear a loin-cloth and brown make-up, so that I resembled a turd in a bikini-bottom.[...] As she covered me from toe to head in the brown muck I thought of Julien Sorel in *The Red and Black*, dissimulating and silent for the sake of ambition, his pride often shattered, but beneath it all solid in his superiority, so I kept my mouth shut even as her hands lathered me in the colour of dirt. A few days later I did question Shadwell about the possibility of not being covered in shit for my debut as a professional actor [...] ‘Mr Shadwell - Jeremy - I feel wrong in it. I feel

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<sup>322</sup> One of the most popular blackface characters was "Jim Crow," developed by performer and playwright Thomas Dartmouth Rice in the 1830s and 40s.

<sup>323</sup> Rudyard Kipling has been variously labeled a colonialist, a jingoist, a racist, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, a right-wing imperialist warmonger.



that

together we're making the world uglier.<sup>324</sup>

The racialized 'brown muck' Karim is lathered in recalls Mel Chen's conceptualisation of animacy. Chen writes that animacies are shaped by 'what or who counts as human, and what or who does not'<sup>325</sup>, focusing on questions pertaining to race, nation, sexuality, species, and disability - categories with long contested histories when it comes to concepts of humanity. Chen's concept of animacy can be prescribed to inert matter, like the theatrical "muck" discussed above, when it participates in practices of de/humanisation. Dirt is racialized and participates in Karim's dehumanisation when he plays Mowgli, a "primitive" jungle boy who affirms colonial stereotypes that people of colour are wild, tribal, bestial. Dirt, in other words, functions to draw boundaries between human and non-human, validating the humanity of the white subject for whose enjoyment, humor, and titillation the show is performed while simultaneously stripping Karim, Mowgli, and audience members of color of their humanity.<sup>326</sup>

Karim's reference to Julien Sorel 'dissimulating and silent' with an 'often shattered' pride but nonetheless solid in his superiority suggests that he is/both are working within the system to advance through its ranks for personal gain. In Sorel's case, a provincial boy who attempts to ascend the ranks of French society, the advance is class-based, whereas in Karim's case it is career motivated but also racially grounded. Despite the solemn

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<sup>324</sup> Hanif Kureishi. *The Buddha of suburbia*. (Faber & Faber, 2009). p. 146. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

<sup>325</sup> Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 30.

<sup>326</sup> Particularly relevant is Chen's consideration of animacy in shaping concepts of wildness, monstrosity, bestiality, barbarity, and tribality, as well as what it is to be human in Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 122.

undercurrent of superiority Karim claims to maintain, his performance is undeniably dehumanizing and degrading.<sup>327</sup> Karim's director Shadwell (secretly called 'Shitwell' by fellow cast members) frames him in primitivist terms when he describes him as a 'dark skinned, small and wiry' boy who will look 'sweet but wholesome in [his] costume' (p. 143). The objectifying aspects of the performance are further reinforced when Karim is compared to a 'competent [...] little orang-utan' (p. 146) a few lines later, a depiction that positions him as a non-human-animal, an uncivilized 'wild' thing.<sup>328</sup>

In Shadwell's production of *The Jungle Book*, dirt functions to affirm racist stereotypes and reinforce the boundary between an assumedly white English citizen and a racialized "outsider". Power dynamics are especially important here, with Shadwell representing the norms of a white, heteropatriarchal society, within and against which identity is repeatedly fashioned and refashioned.<sup>329</sup> Karim is forced to perform his own exclusion as part of the second-generation, a 'peculiar breed' (p. 3) that cannot be recognised as truly English in the context of a post-multicultural and post-colonial 1980s Britain.

The horror of Karim's friends and family only further solidifies the racist overtones of the performance. His father compares the performance to the minstrel shows of 19th century America when he calls it 'an awful performance by my boy looking like a Black and White Minstrel' (p. 157), explicitly calling attention to the dark history of enslavement lurking behind dirt in performance. Jamilia, the political center of the novel, calls Karim out for 'pandering to prejudices' in a production that can only be called 'neo-fascist' (p. 157).

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<sup>327</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999).

<sup>328</sup> The ways that animality becomes a marginalising label for queer and racialised minorities is well documented by Mel Chen and others.

<sup>329</sup> Muñoz describes identity as a performance in *Disidentifications*. (1999).

However, the political potentiality of dirt lies precisely in this disgusted response. In provoking disgust, racism becomes the abject that is furtively rejected by the Pakistani audience members who have come to see Karim perform.<sup>330</sup> The performance lays bare a racist system in all its grossness. This experience of abjection leads to a rejection rather than an embrace of the ‘ugliness’, as Karim puts it, of the racist stereotypes performed onstage, which make visible and hold up a mirror to the very real racism beyond it. Racism emerges as the stain Rushdie identifies beneath England’s veneer.<sup>331</sup> Here, instead of validating the supposed animality of the racialised other, the novel forces a confrontation with the England that drove Gene, Karim’s lover Eleanor’s West Indian ex and fellow actor, to overdose: the ‘bad world in nice old England’ (p. 201). Thus the response to Karim’s performance in black face allows dirt to serve as more than simply a dehumanizing and derogatory marker. Inherent in the acknowledgement that the performance is ‘making the world uglier’ (p. 146) is the potential to expose and confront systems of racial dehumanization both onstage and beyond it.

Karim’s performance is a form of ephemera that offers some utopian potential for dirt. It is a “dirty utopia” in a literal sense because of the actual dirt that Karim is forced to perform in, and a broader political sense because it participates in but also exposes racial marginalization. It constitutes a “dirty utopia” because it serves to expose racism as a filthy reality of everyday life in Britain during this pivotal time. Notably, however, it is only other marginalized first and second generation immigrants of the likes of Karim’s family that respond to this context with disgust, while white viewers gain entertainment value from

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<sup>330</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1982).

<sup>331</sup> Rushdie. “The New Empire”. (2012).

Karim's appropriation. These differential responses are what is at risk when theorizing dirt and utopia together: while dirt's transgressive nature may function to expose and challenge racist systems, it can also function as a marginalizing force that will strengthen precisely those racist systems it sought to challenge in the first place.<sup>332</sup>

Naturally, the question of performance is vital to the theater, but it is also fundamental to identity formation in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, where identity is shown to be something which is artificially manufactured through a series of performances, much like those required of an actor on a stage. Karim's childhood friend and love interest, the self-named Charlie Hero, is a prime example of this kind of identity performance. He is a Punk singer who profits off his 'manufactured rage and defiance' as he heads up 'The Condemned', 'a shit band for shitty idiotic people to love' (p. 153). Haroon, the titular character of the novel, 'a renegade muslim masquerading as a buddhist' (p. 16), plays to white stereotypes about eastern philosophy and spiritualism, making himself the object of white racism so that he can profit from white people willing to literally buy into their stereotyping. Ironically casting for 'authenticity' (p. 146), Shadwell insists Karim is not just right for the part, but rather *is* mowgli; asserting that performance and identity are one and the same.<sup>333</sup>

Performance is fundamental to how people, especially queer of colour people, are asked to navigate the expression of their identities in society. In *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics* (1999), José Esteban Muñoz describes identity-formation as a form of hybrid transformation. He is particularly invested in what he calls 'queer of colour' critique: 'formations formed in response to the cultural logics of

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<sup>332</sup> Halberstam attributes the same problems for theorizing wildness in "Wildness, Loss, Death" (2014).

<sup>333</sup> A typically postmodern approach to identity construction.

heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny - cultural logics that [...] undergrid state power.<sup>334</sup> Muñoz connects these identificatory performances to the navigations required by migration:

‘These subjects’ different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested that migrant urban public culture, by its very premise, hybridizes identity. A theory of migrancy can potentially help one better understand the negotiation of these fragmentary existences.’<sup>335</sup>

Hybridity is a border-crossing, liminal enterprise, which finds its logical home in the migrant urban public culture of the city. Karim epitomizes such hybridity as the ‘funny kind of Englishman’ (p. 3) who resides in politically shaky territory in an England into which he was born but to which he is refused belonging. The suburbs on the boundary of the city where Karim has grown up and is desperate to leave behind are a spatial representation of his alienation and in-betweenness as a member of the Pakistani diaspora. The city’s promise of pop music, sex and cultural self-invention are positioned against Tory England and suburban self-denial. Karim is a boundary transgressor. When he leaves the suburbs and starts a new life in the city of London, he has more freedom to experiment with his identity as a

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<sup>334</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Vol. 2. (U of Minnesota Press, 1999). p. 5.

<sup>335</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999). 32.

bi-cultural, bi-racial, bisexual man. This is one way to understand and build on Spivak's assertion that migrant urban public culture hybridizes identity; Karim is freer to explore and fashion his identity in the city, the city is in turn shaped by these public negotiations as replaces the metaphorical filth of suburban racism with the literal urban 'filth' of a rundown South London flat.

Whereas Karim is reft of agency as a performer by an employer who forces him to perform his own subjugation, Jamila represents the potential to reformulate the world through the performance of politics<sup>336</sup> when she is faced with her father's abject body.<sup>337</sup>

'Half-way up the stairs I smelled something rotten. It was feet and arseholes and farts swirling together, a mingling of winds which hurried straight for my broad nostrils. [...]

Anwar was sitting on a bed in the living room, which wasn't his normal bed in its normal place. [...] He was unshaven and thinner than I'd ever seen him His lips were dry and flaking. His skin looked yellow and his eyes were sunken, each of them seeming to lie in

a bruise. Next to the bed was a dirty encrusted pot with a pool of piss in it. I'd never seen anyone dying before, but I was sure Anwar qualified.' (p. 58-9)

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<sup>336</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999).

<sup>337</sup> I call her father's body abject here in the sense that, in starving himself to death, he becomes akin to Kristeva's corpse, which embodies the abject because it unsettles the boundaries between death and life and forces us to encounter our own fleshy mortal materiality.

Anwar's body becomes a force of utmost abjection; a living corpse giving horrible, fleshy materiality to human mortality.<sup>338</sup> Kristeva calls the corpse 'a force of death infecting life'<sup>339</sup> that encroaches on everything and sends the boundaries between subject and object into disarray. Anwar's decaying body is described in sensuous terms: the yellowing appearance to sight, the odors that emulate from him to smell, the 'dry and flaking' lips to touch. Anwar's placement in the living room rather than in 'his normal bed in its normal place' (p. 59) with a piss-pot in place of a toilet spacializes a collapse in order. As per Douglas' contextual definition of dirt: where there is dirt there is a system, it's not a unique or isolated event.<sup>340</sup> The repetition of 'normal' paradoxically emphasizes the abnormality of the situation: Anwar is matter out of place, a disruption of the normative order.

Anwar's starvation is a perversion of the spiritual practice of daily fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan, which marks the ninth month of the Islamic calendar.<sup>341</sup> Rather than a purification through prayer and fasting, his body signifies a polluting energy with patriarchal overtones: an old order in decay. Here, the unbroken fast functions not primarily to uphold muslim rituals but instead the heteropatriarchal enforcement of his daughter's subjugation. While undeniably traumatic, this moment of confrontation with her father's 'rotten', 'dirty', visceral mortality forces Jamila to navigate a seemingly lose-lose situation where she must choose either to marry, or be forced to watch her father starve himself to death in protest, by finding a third way.<sup>342</sup> Dirt simultaneously

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<sup>338</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1982).

<sup>339</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1982).

<sup>340</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>341</sup> Ramadan is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection and community to bring them closer to God between sunrise and sunset no water, food etc.

<sup>342</sup> The concept of the third is important for both Jose Esteban Muñoz's and Homi Bhabha's theorisations of hybridity.

shapes Jamila's potential for boundary transgression while it also ties her to familial and religious duties that constrain her freedom.

In Muñoz's terms, Jamila *disidentifies* with the traditional ritual of the arranged marriage: she will perform her marriage to Changez, the suitor chosen for her, but never consummate it.<sup>343</sup> The marriage resides in liminal legal and religious territory, as in these terms it is not technically a marriage without consummation. Jamila takes up with other lovers as she pleases, ultimately finding a female life partner who assists in co-raising her 'communal baby' (p. 231) alongside the man she conceived him with, Simon, and her husband, in their communal living space. The commune exists for Jamila as a kind of queer sexual commons that works against the marginalising forces of patriarchy and heteronormativity to sustain the lives of its ethnically, racially, and sexually diverse members, paving the way for them to live, rather than simply survive.<sup>344</sup> The distributed labor of commune life extends to their approach to childcare: each has their role to play and labor is fairly divided between members of the collective. No one person is left with the dirty work.

Jamila finds a way to obey her father in spirit but live a life of free love in practice. She allows her father to affect her without destroying her sense of agency or who she is.<sup>345</sup> As such she represents a revolutionary utopianism that is realistic and grounded in the reality of the differential expectations she bears as the sole daughter of a muslim family and a brown woman in England. She faces challenges Karim will never encounter, but nonetheless finds a

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<sup>343</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999).

<sup>344</sup> The queer sexual commons is a central category of contemporary political discourse that has emerged in response to neoliberalism and global capitalism's privatising enclosures and commodification of social life. For more in depth readings on queer theory's widely overlooked contribution to theorising on "the commons" see Nadja Millner-Larsen and Gavin Butt. "Introduction: the queer commons." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24.4 (2018): 399-419.

<sup>345</sup> Jessica Benjamin. *Beyond doer and done to: Recognition theory, intersubjectivity and the third*. (Routledge, 2017).



way out of ‘the shit’ (p. 61) she finds herself in by performing a middle way that works within and against the system so that it does not consume her.<sup>346</sup> She refuses either to be made responsible for her father’s death or to submit to his patriarchal demands. Her actions are not legible within either an assimilationist western “progressive” order or the realm of an anti-assimilationist traditional islamic framework. Instead they constitute a third-way, not out but *through*, to realize a utopian vision and a new space for possibility, as she goes forward as ‘an Indian woman, to live a useful life in white England’ (p. 216).

While it is Jamila who is ‘left behind’ in the suburbs, her political consciousness and potentiality exceed Karim’s. Finally able to perform himself, rather than a crass stereotype of a minority subject for the entertainment of white people, a symptom of the filth of racism in the “new empire”, Karim’s performances never quite extend into the realm of politics. They do not harness the creative potential of waste to undermine the system in place, but work to affirm it. Jamila, on the other hand, spurred on by her father’s abjection and the racism of her everyday life, harnesses the political potential of dirt as a disordering and transgressive force against the dispossessing ideologies of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Hers is a utopia grounded in the real, one which incurs endless and continuous struggle but allows a space for living, that itself constitutes the utopian possibility of laying waste to white supremacy, rather than being laid to waste by it. In *The Buddha of Suburbia* the ‘dirty’ embodied state of Jamila’s father and the redistribution of “dirty work” in the commons, where Jamila ends up co-raising a child with a communal family including the husband she practices celibacy with, the man who has fathered her child, and the woman she has fallen in love with are examples of how dirt can potentially shape utopian projects.

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<sup>346</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999).

## 2. Fecal Encounters and Hanif Kureishi's "The Tale of the Turd" (2002)

I move now from one dirty utopia to another; from the utopic potential triggered by the abject rotting body of Jamila's father, to the unlikely utopic potential of cleaning feces. The necessary but cathartic trauma of the abject is imbued with political potential in both Kureishi's short story "The Tale of the Turd" (2002) and the paratextual response to "Labour: Workers of the World ... Relax!", an exhibition curated by a young Dalit named C. P. Krishnapriya in Chennai (March 2018) which I discuss alongside it. Both bring dirty histories to the fore through an active and literal grappling with waste, forcing us to look again at murky histories of colonial violence.

Vergès ends "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender" with a compelling and provocative invocation to deal with our own shit, literally. The series of pieces of paper she discovered hanging alongside "Labour: Workers of the World ... Relax!" reiterate the exhibition's call for collective responsibility in regards to the global racialisation of waste labor such as cleaning, stating:

with bare hands, my grandfather cleans human feces, that he did, to such an extent,  
that

it is soaked in the lines of his hand, soaked like blood in blood.

in the night, with the same hands, he would feed my father, with the same hands, he himself would eat. With all this, getting habituated to it, because of that, my father

also

had no hesitation in cleaning feces, my father also did the feces cleaning ...

in my view, more than honoring that women [who clean feces], I think we should show that, like everyone else, she is equal;

1. women should stop cleaning feces, everyone should clean their own feces themselves

2. or else, we all should join with the women and clean human feces. like that, through doing this way, that women can be one of us, as equal, not only by saying it by words of mouth but by feeling it.<sup>347</sup>

The story of a grandfather who cleans feces before eating is a reversal of the eating cycle, in which humans ingest food which will later be transformed into biological human waste. This reversal provokes an abject response which emphasizes the injustice of labor practices wherein people are forced to clean other people's shit. The generational chain and the image of the hands stained with shit, looking as if they are soaked with 'blood' also evokes the colonialist history of these exploitative labor practices. The unnamed Dalit man calls for equality in the practice of waste labour, in a manner that recalls Jamila's commons in the previous section. He advocates for the practice of dignity whereby we all manage our own feces, or, to join the woman who cleans feces in a form of commoning that goes beyond language and organizes around a collective that divides the cleaning labor. Cleaning together

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<sup>347</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

is envisioned as a means of ‘feeling’ equality as opposed to simply ‘saying it’. This distinction is important because it relates to embodying a shared affect through collective labor. Sara Ahmed's description of affect as ‘sticky’ in *Happy Objects* shows how affects serve to sustain and preserve the connection among ideas, values, and objects in similarly tactile terms.<sup>348</sup>

The feces cleaning collective envisioned here is an example of what Munoz terms a “brown commons” in the posthumously published *The Brown Commons* (2020);<sup>349</sup> a collectivity of brown peoples that emerges in, through, and beside art and performance as a way of knowing and being in the world. This vision of utopia is boundary transgressive in the sense that it utilizes the creative and destructive potential of dirt as a critical context, refuting its marginalizing contexts.<sup>350</sup> The collective is a form of brown commons both in the sense that cleaning feces is labor enacted by brown people, across a certain index of violence, precarity, and illegitimacy, but also in the sense that the shared affect in doing this work enacts a moment of encounter, of being *alongside* brownness (both brown people and brown matter), that realizes the plurality of brownness as our shared commonality.<sup>351</sup> Brownness, Munoz argues, also promotes resistance in the face of systemic violence:

Brown, it is important to mention, is not strictly the shared experience of harm between people and things; it is also the potential for the refusal and resistance

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<sup>348</sup> Sara Ahmed. *Happy Objects*. (Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>349</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *The sense of brown*. (Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>350</sup> Duncan Bell. *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the utopian destiny of Anglo-America*. (Princeton University Press, 2020). In this book Bell examines the intersections between conceptualisations of utopia and white supremacy, showing how utopias are implicated in racial hierarchies and systems of domination. Utopias are typically entrenched in colonial fantasies and diminish otherness in a realisation of white supremacist fantasies: a utopia for the few, not the many.

<sup>351</sup> Muñoz. *The Brown Commons*. (2020). p. 2.

to that

often-systemic harm. Brownness is a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility.<sup>352</sup>

Sharing the labor of cleaning/caring has generative potential in the sense that it recognises the harm that has been done to brown populations while also working to actively make reparations for it. It is here that the decolonial and emancipatory potential of cleaning/caring is realized: in collective action which strives first to acknowledge and then make reparations for the damage capitalism and colonialism has incurred. Cleaning feces is imagined as an act of solidarity with those communities of color who continue to be disproportionately saddled with and made vulnerable by the dirty work of cleaning.<sup>353</sup> The concept of cleaning, typically regarded as a marginal and commonplace practice is itself reimagined here as a form of crucial communal engagement. Rather than cleaning labor functioning invisibly through the labor of brown, migrant women, frequently hired as (often uncontracted) cleaners for middle-class white homes, cleaning is rehabilitated as a form of political action which both exposes dark colonialist histories that have laid waste to native lands and peoples, while also working to address and make reparations for them. The collective cleaning of waste emerges as a practice of dirty utopian possibility because it functions to make reparations for the unequal labor practices predicated on and structured by this history of colonial

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<sup>352</sup> Muñoz. *The sense of brown*. (2020). p. 4.

<sup>353</sup> Françoise Vergès. *A Decolonial Feminism*. (Pluto Press, 2019).

enslavement.<sup>354</sup> As a para-text to the central exhibition, it also formally constitutes the commons it strives to create: bringing people in to and from the margins to get down and dirty in collective action.

Hanif Kureishi's short story "The Tale of the Turd" takes Vergès' appeal to deal with our own shit literally. The story concerns a man possessed by a sudden need to relieve himself at a dinner party where he is being hosted by his much younger girlfriend and her parents. Upon making the unfortunately timed but necessary trip to the bathroom, he is forced to seek frantic refuge between the stalls when he finds himself unable to flush his rather large load. This is where things start to get particularly strange, as the turd appears to take on a life of its own in a puzzling realization of Jane Bennett's vital materiality, which ascribes the potential for agency and active participation to nonhuman objects such as trash.<sup>355</sup> Bennett's work has been rightfully critiqued for its idealism and elision of the question of difference<sup>356</sup>. Its affirmation of the concept of a universal human subject invalidates the lived experience of non-human others across axes of race, gender, and sexuality- those treated like nonhuman objects - in a society that doesn't treat all people the same, eliding the supposed political and ethical potential of vibrant matter.

However, I'm interested in the ways that this short story molds vibrant matter into something with embedded political potential in that it does not shy away from but rather forces a confrontation with nonhuman otherness that crosses the boundaries of civility and forces a tactile exchange: a man literally grappling with waste. In this sense I follow Mel

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<sup>354</sup> It is especially important to reclaim this term, as Muñoz does in *Cruising utopia*. (New York University Press, 2019) because utopias have traditionally constituted colonialist fantasies that are bound up in white supremacy.

<sup>355</sup> Bennett. *Vibrant matter*. (2010).

<sup>356</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins cautions against this in "On The Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy" *Lateral 5.1* (2016): 5-1.

Chen, who extends Bennett's work on the affect of nonhuman bodies by considering how animacy is shaped by race and sexuality.<sup>357</sup> The depiction of the turd as a 'strange messenger'<sup>358</sup> who has come to impart some unidentified universal truth is a bastardisation of the role of the prophet or moral teacher in traditional parables, folktales, or fables.<sup>359</sup> In these more traditional stories, prophets function to impart messages that uphold and affirm the system in place whether this be religious, civic, or governmental. The turd emerges instead as the messenger of an alternative and purposefully hidden history, a darker history that threatens these boundaries and exposes the dark side of these dominant systems. The turd is described as a relic: 'exquisite, flecked and inlaid like a mosaic depicting, perhaps, a historical scene'<sup>360</sup> and makes legible the stubborn, unflushable after-waste of the British Empire which lingers on in Britain's post-colonial period, largely kept at bay in the privacy of human restrooms, but ultimately flowing through the sewers of the city, at its very under-core. The inability to flush away this waste has twofold meaning: on the one hand it signifies the ongoing racism in post-colonial Britain, while it also forces a recognition and active grappling with this reality in the present as inextricably linked to a troubled past, without an examination of which one cannot move beyond it.<sup>361</sup>

Salman Rushdie calls imperialism a 'stain' that Britain has made no great effort to wash out.<sup>362</sup> The fact that it is the narrator of "The Tale of the Turd", a man of color, who is

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<sup>357</sup> Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 5.

<sup>358</sup> Hanif Kureishi. "The Tale of the Turd". *deadword*. <http://deadword.com/site1/habit/turd/index.html>.

<sup>359</sup> "The Tale of the Turd" shares aspects of the fable or bawdy folktale, with feces emerging as the anthropomorphised "magical" object with didactic and moral potential, albeit in this case that message is atypically ambiguous.

<sup>360</sup> Kureishi. "The Tale of the Turd".

<sup>361</sup> I use 'beyond' here in reference to Homi Bhaba's theorisation of moving beyond which is neither a new horizon or a leaving behind of the past but a moment in transit where space and time cross to provoke an altered present via a recognition of the past.

<sup>362</sup> Rushdie. "The New Empire". (2012).

forced to grapple with this waste, that it is made - viscerally and literally - his own showcases the marginalizing potential of waste. The fact that the vision and message the turd imparts feel eerily familiar to the narrator, who is sure he has seen these faces before<sup>363</sup> works to uncover an embodied history whereby the trauma of colonization is carried cross-generationally in the bodies of the second and further generations.

“The Tale of the Turd” is transgressive in content as well as in form as it deals intimately in taboos, positioning the reader as a voyeur by inviting them behind the door of the bathroom stall where bowel movements are typically passed in private. The taboo of the relationship between the forty-four year old narrator and his eighteen year old girlfriend is heightened by the fact that he shares her father’s age. The clear oedipal undertones of this dynamic are only heightened by the possessive and infantilising endearment ‘my little girl’<sup>364</sup> with which the narrator repeatedly refers to his young lover. Both the act of passing one’s bowel movements and the relationship between an older man and a much younger woman create a tension between the common and forbidden: passing feces is a human necessity - ‘even the Queen does this’<sup>365</sup> remarks the narrator - and relationships between older men and younger women are so commonplace as to have become cliché. Nonetheless, neither topic is comfortably housed at a dinner party, despite being for all intents and purposes in attendance. “The Tale of the Turd” forces confrontation with taboo at a tactile and visceral nearness.

What might it mean to take seriously the humor and visceral humanity of the story of a man provoked to pass his bowels in the most inconvenient of moments and circumstances? It means confronting the abject; suspending ourselves on the uncomfortable threshold where

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<sup>363</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>364</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>365</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.



the distinction between subject and object and social order and social codes threaten to break down. When the turd refuses to flush and the narrator plunges his hands into the toilet to pull it out, the turd itself seems to come alive ‘wriggling like a fish’<sup>366</sup>; it becomes matter which is *animate* and vibrant, and which in turn animates a consideration of the implications of hygiene discourse: what happens when matter refuses to stay in its rightful place?<sup>367</sup>

The abject confusion of edible food and the human waste produced as its byproduct when the narrator remarks that his shit-stained hands are the color of ‘gravy’<sup>368</sup> expresses the transgression of civilized boundaries between the edible and inedible, clean and dirty, forbidden and acceptable. The manifestation of the turd is a border-crossing enterprise; in its refusal to flush and thus remain unseen, unheard, unspoken of, it forces a confrontation with those taboo subject whose repression maintains and affirms restrictive norms and civic boundaries which in turn shape prescriptive racial and sexual categories.

In *Cruising Utopia*, Jose Esteban Munoz describes queerness as the ‘warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality’<sup>369</sup>. What Kureishi presents us with is not a horizon or possible future, but a present interrupted by the coming into being of the past. In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) Fredric Jameson advocates for the somewhat ambiguous strategy of anti-anti-Utopianism, connecting utopia to the flashing up of the past.<sup>370</sup> Homi Bhaba similarly theorizes the unhomely moment as a present altered by past histories that arise to expose the lingering impact of colonialism today, which is depicted as a form of

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<sup>366</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>367</sup> Bennett (2010), Chen (2012), and Douglas (1966).

<sup>368</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>369</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising utopia*. (New York University Press, 2019). p. 1.

<sup>370</sup> Fredric, Jameson. *Archaeologies of the future: The desire called utopia and other science fictions*. (Verso, 2005).

haunting.<sup>371</sup> These approaches are useful in that they identify the role of the past in shaping political and historical consciousness. Utopia, a vision of a possible future, therefore becomes inherently bound up in a recognition of the past. The turd is described as ‘the corpse of days past’<sup>372</sup>, an abject force which infects the present, unsettling and destabilizing temporal boundaries. The pollution incurred by the turd as a physical manifestation of days past is both destructive and creative in its contradiction of temporal stability as it decrees that past is present, present is past. This temporal disintegration is creative because it unsettles boundaries and opens up a new temporality in which one must simultaneously grapple with a recognition of the present as well as how present contexts are unavoidably and dynamically shaped by the past, which becomes visible through this unhomey moment.<sup>373</sup> What emerges is not (as the corpse quotes may suggest) stillborn, but very much alive:

I glance unbelievably at the turd and notice something, oh no, yes it's true, oh no it's not,

I can see little teeth in its velvet head and a little mouth opening and it's smiling at me, oh

no, it's smiling and what's that, it's winking, yes, the piece of shit is winking up at me, and what's that at the other end, a sort of tail, it's moving, yes it's moving, and oh Jesus,

it's trying to say something, to speak, no, no, I think it wants to sing, yes and even though

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<sup>371</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (Routledge, 2012).

<sup>372</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>373</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

it is somewhere stated that the truth may be found anywhere and the universe of dirt may send strange messengers to speak to us, the last thing I want, right now in my life, is a singing turd.<sup>374</sup>

What possibilities does the aliveness of the turd which is ‘throbbing’ and ‘warm as life’<sup>375</sup> open up? The no longer inert but stubbornly alive matter of the turd as a boundary breaking entity recalls Homi Bhabha’s depiction of a boundary not as that at which something stops but from which something ‘begins its presencing.’<sup>376</sup> In dwelling on the abject boundary of human and waste, subject and object, the act of moving beyond is also a return mediated by the manifestation of the turd in the present as the ‘corpse of days past’ which unsettles and destabilizes the present it intercedes in.<sup>377</sup> Kristeva describes the abject’s power to unsettle temporalities:

‘The clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into banished, fascination into shame. Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder,

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<sup>374</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>375</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>376</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 1.

<sup>377</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012). p. 4.

of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth<sup>378</sup>

The revelatory potential of the abject's temporal doubleness is vital. The confrontation with 'forgotten time' is described in violent terms, as 'a flash of lightning' that is 'discharged like thunder'. These are, however, necessary violences. Bhaba emphasizes that Western nations must confront their postcolonial history told by migrants and refugees as internal to its national identity/nation making<sup>379</sup>, retrieving a repressed history that has been purposefully forgotten. This process is far from easy but fundamental to any process of reparation. Here history manifests in and as the turd that signifies the corpse of the Empire: dirty and difficult to contend with. This forcible return of the repressed, in Kristeva's terms, is not only important but necessary to the kind of movement beyond that Bhabha posits. Confrontation with the abject forces a reckoning with the filth that was always present but kept invisible. The supposed order was always already filthy. But you can't wash out a stain if you can't see it. Kureishi's story forces an encounter with those most uncomfortable, dirty, and taboo topics which are most in need of active engagement.

The necessary but cathartic trauma of the abject brings the dirt to the surface to be worked through. The turd's arrival in the toilet bowl as an aesthetic object 'exquisite, flecked and inlaid like a mosaic depicting, perhaps, a historical scene'<sup>380</sup> conveys its storytelling potential, taking over the narrator's position to tell the story of a past that sheds new light on the present. The depiction of the turd as a 'strange messenger'<sup>381</sup> sent to us from the world of

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<sup>378</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1982). p. 6.

<sup>379</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

<sup>380</sup> Kureishi. "The Tale of the Turd".

<sup>381</sup> Kureishi. "The Tale of the Turd".

dirt to speak of impossible truths is a perversion of the New Testament story in which the gift of speaking in tongues is bestowed on the disciples by the Holy Spirit so that they may spread the word of God more widely. This is a story of the power of language and translation, which is also a story of immigration and assimilation. The turd is evidently the didactic messenger of this unlikely fable, but what parable it has to impart, and to what end, we never find out, as it is flung out of the stall window ‘like a warm pigeon’<sup>382</sup> upon sprouting wings: matter officially out of place.<sup>383</sup>

The toilet is an unlikely home for these kinds of inquiries to take shape, yet nonetheless it is here that a forced encounter with an uncomfortable history emerges in the form of stubborn and unflushable waste. It seems strange to claim that this humorous toilet-bound scene has utopic potential. Perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest it has the potential to undo narratives of utopia that are in fact *dystopic*: a utopia for the few at the expense of the many. The unhomely aliveness of the turd refusing to descend beneath the bowl in a reinstatement of boundaries of civility and humanity, thus signifies the political potential of the abject.

### **3. “Dirty and Beautiful”: Urban Counter-Publics in Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette***

The concept of fecal encounters and fecal commoning, predicated on an often traumatic encounter with, and active reparation for, the literal and figurative wasteful by-products of

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<sup>382</sup> Kureishi. “The Tale of the Turd”.

<sup>383</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

racial capitalism by sharing the labor of cleaning and caring, brought us to the toilet as a space of unlikely utopic potential. Another space that emerges in considering the relationship between waste labor and the racialised delineation of the clean from the “unclean” is the laundrette.

Laundrettes are regaining public attention as a consequence of their decline. The mid 20th century electric washing machine was first patented in the US in 1914 before it’s mass production in 1954. Commercial laundries and laundrettes soon followed although the machines did not become popular domestic appliances until indoor plumbing became commonplace.<sup>384</sup> The laundrette business was at its most booming in the 1970’s and 80s in London, during which time only 65% of homes had a washing machine, and there were almost 12,500 laundrettes in operation. Today, a mere 3,000 laundrettes remain in London, and an overwhelming 97% of households own a washing machine.<sup>385</sup> Many of the laundrettes that now find themselves under threat are co-operative social enterprises and vital community centers. One of these is Shoreditch’s *Boundary Estate Laundrette*, which recently got a 5 year lease approved by Tower Hamlets at an increased price that they could only afford with community and charity support. The fact that they managed to gather this support is a testament to the power of the community to resist urban gentrification, itself facilitated by ideologies of hygiene which construct a racialized, gendered, and classed division between the dirty and the clean.

Globalization, capitalism, and the everyday functioning of the city would be fundamentally impossible without the uncontracted, exploitative, and largely invisible labor

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<sup>384</sup> Ralph et al. *Dirt*. (2011).

<sup>385</sup> Amarr Kalia. “London's beautiful laundrettes”. *The Guardian*. (2018).

of predominantly brown, immigrant women who constitute the majority of cleaners and carers working in western cities.<sup>386</sup> Thus the border emerges as a paradoxical and contested space in that nationalism works to set up a logic of “outsiders” who must be excluded for the supposed health and safety of the “insiders”, those who can claim legal citizenship across axes of racial and political categorisations. However, the functioning of global capitalism necessitates a certain number of “illegals” to slip through permeable national boundaries in order to facilitate the cheap, un-contracted, and supposedly “unskilled” labor of cleaning and caring that the city in particular depends on.<sup>387</sup> Global capitalism depends on the free movement of laborers, not just on the free market, as without them the flow of capital is rendered practically impossible and incomprehensible.

In the context of 1980s London, immigrants represent the new urban ‘scum’; they are considered and treated the way the slum dwellers and prostitutes were treated in the nineteenth century. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe how the prostitute and slum dweller of the nineteenth century city are articulated across a locus of ‘fear, disgust and fascination’<sup>388</sup> which coincide with the anxieties stirred up by the intermingling of the suburbs and slums. The simultaneous desire and disgust for these unruly bodies is articulated through urban embodiment; the body and the city are mutually constituted and the body is often transcoded into the city. The immigrant and “legal” citizen are mutually constituted in binary terms; the former is associated with disease, disorder, laziness, while the latter is represented by cleanliness, civilisation, and control in conservative political and cultural imaginaries and discourse. Differentiation occurs through mechanisms that provoke disgust,

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<sup>386</sup> Vergès. *A Decolonial Feminism*. (2019).

<sup>387</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

<sup>388</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. (Cornell University Press, 1986).

much like dirt is contextualized as matter out of place.<sup>389</sup> However, disgust always bears the imprint of desire.<sup>390</sup> The articulation of the immigrant as a dirty and potentially polluting force across axes of race, class, and illness speaks to the Eurocentrism of bio-politics which is implicitly restricted to national bodies, as well as what Mel Chen calls its ‘species-centric bias’ that privileges discussions about human citizens.<sup>391</sup> A consideration of the multifaceted animations of dirt both as a label that works to marginalize people and as an agent of destructive creation extends given notions of governmentality, health, and race beyond a national framework<sup>392</sup>, and opens up a reconsideration of the right to the city<sup>393</sup> for subjects who are not recognised as legal citizens.

The relationship between desire and disgust stirred up by prostitutes in the nineteenth century and immigrants in the twentieth century is palpable in the laundrette. Laundrettes are part of the broader structure of racial capitalism: caring and cleaning labor is predominantly carried out by brown women and men, who are tasked with cleaning the dirt of largely white clientele’s clothes.<sup>394</sup> On the other hand, laundrettes are glamorized and frequently appear in the backdrop for fashion photography, including work of the likes of Martin Parr for House of Holland, the Athleisure featuring Adidas series at the Amsterdam laundromat, and various shoots in *Vogue*, including shots featuring Rosie Huntington-Whiteley for *Vogue Mexico*. The shoots emphasize cleanliness and purity; Rosie Huntington-Whiteley is spotlighted holding bounce washing tablets, and Megan Alter of Adidas sits inside the washing machine against a backdrop of bleached, clean colors. As Vergès points out, cleanliness is based on violence

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<sup>389</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>390</sup> Kristeva. *Powers of horror*. (1980).

<sup>391</sup> Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 6.

<sup>392</sup> Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 7.

<sup>393</sup> Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities* 63181 (1996).

<sup>394</sup> Robinson. *Black Marxism*. (2020).



and arbitrariness.<sup>395</sup> There are no specks of dirt to be found here, which begs the question: at whose expense?

These fashion shoots serve to affirm a clean/dirty divide. This established binary is facilitated by the “dirty” work of cleaning which is carried out by predominantly brown women in the laundrette, labor which must remain invisible so that the aesthetic purity and cleanliness of the white subjects of the photographs can themselves become hyper-visible. These forms of laundrette media also implicitly call up class and racial hierarchies which make labor invisible while they simultaneously indirectly imply it, so as to associate whiteness with class superiority. Vergès discusses a similar dynamic at work in the gym, which is cleaned and opened by largely black and brown refugee and migrant women whose exhaustion must remain invisible in order for the white male body to perform its comparably “productive” exhaustion in a late-stage capitalist framework. The dialectical relation established between the white male performing body and the racialized female exhausted body illustrates connections between neoliberalism, race, and heteropatriarchy. This so called ‘economy of exhaustion’ also has a long history grounded in colonialism, slavery, and other violent and dehumanising processes of labour extraction.<sup>396</sup> In both cases, laborers are also made vulnerable by their proximity to toxic chemical products. These unsafe and toxic conditions of labor and manufacture, such as inattention to harmful transnational labor and industrial practices that poison, in many cases, badly protected or unprotected workers are often blithely overlooked or steadfastly ignored.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Vergès. *A Decolonial Feminism*. (2019). p. 81.

<sup>396</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

<sup>397</sup> Chen. *Animacies*. (2012). p. 173-4.

The question remains: what makes a laundrette aesthetically desirable? What is it that makes laundrettes “beautiful”, as per the title of Stephen Frears’ film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985)? The purification of space is directly related to social and ethnic cleansing as well as to the production of the imperial, white, heterosexual male subject; the standard on which the boundaries of the acceptable are framed, and against which otherness takes shape. Members of the white middle class can enter the laundrette with little to no regard for the labor that goes on behind the scenes, sampling the clean/dirty divide for their own pleasure and aesthetic output. This is only possible because they will soon leave again.

*My Beautiful Laundrette* is both a product of and a response to the social and political landscape of 1980s Britain. It partially participates in the “trend” of the hyper-clean laundrettes which are glamorous and oxymoronicly titillating in the fashion photography above. Second-generation Pakistani protagonist, Omar, who is sent to work for his uncle has a vision to create a ‘Ritz among Laundrettes’, implying a glamorization of the laundrette which will stand in direct contrast to those laundrettes people usually hate because they’re ‘like toilets’<sup>398</sup>: unclean, dirty, a repository for human waste.

However, by presenting the laundrette as a safe haven where the film’s queer male protagonists can express and consummate their interracial, queer relationship, Hanif Kureishi disrupts and subverts the association of race and queer identity with uncleanliness, while simultaneously airing the dirty laundry of Thatcher era capitalism. The laundrette is ‘beautiful’ first and foremost because it will make Omar more money than the more typically run down establishments. However, the laundrette also undermines Thatcher’s individualist and capitalist assertion that each man must fend for himself in order to survive, because it is

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<sup>398</sup> Hanif Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. dr. Stephen Frears (Working Title Films, 1985).

realized as a collective space. The laundrette provides a home for the unhomed and marginalized, and while this home can only be an ephemeral one, nonetheless the laundrette-as-alternate-home challenges racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy through the union of two queer men across boundaries of race and class. Omar and Johnny's boundary transgressive relationship complicates Lee Edelman's prominent theorisation of queerness as a-futurity.<sup>399</sup> The film complicates this reading of queerness as annihilatory negativity linked with the death drive.<sup>400</sup> Omar and Johnny's relationship is necessarily tied up in abusive power dynamics inextricable from systems of racialization and class. Nevertheless, their union in the laundrette is an opposition to a homophobic social and political order, and it does not ultimately necessitate their own destruction.

The progression of Omar and Johnny's relationship directly corresponds to the re-modelling of their 'Ritz among laundrettes', which also becomes the space where their erotic intimacy unfolds. Thus, the laundrette, which is often associated with dirty laundry and the gendered and racialised domestic labor of cleaning, is re-claimed as a site of interracial and homosexual love. Johnny and Omar constitute 'matter out of place' in Douglas' sense of contextual marginalization: both are categorized as human waste by a marginalizing framework of racism and classism. They are excluded from society through a discourse of contamination and regulation. The commercial and interpersonal struggles they encounter as they endeavor to form a business partnership and romance across difference threaten, destabilize, and oppose white male imperialism, heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy.

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<sup>399</sup> Lee Edelman. *No future*. (Duke University Press, 2004). ie. positioned against the possibility of a future.

<sup>400</sup> Edelman. *No future*. (2004).

The laundrette becomes a possible home for what Nancy Fraser terms ‘subaltern counterpublics’, which emerge from and oppose conditions of marginalization and exclusion within the dominant public sphere, thereby contributing to a widening of discursive contestation.<sup>401</sup> These discursive arenas develop in parallel to the official public spheres and become spaces “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”.<sup>402</sup> Though they are not necessarily always democratic or egalitarian, in certain manifestations, such as in the collective action to save the *Boundary Community Laundrette*, these counter-publics can offer the possibility of combining social equality, cultural diversity, and participatory democracy.<sup>403</sup>

*My Beautiful Laundrette* participates in the contestation of public marginalization while also providing shelter from conditions of oppression. As such it constitutes a dirty utopia. Specifically, the film works to oppose the construction of immigrant and queer communities as dangerous “outsiders” under Margaret Thatcher in the context of 1980s London, amidst the backdrop of stringent anti-immigration sentiment and policy, and alongside homophobic responses to AIDS, falsely and discriminatorily thought of as a kind of “gay plague”.<sup>404</sup> Anna Marie Smith describes how this ideological marginalization legitimized the structural territorialisation and exclusion of these populations:

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<sup>401</sup> Nancy Fraser. "Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy." *Social text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80. p. 67.

<sup>402</sup> Fraser. "Rethinking the public sphere." (1990). p. 123.

<sup>403</sup> Fraser. "Rethinking the public sphere." (1990). p. 70.

<sup>404</sup> Treichler. "AIDS, homophobia and biomedical discourse." (1987).

The Thatcherites were able to construct the black immigrant and dangerous queerness such that they operated as particularly credible figures of outsider-ness. These demonizations were central to the legitimations of specific authoritarian measures, such as the intensification of racially defined immigration policies and the reduction in local government autonomy, and to the more general re-orientation of the British right wing from the pragmatic “consensus” approach to a radical right-wing populism.<sup>405</sup>

Smith describes the exclusionary ‘wider publics’ of Thatcher’s England, against which *My Beautiful Laundrette* is situated. The film reappropriates dirt as an aesthetic which counteracts the Thatcherite construction of the “dirty” and othered racialised immigrant and broader queer community. The laundrette takes on new meaning beyond a place of racialised labor as we see it emerge as a “dirty and beautiful”<sup>406</sup> home for those lower class, immigrant, and queer subjects who are not comfortably housed in Britain’s wider-publics under Thatcher, whom Johnny, a working class white, homosexual man, and Omar, a middle-class second generation homosexual man stand in for and represent.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s commons of the metropolis in *Commonwealth* recognises the city as “a living dynamic of cultural practices, intel-lectual circuits, affective networks, and social institutions.”<sup>407</sup>. This urban form of the commons realizes the

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<sup>405</sup> Anna Marie Smith. *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). p. 34.

<sup>406</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

<sup>407</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Commonwealth*. (Harvard University Press, 2009). p. 154.

potentiality of the city to challenge rather than be subsumed by capitalist production. The laundrette becomes the site of urban communing because it is where the multi-ethnic homosexual relationship between Omar and Johnny can be lived out, a relationship whose existence challenges a heteronormative, white centric standard. Inexpressible in any public domain, the laundrette as the site of their relationship, which takes off in direct parallel to the success of the laundrette, is realised as a multi-ethnic, queer, counter-public. As discussed, the mixing in the laundrette stirs up violence and tension, yet nonetheless it opens up possibilities for relating across difference against a dominant “wider public” mode of exclusion.<sup>408</sup>

It is important to recognise the laundrette not only as counter-public, but as a home for the unhomed, albeit a necessarily fragile and ephemeral one. Marc Augé’s 1992 work on late modernity, or ‘supermodernity’ as he calls it, responds to a context in which human beings spend increasing amounts of time in ‘non places’, places human beings move through but in which they do not live, places of loneliness and anonymity where identity is disaffirmed.<sup>409</sup> Importantly, non-places are not meeting places, they do not build social bonds or allow for groups to be formed.<sup>410</sup> Much like dirt is contextualized as matter out of place, non-places only exist in context; a hotel is not a non-place for people who work there, like it is for people who stay there transiently. The laundrette is not a non-place for Johnny and Omar since they work there daily. However, the relative anonymity that the laundrette affords them is fundamental to the living out of their relationship. The laundrette emerges as an ephemeral and dirty utopia, one which constitutes a home for the unhomed that is not

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<sup>408</sup> Fraser. "Rethinking the public sphere." (1990).

<sup>409</sup> Marc Augé. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. (Verso, 1995).

<sup>410</sup> Augé. *Non-places*. (1995).

completely separate from the realities and systems beyond it. The laundrette as a non-space that nonetheless affirms a sense of home and co-constituted identity formation has implications for transience and ephemeral visions of love.

Since dirt repels and discourages the laundrette's largely white clientele from hanging around after depositing their dirty laundry for cleaning, it shapes a place of counter-cultural refuge where Johnny and Omar can uncover new ways of being with one another, in spite of the cultural tensions that surround them. The laundrette emerges an unlikely space where queer, multi-racial intimacy can be fostered. *My Beautiful Laundrette* shows dirt to be creative as well as destructive because in disrupting systems of power that privilege whiteness and heterosexuality. In this manifestation, there is aesthetic appeal to be found not in the hyper-cleanliness of cleaning labor, but in dirt itself, as when Omar calls Johnny 'dirty and beautiful'.<sup>411</sup>

Karim and Jamila's trysts in public toilets in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, discussed in the previous section, represent a similar queer potential to be harnessed from dirty spaces.

'Before I knew it, we were passing a public toilet beside the park and her hand was pulling on mine. As she tugged me towards it and I inhaled the urine, shit and disinfectant cocktail I associated with love, I had to stop and think. [...] It was unusual, I knew, the way I wanted to sleep with boys as well as girls.'<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

<sup>412</sup> Kureishi. *The Buddha of suburbia*. (2009). p. 55.

While from the outside this moment may be categorised as a heteronormative union, the fact that both Jamila and Karim are queer, and that Karim spends this moment thinking of being penetrated by men, and of his current ‘main love’ (p. 55) Charlie, gives it queer potentiality. Queer identity, in this case bi-sexuality and desire, does not only become animated during same-sex partnerships but is ultimately ever-present. The association of love with a cocktail of ‘urine, shit, and disinfectant’ is legible in relation to the previously discussed relationship between desire and disgust. It also foregrounds sex and love as fundamentally messy, and that this dirty aspect of love and sex is often pleasurable. Love and sex take on creative potential in harnessing dirt as a medium not for differentiation and exclusion, as per the state, but rather for mixing, love-making, desire. The liminality of the toilet and the laundrette as public spaces that nonetheless allow for a certain kind of privacy and intimacy for the couples that utilise them, is important because it indicates the ephemerality of queer intimacies while also concretising and validating them.

Naturally these ways of “being with” are not without tension and violence. Kureishi’s film supersedes any simplistic narratives of exclusion, be it white/black, straight/gay, citizen/illegal. Just like the immigrant characters of *The Buddha of Suburbia* are equally capable of behaving badly, in *My Beautiful Laundrette* the logics of exclusion go beyond the dynamic of outsider/insider and instead complicate these binaries to present us with a world where this dominance and violence function across interactive axes of class, sexuality, and race.<sup>413</sup> Johnny is exploited by Nasser and Omar for his labor. Johnny’s participation in neo-fascist English Defense League (EDL) marches is also an act of prejudice. Both parties

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<sup>413</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics." *u. Chi. Legal f.* (1989): 139.



are enacting violence in return across intersections of race and class in ways that complicate and counteract any neat logic of subjugation and exclusion. As a white working class man, Johnny is as much on the margins as Omar, and both are seen to abuse one another; Omar points out that while he and his friends used to beat him at school Johnny is now the one 'washing [his] floor' just as he 'likes it'.<sup>414</sup>

Nonetheless the two are able to form a partnership as lovers and business-partners in the laundrette where the violence of Thatcherism, homophobia, and white supremacy are publicly aired, like dirty laundry. The laundrette emerges as a home for the unhomed, but also as a place where tensions and conflict are stirred up and brought to the fore. These tensions culminate in the violent and glass-shattering intrusion by Johnny's 'skinhead' gang in protest against Johnny's employment at the laundrette:

'I don't like to see one of our men groveling to p\*\*\*s. They came here to work for us.

That's why we brought them over, okay? Don't cut yourself off from your own people. Because there's no one else who really wants you. Everyone has to belong'.<sup>415</sup>

The overt racism in this passage establishes an "us" and "them" binary whereby to belong necessarily means picking a side. Johnny's presence in the laundrette challenges this concrete and separatist conception of "belonging" and becomes perceived as a threat by his friends. Johnny *is* matter out of place: regarded as a traitor because he is not "where he belongs"

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<sup>414</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

<sup>415</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

according to a binary where whites and non-whites cannot be allowed to mix.<sup>416</sup> Salim expresses similar anxieties about mixing using the language of contamination<sup>417</sup> when he tells Omar he is ‘weak’ from an excess of ‘white blood’<sup>418</sup>: as if in mixing with Johnny he is putting himself at risk of hematological weakness. The transgression of the “us” and “them” boundary incurred by Johnny and Omar’s business partnership and love affair makes them vulnerable to violence but in challenging binary constructions of belonging their union also harnesses the more creatively destructive potential of dirt. The playful ending of the film where the shirtless protagonists are seen splashing one another with water in the backroom of the laundrette is a vision, however fleeting, of togetherness across difference: a moment of belonging not predicated on the imposition of an “other” that must be excluded in order for one to belong. The playful intimacy shared by the two protagonists as they splash one another with water also complicates the assumption that they, and the water, are there primarily to wash clothes.

The fact that Johnny gets caught in the crossfire of racially motivated violence when he tries to intervene in his former friends’ intrusion indicates the impossibility for the violence of white nationalism to be contained across boundaries of differentiation. White supremacy emerges as the true contagion: enacting violence across the boundaries of belonging against those it prioritizes and falsely promises to protect. The resort to violence indicates that, on its own, white supremacy is inadequate and vulnerable to its own undoing.

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<sup>416</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>417</sup> Mel Chen discusses how contamination discourse is racialised in *Animacies*. (2012).

<sup>418</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

*My Beautiful Laundrette* represents a shift from what Stuart Hall terms the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself.<sup>419</sup> “Blackness” was initially coined as a term to reference a common experience of marginalization and racism in Britain, but the 1980s cinema was a watershed for black independent film and video in Britain which saw a recognition of the vastly different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities that are intertwined with but necessarily not the same as one another. *My Beautiful Laundrette* resists essentializing black subjects. Stuart Hall goes so far as to call it ‘one of the most important films produced by a black writer’ because of its complex and unsentimental approach to cross-cultural relations and the way it traverses frontiers between gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class.<sup>420</sup> Antiracism can and should embrace multi-ethnicity, but to do so ethnicity must become decoupled from the state, where it is necessarily bound up in nationalism, imperialism, and racism. The structure of the film is itself mixed, boundary-transgressive, hybrid. The cinematic structure and plot arc are mainstream, which make it enjoyable to a wide mainstream audience, but the subject matter is subversive, and refuses to represent black experience in a self contained, or sexually rigid, heteronormative framework. *My Beautiful Laundrette* harnesses the destructive and creative potential of dirt as a frontier-crossing work of cinema that denies and reconfigures exclusive and regressive forms of English national identity reinforced in the Thatcher era that continue to be one of the core characteristics of British racism today.<sup>421</sup>

The laundrette emerges as a space of collision and mixing. On the one hand the laundrette signifies the civilizing force of the empire. On the other hand, however, it indicates

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<sup>419</sup> Hall. *New ethnicities*. (2006).

<sup>420</sup> Hall. *New ethnicities*. (2006). p. 171.

<sup>421</sup> Hall. *New ethnicities*. (2006). p. 168.

the power of migrants to shift, change, transform and fundamentally reshape urban structures by moving through and interacting in them.<sup>422</sup> Bhaba describes how migrant identity destabilizes and questions national memory, functioning as an alternate narrative, or counter-narrative of the nation that continually evokes and erases its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—and disturbs those ideological maneuvers through which 'imagined communities' are given essentialist identities.<sup>423</sup> The laundrette is an ephemeral home - not a non-place but a some-place - that confers identity onto those who are always re-locating, and never really at home, embodied in the hybrid and inter-racial affair between second-generation Pakistani immigrant Omar and working-class English Johnny. Dirty laundry is made public in the laundrette, airing the filth of imperial Britain in ways that promote tension but also a confrontation with difference that allows for life to become possible in manifestations that are necessarily both dirty, and beautiful.<sup>424</sup>

#### **4. "To the pure all things are pure": Spiritual Entanglements in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)**

While this chapter has so far dealt with more palpable forms of dirt and waste, *White Teeth* (2000) shuttles us, hybrid-like, between the literal and the symbolic, to showcase how dirt becomes implicated in moral and spiritual frameworks. Written when Zadie Smith had only just graduated from Cambridge at the age of 21, *White Teeth* centers on Britain's relationship

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<sup>422</sup> Baucom. *Out of Place*. (1999). Baucom calls these spaces 'lingering zones of imperial confusion' (p. 4) in that they house disciplinary projects of imperialism as well as subsequent imperial destabilizations.

<sup>423</sup> Homi K. Bhabha. *Nation & narration*. (Routledge, 2013). p. 300.

<sup>424</sup> Kureishi. *My Beautiful Laundrette*. (1985).

with immigrants from the British Commonwealth. Dirtiness and cleanliness are important symbolic religious concepts that recur throughout the novel, which questions and challenges the ways that bodily and spiritual purity are often seen to be fundamentally bound up in one another. Dirt is contextual and differential.<sup>425</sup> Like “The Tale of the Turd”, discussed above, the so called ‘Temptation of Samad Iqbal’<sup>426</sup> offers a twist on the traditional parable, this time a Quranic parable. Instead of a clear didactic message with the purpose of imparting a moral lesson in familiar, clearly delineable, typically black and white terms, the temptation of Samad Iqbal has quite the opposite effect, obscuring any clear delineation of im/purity. Moments of transgression in *White Teeth* challenge the binary opposition of dirt and cleanliness by emphasizing an interactive proximity between purity and impurity, which are epitomized by Samad’s temptation.

Islam demands physical purification before prayer, and then purification of the soul five times a day in prayer, a process Elizabeth Pisani connects to modernity and its mandates of purification, which parallel the excision of the other: an embodiment of what is deemed dirty and disorderly.<sup>427</sup> The terms haram (forbidden) and halal (lawful, permitted) set up a similarly mutually constituted relationship to dirt and purity, which cannot be understood without the other; to know what is clean we must have a sense of what is unclean. Samad’s mantra ‘to the pure all things are pure [...] if one is truthful and firm in oneself, it can harm nobody else, nor offend’ (p. 138) is repeated to himself throughout the chapter as a means to justify impure acts; separating spiritual from physical impurity. The expressed logic is a form

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<sup>425</sup> Douglas. *Purity and danger*. (1966).

<sup>426</sup> Zadie Smith. *White teeth*. (Vintage, 2003). p. 125. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

<sup>427</sup> Elizabeth Pisani. “Leviticus be damned, dirt in the community” in Ralph et al. *Dirt*. (2011).

of disavowal that separates the body from the soul. If dirty acts do not convey dirty intent, this complicates the association of dirt with expulsion, exclusion, and, in Samad's case, self denial.

This body-soul split is not confirmed or supported by the elderly alim from whom Samad seeks guidance in a mosque in Croydon, however. Many of the nine acts which invalidate fasting, including ejaculation, vomiting, sex, eating, drinking, and swallowing dust, are intimately and abjectly tied to the body, the role of which Samad wants to conveniently circumvent. Even Samad himself cannot quite embrace the split his mantra obsessively rehearses. The furtive period of masturbation stirred up by his desire for his son's music teacher Poppy Burnt-Jones constitutes 'the longest, stickiest, smelliest' but also 'guiltiest fifty-six days of [his] life' (p. 140). Desire is messy; in this case, literally so, as Samad employs 'the best of his Western pragmatism' (p. 139) as he achieves orgasm using his left hand rather than the right, which the alim has explicitly warned him to avoid. His temptations signify messy conflicts between desire and responsibility framed by a dialectic of im/purity.

The alim's association of Samad's repeated mantra with Anglicanism – 'Allah have pity on the Anglicans!' (p. 138) rehearsed by Samad when he curses England for 'corrupting' him – signifies the ways that this mantra of im/purity becomes tied up in cross-cultural exchange. Repetition is explicitly associated with the experience immigration and trauma in the novel:

'immigrants have always been prone to repetition - it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island.

Even

when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There's no property term for it - *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. Trauma is something that repeats and repeats after all' ( p. 161)

The association of repetition with both the literal and symbolic shuttling back and forth of the migrant experience - literal in the sense of moving from one place to another, and metaphorical in Munoz's sense of hybrid identity as 'always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors'<sup>428</sup> - signifies a hybridisation of language and culture in postcolonial London. Samad lives this out by shuttling between Islamic teaching and Western pragmatism, twisting the logic of purity in ways that constitute a hybrid border-crossing between cultures, unsettling each in turn, much like Bhabha's third way or unhomely moment whereby hybridity creates new cultural forms and identities as a result of the colonial encounter.<sup>429</sup> This passage serves to intertwine repetition, immigration, and trauma around the issue of translation, a process inherently bound up in both language and broader cultural habitual translations.

Arabic becomes a mode of seduction between Samad and Poppy; islamic religious teachings become transposed as the language of courtship which sees abstinence and control realized as a catalyst of desire. 'Amor durbol lagche' (p. 159) expresses a logic of restraint: 'closed mouth worship of the Creator' (p. 159), while also serving as a confession of desire, the literal translation being 'I feel weak [...] every strand of me feels weakened by the desire

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<sup>428</sup> Muñoz. *Disidentifications*. (1999). p. 31.

<sup>429</sup> Bhabha. *The location of culture*. (2012).

to kiss you' (p. 159). The language of abstinence metamorphoses into a language of seduction. The co-exchange of language when Poppy repeats the phrase 'amor durbol lagche' signifies the process of translation across cultures as well as a confirmation of desire. Anything can become dirty, in context.<sup>430</sup> Poppy also fetishises Islam, and by extension Samad, when she praises the 'incredible' acts of 'self control', 'sacrifice', 'abstinence' and 'self restraint' she associates with Islam. This conceptualisation of Samad as the desired but forbidden other is fundamental to her desire for him. Poppy's desire for Samad is boundary transgressive but also boundary reinstating in that it is predicated on both desire and disgust and indicates the impossibility for the translation of certain cultural attributes.

Just as the physical attraction Samad feels for Poppy paradoxically triggers a form of sensory collapse and disembodiment; 'hearing the color of her hair in the mosque, smelling the touch of her hand on the tube, tasting her smile while innocently walking the streets on his way to work' (p. 140). This 'anesthetic fixation' (p. 140), all of which leads to a seemingly inevitable path of masturbation, indicates the disordering force of desire and once again a sensuous mixing which precludes any easy delineation of purity and impurity. Cross-cultural desire mobilizes a kind of imperfect process of translation and exchange that realizes various complications: interpersonal, historical, and cultural in nature. Encountering difference opens up possibilities for deeper understanding but also for violence, disavowal, and dehumanization, and as such require navigation, mediation, and sacrifice.<sup>431</sup> Encounters

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<sup>430</sup> I refer again here to Mary Douglas' definition of dirt as "matter out of place", but here in a more conceptual sense. Where there is dirt there is a system, but also the potential to disrupt that system.

<sup>431</sup> A colleague and friend of Samad's advises him that it will never work with an English girl because there is 'too much bloody history' (p. 164). The double entendre of "bloody" points to the violence and persistence of British colonialism, which will inescapably define the power dynamics of their relationship and doom it to failure.



with difference in *White Teeth* are charged with potential because they negotiate tensions in complex, and often violent ways, showing that urban entanglements are necessarily conflictual, mixed, and dirty.

Coda: Beyond the Border: Global Mass Migration and the Brexit era

### **Introduction: Racial Capitalism, Global Warming, and the Proliferation of Borders in the twenty-first century**

Today, new waves of migration which are no longer explicitly postcolonial are attempting to reach the United Kingdom. The refugee crisis, driven by the intersecting factors of late stage capitalism, globalization, global warming, and global conflict, has already become an era-defining moment of the twenty-first century. Capitalism drives migration because the “free” movement of capital necessitates the free movement of people to perform the cheap, migrant labor upon which late stage global capitalism relies.<sup>432</sup> The uncontracted labor that allows late stage capitalism to function on a global scale is conducted primarily by brown women and is explicitly racialised.<sup>433</sup> Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983) solidifies this connection between racism and capitalism by demonstrating that capitalism originated in an already racialised Western civilization built on colonial processes such as invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Françoise Vergès. "Capitalocene, Waste, Race, and Gender." *e-flux journal* #100 (2019).

<sup>433</sup> Vergès. "Capitalocene." (2019).

<sup>434</sup> Cedric J. Robinson. *Black Marxism: The making of the black radical tradition*. 3rd rev ed. (UNC press Books, 2020).

Capitalism functions according to and proliferates racial inequalities, producing a modern world system which depends on and profits from slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide.<sup>435</sup>

The racialised history of capitalism also provides an important context for understanding global warming, a vital factor that increasingly drives waves of displacement, migration, and refugee creation in the twenty-first century. Both capitalism and global warming are often discussed in relation to a supposedly “universal” human subject. Global warming is described as a ‘great equalizer’ while the supposed ‘equal opportunity’ of capitalism’s free markets is emphasized in widespread western political and cultural discourse, perhaps best encapsulated in the fallacy of the American Dream and its promise of prosperity for anyone able and willing to work hard enough to achieve it. This individualist logic was also at the heart of Margaret Thatcher’s austerity measures, discussed in chapter 3, which assumed a level playing field for all individual people, ignoring vital socio-cultural hierarchies.<sup>436</sup>

Global warming is neither neutral or equalizing, and the idea that all humans are equally responsible for this ecological plight neutralizes inequalities and the fundamentally causal role of capitalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay “The climate of history: Four theses” is a key source relating to this issue. In the essay Chakrabarty points out that the age of the anthropocene was not inevitable but rather a direct result of industrialization and capitalism for which humans carry a ‘common but differentiated responsibility’.<sup>437</sup> Global warming is

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<sup>435</sup> Robinson. *Black Marxism*. (2020).

<sup>436</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color." *Stan. L. Rev.* 43 (1990): 1241.

<sup>437</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty. "The climate of history: Four theses." *Critical inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197-222.

not the story of collective human hubris but rather the direct result of the “waste” augmented by colonialism and racial capitalism, discussed more fully in chapter three of this dissertation.<sup>438</sup> Urban climate-related catastrophes caused by global warming such as inundation in coastal cities, heatwaves, tornados, and flooding disproportionately impact members of the Global South who have limited resources with which to cope with ecological changes, and whose homes will therefore become uninhabitable at a far greater rate than in the West.<sup>439</sup> As a result, increasing numbers of refugees will need to seek asylum in habitable western lands; migration will come to the west on a vast scale no matter what.

The 17th International Architectural Biennale in Venice (2021), first mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, responds to this inevitable future of vast transnational migration by asking a simple question: “How Will We Live Together?”. This question of how to live together is as much a social and political question as an environmental and spatial one, and it is historically and theoretically rooted in urbanism, because it is the question that led Aristotle to propose one of the earliest models of cities (384-322 B.C.E.).<sup>440</sup> The exhibition’s curator Hashim Sarkis explains that the theme endeavors to address ‘widening political divides and growing economic inequalities’ by imagining ‘spaces in which we can generously live together’.<sup>441</sup> Moshin Hamid’s novel *Exit West* (2017) speaks to this context of growing global inequities and provides an excellent response to the question underlying Sarkis’ exhibition by centering an anti-apocalyptic approach to mass migration. In doing so,

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<sup>438</sup> Jason W. Moore. ed. *Anthropocene or capitalocene?: Nature, history, and the crisis of capitalism*. (Pm Press, 2016).

<sup>439</sup> Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>440</sup> Aristotle. *Aristotle's Politics*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905). Aristotle proposes the city as a model for political life but recognises it as falling short of the ideal of a community of virtuous citizens.

<sup>441</sup> Domenico Moramarco. ”Confirmed the 17th Architectural Biennale in Venice”. *International Web Post*. (9 August, 2022).

Hamid conjures up alternative global futures which constitute their own answers to the question “how will we live together”. The alternative futures that emerge are not resigned to or limited by nationalist models of citizenship, as they understand mass migration as an unpreventable reality, as opposed to a crisis that can be averted through a tightening of national borders and intensifying state violence.

Both Sarkis and Hamid view the imagination as a vital political tool that can be used to prevent worsening global inequalities in the context of racial capitalism, global warming, and mass migration. In a 2015 *The Guardian* article, Hamid describes Britain’s resistant and fearful response to migrants as a failure of the imagination:

The tragedy of Britain, at this present moment is at heart an inability to articulate a desirable future. We are mired in illusory nostalgia. In such an environment, migrants add to the problem. To my mind, the time has come to reverse our perspective, to recognise that visions of a desirable future have been eluding us because we have failed to consider that migrants are not a nightmare. They are – we are, every one of us whose ancestors have left the precise spot where our species first evolved – a great and powerful hope.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>442</sup> Moshin Hamid et al. “The turmoil of today’s world: leading writers respond to the refugee crisis.” *The Guardian*. (12th September, 2015).

Migration is often framed as a problem, but can – and often has – led to renewal and vigor. For Hamid, the possibility to imagine and conjure alternative ways of living and being in the world is inherently political. In particular, reimagining urban belonging is vital to addressing the needs of repopulation brought about by migration and global warming. *Exit West* invites these imaginative leaps by sketching out alternatives to hostility and genocide, such as the London Halo, a new city that is built around the capital by migrants to house new arrivals, who are promised ‘40 meters and a pipe: a home on 40 square meters of land’<sup>443</sup> in return for their labor. From the perspective of a century or so in the future, the novel prospectively envisages various spatial and social models for urban belonging which challenge European national sovereignty and are centered around building what Hamid terms a post-national collective humanity.<sup>444</sup>

While we live in an era of globalization which lays bare and to some extent also depends on the inherent fragility of territorial borders, Britain is increasingly focused on limiting the free movement of people. Britain and most other European countries would be unrecognizable without the centuries of migration that have shaped them, yet anxieties raised by the scale of these new waves of migration has led to a tightening and intensified policing of England’s national borders. Border control was a central factor in England’s exit from the European Union (colloquially known as “Brexit”) in January 2020. This decision followed from a reluctant response by prime minister David Cameron and the Conservative

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<sup>443</sup> Moshin Hamid. *Exit West*. (Penguin, 2018). p. 168. All further references will be to this edition and will be included in the body of the text.

<sup>444</sup> Moshin Hamid. “Nationalism should retire at 65”. *The Times of India*. (August 14, 2012).

Government to take in Syrian refugees fleeing humanitarian crisis<sup>445</sup>, and meant an exit from “free movement”, which allowed EU members to move between and work in EU countries without possession of a visa. The nationalistic rhetoric of a ‘greater Great Britain’ and the overwhelming surge in support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP)<sup>446</sup>, spearheaded by Nigel Farage, denoted a dangerous kind of nostalgia for the British Empire in terms that were explicitly racialised, for instance gesturing to Britain’s former “purity” with clear and ominous connotations of ethnic cleansing. Boris Johnson’s “joke” about supporting forced sterilization or a one-baby policy to curb immigration numbers in the UK during his time as Mayor of London in 2014<sup>447</sup> signifies the casual legitimacy of bio-political warfare waged on the bodies of immigrants as a form of population management and control in the UK, paramount to a form of urban culling. Brexit is symptomatic of Britain’s growing anxiety concerning globalization and the “other”, evidenced by a resurgence of right-wing nationalism and the proliferation of white supremacist ideologies.<sup>448</sup>

According to French philosopher Étienne Balibar, the term border is currently undergoing a profound change in meaning.<sup>449</sup> European borders, which Balibar associates with national identity but also with violence, no longer function as strict dividing lines between countries and nations but are instead heterogenous and ubiquitous. Borders no

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<sup>445</sup> Cameron eventually accepted 4,000 refugees fleeing the war into Britain, but this is no compensation for the fatalities caused in his belatedness.

<sup>446</sup> UKIP achieved the highest vote gain of any party in the 2014 general election, during which time they won 163 seats, at an increase of 128.

<sup>447</sup> Unknown. “The Guardian view on Boris Johnson’s government: eugenicists not wanted”. *The Guardian*. (17 Feb 2020).

<sup>448</sup> These fears were made repeatedly explicit by Nigel Farage, who claimed Britain has been “taken over” by a siege of immigrants, leaving it “unrecognizable” and people feeling “awkward”. Farage’ also suggested the UK faced “dangerous” integration from Romanians who live “like animals” and wish to settle somewhere “more civilized” like the UK (2013). The association of “others” with animals has a long racially embedded history, which can be explored further through Mel Chen. *Animacies*. (2012) among others.

<sup>449</sup> Étienne Balibar. *We, the people of Europe?* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

longer simply connote territorial boundary lines but also new “sociopolitical entities” such as check-points and other forms of state surveillance and control to which migrants are increasingly subjected in cosmopolitan cities.<sup>450</sup> These often invisible borders, situated everywhere and nowhere, direct the individuals from different social classes to have vastly different experiences of the law, civil administration, police and elementary rights.<sup>451</sup> Borders have also never been purely external realities, they exist within nations and are internal to subjectivity and identity formation (for those recognised as rightful citizens) and deformation (for those migrants who find themselves excluded within the host country, even if they make it across the territorial border).<sup>452</sup> Johann Fichte names these *innere Grenzen* (inner-borders) which connote an internalization of national identity as an essential reference of collective, communal belonging only available to a select few.<sup>453</sup>

In Moshin Hamid’s *Exit West*, national borders are portrayed as completely futile in the face of magical doorways which spontaneously open up all over the globe, providing immediate passage to various “elsewheres” around the world. The instantaneity of movement from place to place which is facilitated by the doorways represents a globalized world in which distance has grown smaller and travel easier against a backdrop of inevitable mass migration. The doorways make visible the permeability of urban space and of the boundaries between nations, highlighting displacement and migration as crucial events of twenty-first century life that undermine the relevance and efficacy of territorial borders. The

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<sup>450</sup> Étienne Balibar. "World borders, political borders." *pmla* 117.1 (2002): 68-78.

<sup>451</sup> Balibar. *Politics and the other scene*. (2012). p. 81-2

<sup>452</sup> Étienne Balibar. “What is a border” in *Politics and the other scene*. (Verso Trade, 2012). and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. *Reden an die deutsche Nation*. Vol. 588. (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008).

<sup>453</sup> Johann Gottlieb Fichte. *Reden an die deutsche Nation*. Vol 588. (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2008).

fundamental porosity of the world and the city in *Exit West*, literalised in the novel by the spontaneously appearing doorways, present us with a world that is malleable to change, however resistant it might be in socio-political terms.

The passageways facilitated by the doorways are particularly transgressive because they function to circumvent the otherwise territorializing force of national borders, which exist to control and regulate the circulation of bodies around the world. Uncertainty around where some of these doorways lead, and the police presence stationed at those doorways leading to more “popular” (typically western) locations, gesture to the inherently precarious nature of refugee passage. However, because Hamid shrinks the timespan of migration - typically involving months of perilous transit - into a single instant, he eschews many of the perils characteristic of these journeys so as to focus on the aftermath of migration and more directly answer the question “how we will live together”. As such, Hamid shifts the focus from the ultimately futile question of how to prevent flows of mass migration to how we will socio-spatially account and provide for new migrant populations when they inevitably arrive on Europe’s shores.

However, while the magical doorways concretize the fragility of territorial borders, the novel is rife with what Balibar terms “sociopolitical borders”, which manifest as a series of controls, exclusions, and state-based violence that migrants are subjected to beyond the border.<sup>454</sup> For example, when Hamid’s protagonists Saeed and Nadia arrive in London, one of the three destinations to which the doorways take them after they flee their war-torn home, they are faced with a public sphere that is incredibly hostile in its response to refugees.

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<sup>454</sup> Balibar. *We, the people of Europe?* (2004).



Inclusion and exclusion are mobilized as political weapons that function institutionally to deprive foreigners of their human rights, including the right of belonging in the city. The many forms of surveillance and control faced by the protagonists uncover the violence that underpins European nationalism today. Hamid uses visceral depictions of state violence to showcase the political and moral consequences of nation state citizenship, challenging the idea that any human should be considered “illegal”.

While the journeys on which the protagonists embark once they are through the portals are defined by the precarity and struggle that Balibar ascribes to migrant’s repeated encounters with ubiquitous border controls, they also result in the building of unlikely communities. At first these communities are built around survival, but with time they develop into part of the essential fabric of the city, paying testament to immigrants' vital contributions to the architectural, social, and cultural landscape of contemporary world cities.<sup>455</sup> These communities - shaped by shared conditions of precarity and other forms of familiarity (ethnic, religious, cultural) - reimagine Henri Lefebvre’s conception of ‘the right to the city’ (1968) for a diverse and globalized world.<sup>456</sup> Moments where public protest and action lead directly to change in the novel bear out Lefebvre’s claim that the city belongs to its people, and that they have the potential to shape and change it as they see fit through active engagement with/in urban space.<sup>457</sup> These public showings of support for migrants also stand as a public acknowledgement that migration should be a shared concern and that the

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<sup>455</sup> Henri Lefebvre argues that the city belongs to urban subjects who have the right to reshape the city through an active engagement with urban space. This is happening on a global scale in the 21st century because mass migration is becoming an ever increasing necessity and reality.

<sup>456</sup> Henri Lefebvre. "The right to the city." *Writings on cities* 63181 (1996).

<sup>457</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

state-based violence that stems from border territorialisation hurts both migrants and natives alike.<sup>458</sup>

*Exit West* explicitly responds to the 2015 European migrant crisis, also known internationally as the Syrian refugee crisis, during which time 1.3 million people (the most in a single year since World War II) came to the continent to request asylum. The publication of the novel also coincided with Donald Trump's 2017 executive order banning people from six Muslim-majority countries from entering the USA which suspended the entry of Syrian refugees to America indefinitely. Hamid critiques the territorialism of the border and discriminatory legislation such as the colloquially known "Muslim ban" which have fatal consequences for refugees. The novel challenges discriminatory legislation that defines who has the right to move and who doesn't, advocating for a change in our approach to diversity and inclusion. *Exit West* advocates for migrants' rights to the city by challenging readers to imagine new versions of socio-spatial urban belonging which revise outdated notions of nationality and legality which are compromised by global displacement.<sup>459</sup>

### **Portals to "elsewhere": Envisaging a Global Future in Moshin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017)**

*Exit West* follows the protagonists Nadia and Saeed, two young students who fall in love in an unnamed city 'swollen with refugees' (p. 1) on the brink of civil war. The pair come together in spite of their differing worldviews - Saeed is conservative and religious, while Nadia is more liberal and secular - and as tensions escalate and violent militants take over the

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<sup>458</sup> Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha. *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*. (Verso Books, 2022).

<sup>459</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

city, they make a plan to exit together through the rumored magical doors, circumventing border controls. Over the course of the novel they make three major voyages: from their unnamed home city (which is predominantly Muslim and presumably modeled on Hamid's native Lahore) to a refugee camp on Mykonos, then to squatting in a mansion in London, and finally settling in Marin County before returning home half a century later. Having gone their separate ways in Northern California, the pair are reunited in the city of their birth, bringing the novel full circle. Their oxymoronic experience of one another as 'familiar but also unfamiliar' (p. 227) is analogous to the experience of migration and their newfound relationship to the place they once called home. The cyclical permanence of their home city in spite of the violent conflicts that nearly succeeded in decimating it signifies Hamid's anti-apocalyptic approach to the contemporary world and its landscape of civil war, global warming, and late stage capitalism, factors driving mass migration in the twenty-first century.

As outlined in the introduction, *Exit West* (2017) implicitly references and responds to the 2015 European migrant crisis, one of today's most pressing humanitarian crises. Polly Pallister-Wilkins' *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives* (2022) addresses the ways that state violence often becomes repackaged as humanitarianism in ways which mask underlying injustices, depoliticise violent border processes and bolster liberal and paternalist approaches to suffering.<sup>460</sup> Far from being barriers that protect societies, borders actively produce violence and force migrants who are excluded from safe and legal travel to take riskier, life threatening journeys.<sup>461</sup> Hamid's London is an unwelcoming,

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<sup>460</sup> Polly Pallister-Wilkins. *Humanitarian Borders: Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives*. (Verso Books, 2022).

<sup>461</sup> Reece Jones. *Violent borders: Refugees and the right to move*. (Verso Books, 2016). p. 5.

nativist space and a vital representative of European sovereign territory.<sup>462</sup> The barriers that Nadia and Saeed face when they arrive in the city reveal the ubiquity of the border in British society, where refugees are met with various socio-spatial exclusions and subjected to territorialisation by the state. Local authorities cut off the electricity, the police arrive, and violent attacks are waged on migrant communities. For instance, a rumored cinema incineration is said to have killed over two hundred people (p. 160). These measures serve to strip migrants of their human rights and re-enforce a limited and outdated notion of Britishness and belonging in Britain.

London's migrant-dominated areas, patrolled by soldiers and armored cars, helicopters and drones, increasingly begin to resemble the war zone that Saeed and Nadia have attempted to flee in their home country. Murders, rapes, and assaults are committed by nativists and soldiers (p. 143) and Nadia and Saeed are left 'waiting, waiting, like so many others' (p. 135). Balibar attributes this sense of waiting to live to the condition of refugees who repeatedly confront various proliferations of the border in Europe:

For a poor person from a poor country [...] the border tends to be something quite different: not only is it an obstacle which is very difficult to surmount, but it is a place he runs up against repeatedly, passing and repassing through it as and when he is expelled or allowed to rejoin his family, so that it becomes, in the end, a place where he resides. It

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<sup>462</sup> Nurretin Ucar. "Moshin Hamid's *Exit West*: Invisible Borders and the Exclusion of Refugees." *EuropeNow*. (April 4, 2019).

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an extraordinarily viscous spatio-temporal zone, almost a home – a home in which to live  
a life which is a waiting-to-live, a non-life.<sup>463</sup>

The border connotes such an unending series of checkpoints that refugees have to confront that, in the end, it becomes, in the end, ‘a place where [they] reside’; a home unfit for living. This condition of ‘waiting-to-live’ a ‘non-life’ precisely maps onto Nadia and Saeed’s experience of endless waiting, always on high-alert to the violence that surrounds them.<sup>464</sup> Hamid’s comparison of the sound of London’s trains to the ‘detonation of a massive, distant bomb’ (p. 142) depict the city as a warzone. This association of the would-be innocent rumblings of the trains with the sound of bombs exposes the atmosphere of violence in London and associates its technologies of state surveillance with weapons.

Britain is also plagued by nativist ideologies that proliferate hatred against foreign “others” through nationalist agendas and ideologies. As Balibar and others have argued, nationalism emerges out of racism.<sup>465</sup> Claims to national identity and the rights of citizenship are explicitly linked and racialised in *Exit West*. Despite the fact that there are almost no natives in Marin county, Saeed and Nadia’s final destination, those who claim ‘the rights of nativeness most forcefully’ are typically ‘drawn from the ranks of those with light skin who looked like the natives of Britain’ (p. 196). In the novel, nativist extremist mobs reminiscent

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<sup>463</sup> Balibar. “What is a border”. p. 83.

<sup>464</sup> Balibar. "World borders, political borders." (2002).

<sup>465</sup> Étienne Balibar, Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, and Senior Researcher Immanuel Wallerstein. *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. (Verso, 1991).

of the English Defense League (EDL)<sup>466</sup> represent the racist and nationalist ideologies which view migration as a synonym for terrorism and refugees as agents of religious, political, or cultural scheme to seize European jobs, wealth, and territory. These groups advocate wholesale slaughter and massacre as a way of clearing migrants from the country, with the explicit objective to ‘reclaim Britain for Britain’ (p. 132) through heightening global disparities and racial division.<sup>467</sup>

The language of ‘reclaiming’ Britain is eerily reminiscent of frontman Nigel Farage’s assertion at UKIP’s spring conference in 2014 that Britain had become ‘like a foreign land’ which needed to be reclaimed by increasing border controls.<sup>468</sup> As migrant numbers have increased in Europe, national identity and sovereignty are discussed more explicit and fervently, with European political rhetoric tending towards increasingly populist and nationalist ideologies as a tactic to achieve political power.<sup>469</sup> These are prime examples of the ways popular sovereignty is used to endanger the lives of refugees, while simultaneously securing the positions of politicians who spark the controversy concerning refugees by emboldening extremist and nationalist groups and playing into fears of “otherness” and infiltration.<sup>470</sup>

Nativist anti-immigration rhetoric remains common in right-wing politics in the UK, with Nigel Farage recently advocating a “Brexit 2.0” on GB news this April (2022). This would most importantly entail an exit from the European convention of human rights, a move

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<sup>466</sup> A far-right Islamophobic group which had its heyday between 2009-11. Its ideology centered on nationalism, nativism, and populism, blaming a perceived decline in English culture on high immigration rates.

<sup>467</sup> Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha. *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*. (Verso Books, 2022).

<sup>468</sup> Andrew Sparrow. Nigel Farage: parts of Britain are 'like a foreign land'. *The Guardian*. (28 February, 2014).

<sup>469</sup> Ucar. “Moshin Hamid’s *Exit West*.” (2019).

<sup>470</sup> Ucar. “Moshin Hamid’s *Exit West*.” (2019).

which would explicitly target migrants during an ever more urgent and ongoing refugee crisis. The splitting of the city into ‘dark London and light London’ (p. 142) in *Exit West* rehearses separatist logics of inclusion and functions as a border inside the physical boundary between nations.<sup>471</sup> Hamid challenges these ideologies, arguing that they are outdated and unsuitable to addressing the reality of vast scale migration:

The US and the EU, despite the internal victories they have won for democracy and the rule of law, are stumbling on the world stage. Perhaps this is in part because their models are attempts at uber-nations, not a post-national collective humanity. Such models are too small-minded for the challenges the globe faces, thrown off-balance by the conflicted ambition of mating individual equality with national superiority.<sup>472</sup>

In the mind of ‘uber-nations’ represented by major urban centers in Europe and the United States, people like Nadia and Saeed are inferior subjects undeserving of entry. In Hamid’s eyes, while the leaders of Europe and the United States often cast their countries as culturally and technologically superior, their stringent nationalism makes them ill equipped to face the challenges of our contemporary world. Hamid questions the validity of the European project and the rise of rightwing nationalism and national sovereignty in response to increased

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<sup>471</sup> Balibar. “What is a border”. (2012).

<sup>472</sup> Hamid. “Nationalism should retire at 65”. (2012).

migration, arguing that a nation can be best evaluated by how it treats its minorities: 'each individual human being is, after all, a minority of one'.<sup>473</sup> Nationalism is inherently flawed because it advocates exclusion and impedes the development of possible models of 'post-national collective humanity' which might make it possible to envisage practical solutions to addressing an inevitable global future of mass migration.

*Exit West* endeavors to reconfigure the question of mass migration to offer a solution-based as opposed to denial and crisis-driven approach represented by tightened borders and widespread right-wing nationalism. Border control has already resulted in countless migrant and refugee deaths; people have been killed by border officials, drowned at sea, and dehydrated, starved, or suffocated in shipping containers. The United Nations estimates that around 500 have died trying to enter European countries between 2014 and 2019, excluding the estimated 18,500 that have died crossing the Mediterranean.<sup>474</sup> This number is only growing. Hamid argues that the real question raised by the refugee crisis is 'not whether the people of the countries of Europe wish to accept more refugees' but whether 'they wish their countries to become the sorts of societies that are capable of taking the steps that will be required to stop the flow of migration.'<sup>475</sup> Border control and other forms of national exclusion will not alone be enough to curb future global waves of migration, in spite of their brutality. Measures would need to be taken to the extreme, with whole groups of

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<sup>473</sup> Moshin Hamid. *Discontent and its civilisations*. (New York: Riverhead, 2014).

<sup>474</sup> Talitha Dubow and Katie Kuschminder. "Refugees and Migrants know the risks of stowing away on a Lorry, but feel they must take them." *Our World*. (2019)

<sup>475</sup> Hamid. "The turmoil of today's world." (2015).



people being exterminated by the state in a manner tantamount to Hitler's mass genocide of Jewish people that was in the making for over a thousand years, but on an even larger scale.<sup>476</sup>

By projecting the reader a century into the future, *Exit West* envisages how Europe might respond if faced with the actuality of committing mass genocide as the only feasible way of successfully excluding refugees from the continent. London's native population is ultimately forced to recognise that to deny coexistence with others is akin to extermination in the novel: 'one party [would be required] to cease to exist' (p. 164). The people of London are ultimately forced to accept the impact these extreme measures would have on them; that they 'would have been transformed in the process' (p. 164) too. Ultimately the natives realize they would be unable to bear the moral and ethical consequences of these atrocities, that they 'would not have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done' (p. 164) if they were to take the extreme action required to stop the flows of migration into the city. Conflict does not dissipate overnight but existence goes on in tolerable safety in London as people begin to accept migration as an unavoidable reality, representing Hamid's anti-apocalyptic stand on the refugee crisis.

*Exit West* critiques models of European national sovereignty by exposing the unthinkable extremities border territorialism would need to be taken to in order to curb global waves of migration to western nations. However, it also works to imagine alternative anti-apocalyptic approaches to the inevitable future of global migration. One way Hamid navigates this is by using the doorways to shrink time: "the doors allow the world to change very quickly. So the next century or two of migration that are likely to happen on planet

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<sup>476</sup> Hamid. "The turmoil of today's world". (2015).

Earth, in the novel, occurs in just a year or two.”<sup>477</sup> In doing so, the novel shifts focus away from refugee passage to what happens after refugees have already migrated.

In the prospective future of *Exit West* an unprecedented flow of migrants arrives in rich countries whose attempts to build walls and fences and strengthen their borders are ultimately ‘unsatisfactory’ (p. 71). While state-based attempts to control migration are made by having armed guards patrol the doorways, the fact that the doors cannot be closed and new ones are continually opening (p. 164) mean these patrolling efforts are in vain. By prophesying the futility of the border and other exclusionary measures, Hamid presents right-wing nationalism as an outdated system unable to meet the challenges of mass-migration. The uncontrollable flow of migrant passage through the magical doorways stands as a metaphor for the decreased efficacy and meaning of territorial borders in a contemporary globalized world. From the future vantage point of *Exit West*, people begin explicitly to question the meaning of nations:

‘Without borders nations appeared to be becoming somewhat illusory and people were questioning what role they had to play [...] one was tempted to conclude that the nation was like a person with multiple personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration [...] furthermore a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving in a

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<sup>477</sup> Moshin Hamid. “From Refugees To Politics, Mohsin Hamid Writes The Change He Wants To See”. *NPR*. (March 2018).

soup

full of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving.’ (p. 155-6)

The personification of the nation as a person with multiple conflicting personalities is an anti-apocalyptic but also anti-utopian vision for future world cities, in which a mixing of people with differing social, cultural, and political outlooks will become increasingly inevitable. The macabre image of the nation as a body whose skin is ‘dissolving’ amidst other people’s dissolving skins suggests a dissolution not of the border but of the perceived boundaries between races. Privileges of movement and global inequalities are rooted in colonial histories and white supremacy, and humanitarian efforts that purport to save lives often actually deepen these inequalities.<sup>478</sup> However, Hamid imagines a world where it becomes increasingly impossible for peoples’ “belonging” and accompanying rights within a nation to be dictated by their racial or ethnic identity, because the distinction between native and migrant becomes more and more contrived. Most natives in western cities are just migrants who have settled for longer, and there are no longer any strict defining characteristics for what it means to be native (p. 181).

The seemingly endless and unstoppable filling of London houses, parks, and disused lots with millions of migrants - ‘the more empty space in the city the more it attracted squatters’ (p. 126) - signifies the porosity of both national borders and the inner-city spaces of London.<sup>479</sup> Writing on the porosity of Naples, Benjamin describes how poverty has

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<sup>478</sup> Pallister-Wilkins. *Humanitarian Borders*. (2022).

<sup>479</sup> Walter Benjamin. “Naples.” in *Reflections: Essays, aphorisms, autobiographical writings*. (New York and London, 1986).

brought about ‘a stretching of [the city’s] frontiers’ in a manner ‘that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought.’<sup>480</sup> This association of poverty with urban intellectual freedom advocates for the role of the poor to shape the architectural and intellectual landscape of the city they are living in, in line with Lefebvre’s emphasis on the importance of an active engagement with urban space in “the right to the city”.<sup>481</sup> Porosity also envisions a commingling and permeation of public and private life so that these become a ‘collective matter’.<sup>482</sup> The collectivity of urban space facilitated by its inherent porosity connotes not only the possibility but also the necessity for urban dwellers to reshape urban relations. Porosity therefore becomes a political tool for envisaging what Hamid terms ‘a post-national collective humanity’<sup>483</sup> in *Exit West*.

Hamid inscribes a textuality to the city when he writes that migrants pitch tents to sleep in ‘margins of streets’ (p. 23): here the condition of marginality is written on the margins of the city as a figurative book. The gutter is re-imagined as a margin to be utilized in creative ways that reshape our understanding of public urban spaces and denote the right to the city for migrants who can restructure urban space and utilize it as a form of (albeit somewhat precarious and ephemeral) shelter.<sup>484</sup> If the city is a text then pedestrian activity can be imagined as a way of “rewriting” urban space, as Michel De Certeau argues in “Walking in the City” (1984).<sup>485</sup> Walking is a political intervention because it

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<sup>480</sup> Benjamin. “Naples.” (1986). p. 171.

<sup>481</sup> Lefebvre. “The right to the city.” (1996).

<sup>482</sup> Benjamin. “Naples.” (1986). p. 171.

<sup>483</sup> Hamid. “Nationalism should retire at 65”. (2012).

<sup>484</sup> Lefebvre. “The right to the city.” (1996).

<sup>485</sup> Michel De Certeau. “Walking in the City” in *The practice of everyday life*. trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

counterbalances the totalizing eye of panoptic voyeurism by charting new and alternative paths through urban space. The pedestrian's language is fundamental to political action in the city because it creates 'liberated spaces that can be occupied'<sup>486</sup>. Hamid's urban margins connote a lived example of this liberation as a form of occupation that challenges the territorialisation of marginalized people in the city. In *Life as Politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East* Asef Bayat argues that the poor and downtrodden quietly encroach on urban space and make meaningful change through routine, yet vital, everyday actions.<sup>487</sup> The migrants of *Exit West* participate in the repurposing of urban space when they use the gutters of the city as temporary rest-stops to pitch their tents and sleep in, accounting for their ability to alter urban space in small and routine, yet powerful ways.

The novel works to build big-picture global, political alternatives to nationalist responses to mass migration in order to advocate for visions of a post-national collective humanity. Interpersonal forms of community building visualize what this collective humanity could look like. The form of the novel is one way in which Hamid facilitates the formation of collectivities. The main narrative is interspersed with various short vignettes that describe migrants' passages through the doorways to various places around the world, tying together the local and the global. Taken together, these disparate stories build a collective story of migration. While these snapshots fragment the central narrative, they tell the stories of characters who are also often related to the protagonists in some way, thus fostering a sense of connection between them. For instance, the story of two elderly men who travel to Rio de

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<sup>486</sup> De Certeau. "Walking in the City." (1984). p. 105

<sup>487</sup> Asef Bayat. *Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East*. (Stanford University Press, 2013).

Janeiro together mirrors Nadia's relationship with one of her female coworkers at the Sausalito co-op. Both are examples of queer relationships that destabilise challenge oppressive heteronormative standards for sex and romance.<sup>488</sup> The inclusion of the stories of the diverse and unnamed people undertaking migrations through portals all over the world provide a broader global perspective that contributes to and intersects with the novel's core narrative.

However, certain visions of collective humanity in the novel feel at best too optimistic and at worst eschew and disregard differentiating factors that shape global inequalities. For instance, Hamid's assertion that an acknowledgement of how 'loss unites humanity, unites every human being' that might lead to a renewed belief 'in humanity's potential for building a better world' (p. 202) is uncomfortably universalist and ultimately untrue. This sometimes overly idealistic tone has led critics to argue that the novel strays too close to liberal wish-fulfillment.<sup>489</sup> At best, the idea of a universal humanity is a sanguine view of what collective suffering produces, and at worst it obscures difference and becomes complicit in the marginalization of people whose bodies are marked by and embody structural violence.<sup>490</sup> Jean Baudrillard terms this 'the violence of the global'.<sup>491</sup> Universalist approaches to humanity are at risk of overlapping with the imaginaries surrounding state order because they circumvent the facts of difference and what it means to live in a body that is imprinted

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<sup>488</sup> Liliana M. Naydan. "Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*." *Studies in the Novel* 51.3 (2019): 433-451. p. 446.

<sup>489</sup> Theo Tait. "Some will need to be killed." *London review of books*. Vol. 39. No. 22. (16 November 2017).

<sup>490</sup> Jean Baudrillard. "The violence of the global." (*C Theory*, 2003): 5-20.

<sup>491</sup> Baudrillard. "The violence of the global." (2003).

by gender, race, class and various other socio-cultural factors.<sup>492</sup> While universalism appears to endeavor to bring people together around a collective humanity, it often further divides people by renouncing the differences that necessarily define them.

The refugee camps in Mykonos and London represent a more realistic and hopeful vision of collective humanity in the novel because they are microcosms of world cities where people need to strive to learn to live together in difference. Refugees form collectivities around conditions of mutual estrangement, realizing that their shared foreignness is a form of familiarity: 'in this group everyone was foreign [...] so in a sense, no one was' (p. 100). Importantly, Hamid also presents examples of conflict between refugees from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who often find one another equally as threatening as members of the native population (p. 150), thus precluding an over-simplification of migrant communities as one homogenous group. Life finds a way to go on with some semblance of normality in the camps, where multiple languages are spoken and goods are sold, traded and exchanged, another form of porosity which blurs the boundaries between the camp and the wider city. This blurring of boundaries is epitomized when the 'London Halo' (p. 167), a ring of new cities able to accommodate more people again than London itself, is built in the formerly protected green belt around the city. This is a vision of urban expansion that is not predicated on excluding minority ethnic communities who are pushed out of their homes by gentrification at a rate disproportionate to white natives. The new cities made up of solar-paneled shacks in Marin County are another example of Hamid's anti-apocalyptic

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<sup>492</sup> Crenshaw. "Mapping the margins." (1990).

vision of how we will live together, as it envisages ways that cities can be expanded to house migrants in eco-conscious ways that simultaneously endeavor to redress the related impact of global warming.

While nativist violence is palpable in the novel, Hamid also characterizes groups of natives who collect around refugee-solidarity. The pro-migrant contingents represented by the symbol of ‘the black door within a red heart’ (p. 105) best epitomize Hamid’s post-national collective humanity. Crowds of people of all races and ethnicities show up in a reaction against the xenophobic attitudes of nativist mobs and actively engage in public protest against the state’s violent territorialisation of refugees. The power of this public engagement in urban space is evidenced when the crowd succeeds in forcing the police to withdraw by banging their cooking pots with spoons and chanting in various languages. This is an example of the power of public protest as it is depicted by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou in *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013). Butler and Athanasiou argue that dispossession (the condition of those who have lost land, citizenship, property, and a broader belonging to the world) opens up a performative condition of being both affected by injustice and prompted to act.<sup>493</sup> The crowds assemble in public urban space to protest conditions of political, economic, and social dispossession experienced by refugees on a mass global scale by challenging the supremacy of the sovereign subject and undermining its propriety by publicly opposing the state violence it perpetuates.<sup>494</sup> By insisting on a collective public stand, the crowd opposes the state territorialisation of

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<sup>493</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou. *Dispossession: The performative in the political*. (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

<sup>494</sup> Butler and Athanasiou. *Dispossession*. (2013).



refugees, which in turn signifies the power of public action to re-claim the city for the people as opposed to the state.<sup>495</sup> The public showing of support for migrants by native people also exposes border control and the proliferation of the border as state violence as an issue that impacts both migrants and citizens by disrupting collective safety and freedom.<sup>496</sup> The people who stand in solidarity with refugees represent a powerful urban collectivity who can reclaim urban space with the intention of combating conditions of precarity.<sup>497</sup>

Hamid repeatedly emphasizes the bi-directional co-constitution of migrants and natives to unsettle the uneven power dynamics that are set up by the “us” and “them” binarist logics of nationalist ideologies. Hamid asserts that native people also become migrants in the face of globalization. It is not only migrants who find themselves changed upon entering a new country, the natives find their land, manners, and habits considerably changed as well. Hamid portrays migration as a shared condition of humanity through the perspective of a long-term Marin native who muses upon the changes to her home city:

‘every year someone was moving out and someone was moving in, and now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was, even the homeless ones who spoke no English, more at home maybe because they were younger, and when she went

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<sup>495</sup> Lefebvre. "The right to the city." (1996).

<sup>496</sup> Bradley and de Noronha. *Against Borders*. (2022).

<sup>497</sup> Butler and Athanasiou. *Dispossession*. (2013).

out it seemed to her that she too had migrated that everyone migrates even if we stay  
in  
the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it. We are all migrants  
through  
time.' (p. 209)

The older woman perceives herself as a migrant who is less at home in her home city of Marin than the migrants who have more recently arrived there. The passage emphasizes that time is a form of migration which changes people, cities, and, - perhaps most powerfully - one's conception of oneself. As Salman Rushdie puts it in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991): 'the past is a country from which we have all emigrated.'<sup>498</sup> It is not only migrants who find themselves 'translated' when they move away from home, but all people who have experienced the passage of time, united in the collective strangeness that change brings.<sup>499</sup>

The story of Nadia and Saeed's relationship models the transitions and changes brought on by migration and the passage of time. The partners ultimately find themselves drifting apart due to their different relationships to the home they left behind. The further Saeed gets from the city of his birth the more he tries to strengthen his connection to it by turning to his faith and forming bonds with people with similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nadia, on the other hand, finds that she feels less and less of a desire to recall this past as time passes and her psychological distance from her geographical home increases, ultimately ceasing to define her at all. The gulf that lies between them represents

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<sup>498</sup> Salman Rushdie. *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981-1991*. (Random House, 2012). p. 12.

<sup>499</sup> Rushdie. *Imaginary homelands*. (2012). p. 17.

the divisions that can grow between people in spite of their shared histories (p. 194). Saeed and Nadia's uncoupling, which builds unconsciously over many years, represents a psychological border that grows ever less traversibly between them. Their eventual conscious uncoupling when they decide to separate in Marin county is a physical manifestation of the chasm that is left in place of their intimacy. When the pair reconnect in the city of their birth many years later, having previously severed ties in Marin, they discover what Rushdie refers to as an 'imaginary homeland'<sup>500</sup> between them: something familiar yet irretrievable at the same time. Their conversation, which 'navigate[s] two lives' (p. 228), symbolizes their experience of a home that may have physically survived but is nonetheless lost, in the sense that it is no longer the homeland of their childhood.

Despite the psychological borders that distance them from one another, Saeed and Nadia are able to share in fleeting moments of nostalgia and intimacy. As such, their relationship is worth the negotiations and navigations that are required by each of them to connect with one another. Their bond represents a more hopeful alternative to the violent severing that Hamid ascribes to the relationship between those migrants who leave their home country and those they leave behind. Hamid often depicts migration in brutal and visceral terms: 'when we migrate we murder from our lives those we leave behind' (p. 94). The association of migration with murder implies both a sense of agency and finality. Murder is an act which is premeditated and deliberate, whereas Saeed and Nadia had mitigated agency because their decision to migrate was primarily about safety. The concept of

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<sup>500</sup> Rushdie describes how migrants long to retrieve the home they have left behind, which is only accessible to them in their imagination. Necessarily, this mental process cannot retrieve an objective picture of home and instead provides a fiction or 'imaginary' homeland. Something is lost in this process of mental retrieval, but something is also gained by the creative endeavor of (re)imagining a lost home.

migration as murder is prophetic only insofar as Saeed and Nadia do indeed both lose the families they leave behind, with little to no capacity to discover what fate precisely befell them.

Saeed and Nadia's home city, where the conflicts that drove them away in their youth have long since burned out, is described in a double negative: it is 'not a heaven' but is also 'not a hell' (p. 227). This metaphorical middle-ground constitutes one of Hamid's anti-apocalyptic visions for the aftermath of twenty-first century refugee migration. The prospective vantage point from which Hamid writes about the city in *Exit West* is an attempt to fill in for these fatal gaps he perceives in the British imaginary, which cannot see outside of nationalist frameworks because it is clouded by an illusory nostalgia from which it is impossible to articulate or imagine desirable global futures.<sup>501</sup> The magical doors are a metaphor for the power of the imagination to alter not only perspectives but also ways that the world functions. When the rumors about the portals first begin to spread, even the non-superstitious start to gaze at their own doors a little differently (p. 70), believing, if not in the reality of the portals, then in the possibility of their existence. In this way, Hamid gestures to the power of the imagination to actually reshape the world. The novel also suggests that it is impossible to see clearly from within a crisis. When the apocalypse arrives but does not bring any of the irreparable chaos people anticipated with it, desirable futures become visible owing to the relinquishing of an atmosphere of catastrophe:

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<sup>501</sup> Hamid. "The turmoil of today's world". (2015).

‘in the Bay Area, and in many other places too, places both near and far, the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic, which is to say that while the changes were jarring they were not the end, and life went on, and people found things to do and ways to be and people to be with, and plausible desirable futures began to emerge, unimaginable previously, but not unimaginable now, and the result was something not unlike relief’. (p. 215-6).

This passage defines Hamid’s prospective and anti-apocalyptic approach to the refugee crisis. The apocalypse has arrived, and while it has brought about changes, these are not world-ending; life goes on, and even allows for new ‘plausible desirable futures [...] to emerge, unimaginable previously’ (p. 216).

Migration is not avoidable but inevitable. Hamid asserts that prospective or imaginative thinking allows for a reprieve from the urgency of the present moment. This anti-apocalyptic approach to the reality of mass migration unsettles the notion that it must necessarily be approached as a ‘crisis’, something which is essential to imagining alternative futures that might get at the vital question at the heart of the 2021 Architectural Biennale in Venice: “How Will We Live Together?”. In the world of *Exit West* mass migration has already reshaped the earth but has not amounted to apocalypse or global crisis; instead it has allowed for new ways of living and being with one another to surface. In a world where

globalization, racial capitalism, urbanization, and global warming make the safe movement and rehousing of people from around the world more urgent a concern than ever before, anti-apocalyptic, forward-thinking, and solution-based approaches which understand mass migration as an inevitable reality as opposed to a problem that can be prevented are vital to envisaging how we will live together.

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