“How Newness Enters the World”:
Hybridity in the Intercultural Novels of
Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and
Salman Rushdie

By

Marie-Louise Stening-Riding

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at
Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
May 2004

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this dissertation.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the dissertation.
DALHOUSSIE UNIVERSITY

To comply with the Canadian Privacy Act the National Library of Canada has requested that the following pages be removed from this copy of the thesis:

Preliminary Pages
Examiners Signature Page (pii)
Dalhousie Library Copyright Agreement (piii)

Appendices
Copyright Releases (if applicable)
Table of Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................v
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................vi
Introduction.............................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: “A Text for Our Times”.........................................................................6
    Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity .......................................................................9
    Hybridity’s Racial History ...............................................................................12
    Hybridity and Identity .....................................................................................18
    Hybridity, the Nation and Globalization .........................................................24
    The Poetics of Hybridity: Mimicry, Translation, and Doubleness ......................33

Chapter 2: Monstrous Hybridity in The Satanic Verses .........................................48

Chapter 3: Hybridity and Palimpsests in The Moor’s Last Sigh .............................78

Chapter 4: Seeing Double and Double Exposures in The Ground Beneath Her Feet ...110

Chapter 5: Hybridity, History and Loss of Language in In the Skin of a Lion ............146


Chapter 7: Hybridity and Haunting in Anil’s Ghost ...............................................205

Chapter 8: Hybridity and Time Travel in The Holder of the World .......................230

Chapter 9: The Orphan as a Figure of Hybridity in Leave It to Me ........................263

Conclusion .............................................................................................................284

Bibliography ..........................................................................................................291
Abstract

The dissertation examines the intercultural novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie to show how their writing disturbs, unsettles and reconfigures cultures, identities, and worlds. In doing so, they deploy hybridizing techniques and stage spatiotemporal displacements to foreground the creative role of contingencies, accidental connections, and chance encounters. For all three writers, cultural hybridity—or transculturation—is a boundary negotiation or transgression, which exposes order to the disorder of chaos, flux, and upheaval, and reveals that what appears to be natural and settled on either side of the boundary is in fact disorienting and fluid. This discovery leads their characters to reconsider traditions, ancestry, community, and identity. In these writers, the liminal figure of hybridity marks unknowability and undecidability, not just contamination and mixture. I argue that their hybrid negotiations enrich our experience of the world by imaginatively opening up other possible worlds for scrutiny across time and space. I also demonstrate that narrativizing cultural hybridity is a difficult textual practice, since it erupts in utterly unpredictable and unforeseen ways, and requires the reader to interpret the effects of transculturation from the interstices, gaps and ambiguities of these intercultural novels. I discuss both the dangers and the opportunities inherent in the loss of certainty and predictability as a result of dislocation and upheaval, typically achieved through the use of ostramenie (defamiliarization); historical and cross-cultural ironies; palimpsests and double-exposures; catachrestical figures employing doubling, splitting, substitution and exchange; the rhetorical devices of chiasmus and metonymy, and the intercultural practices of mimicry, passing, and translation which occur in the border zones of cultures.

My discussion shows that Bharati Mukherjee frequently uses the figure of the orphan catachrestically to examine intercultural gain and loss, and to defamiliarize the exotic and exoticize the familiar; that Michael Ondaatje interrogates and sets identities in motion through the figures of vagrants and nomads, and by pushing identities into the realms of the spectral and enigmatic; and finally that Salman Rushdie typically stages hybridity (or in his idiom “mongrelization”) as a fall into uncertainty and doubt, and that the transformation into the monstrous hybrid is necessary for the emergence of the new.
Acknowledgements

Above all, I wish to acknowledge my thesis supervisor, Dr. Victor Li, whose unflagging support, intellectual generosity and theoretical guidance gave me the courage to finish the dissertation. I also wish to acknowledge the support and generosity of the entire English Department, and in particular Dr. Bruce Greenfield, and Drs. John Baxter, Judith Thompson, and Melissa Furrow in their capacities as graduate coordinators. I am also grateful for the cooperation of the Department of Graduate Studies.

I also want to thank the internal readers, Drs. Alice Brittan, Judith Thompson and Andrew Wainwright for their constructive criticism and the intellectual challenge they provided. Dr. Chelva Kanaganayakam of the University of Toronto served as the external reader, and I want to thank him for his pivotal contribution and keen interest. I am also grateful for the formatting expertise that John MacDonald provided.

I dedicate the thesis to my daughter Hannah Riding, and to my friend Shelagh Mackenzie. Without their encouragement I would not have prevailed.
Introduction

In my thesis, I explore whether strangeness is always the first casualty of the encounter between the self and the other. My contention is that in the intercultural meeting between the strange and the familiar, between self and other, something new and unexpected is always born: cultural hybridity. This, then, is the new masquerading as the strange. Thus, the strange is the new, and the new the strange. Cultural hybridity is a contested term and critical terrain, and hybridity is regularly excluded as a troublesome and contaminating third from all binary systems. Cultural hybridity is typically also erased from history as a contagion. Alternatively, it is celebrated as an empowering and creative perspective on the world. I contend that cultural hybridity is not one or the other, but both. In my discussion, I establish that hybridity follows the logic of not one without the other as it mixes and contaminates the pure and the original in entirely unexpected ways.

Thus, the narrative of cultural hybridity inscribes the unknowable and unpredictable, or the contradictory, which is how Theodor Adorno describes the role of the nonidentical under the aspect of identity in his Negative Dialectics. Adorno suggests that new ways of apprehending the world are framed negatively since identity is a totality that is “structured to accord with ... [an identitarian] logic whose core is the principle of the excluded middle,” and as a result, “whatever does not fit this principle, whatever differs in quality, comes to be designated as a contradiction” in terms (5). He adds, however, that as “the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself,” and can ultimately not be contained (5). What Adorno identifies is the border negotiation from which hybridity erupts. As Adorno observes, the struggle for inclusion is a formidable one since strangers push up against both “the identity of identity and nonidentity” postulated by Hegel:
What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for as long as the structure of our consciousness obliges us to strive for unity, as long as its demand for totality will be its measure for whatever is not identical with it. (Negative Dialectics 5-6)

I will discuss the negotiation of hybridity in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels The Holder of the World (1993) and Leave It to Me (1997), Michael Ondaatje’s novels In the Skin of a Lion (1987), The English Patient (1992) and Anil’s Ghost (2000); and Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses (1988), The Moor’s Last Sigh (1995), and The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999). In a theoretical chapter, “A Text for Our Times,” I attempt to situate and explore critical models for hybridity as they cross over into theories of subject formation, alterity and the practices of intercultural translation, passing and mimicry. I discuss the ontological models I have found in Robert Young, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Walter Benjamin, among others, as they apply to hybridity, or transculturation. I explore the novels in close readings to determine how they are inflected by cultural hybridity, which is a complex concept to portray without resorting to essentialisms or mimetic descriptions which demonize, idealize, or exoticize the world of the other. The corrective for these writers is typically irony, satire and parody.

The fiction writers mentioned deploy several figures catachrestically to challenge boundaries, and negotiate new ways of being in the world, such as outcasts, nomads and vagrants. Figures of doubling, such as twins and orphans, are frequently used to negotiate alterity, while rhetorical figures of displacement and exchange, such as metonymy and chiasmus, are dispatched to dismantle and transpose oppositional binaries across worlds. An intercultural hybrid negotiation is typically aporetic, involving a paradox or an oxymoron, but the kinetic figure of chiasmus is particularly interesting as a rhetorical device in that it allows the familiar and the strange to exchange places, and in the crossing, new and uncanny effects are generated. Both of these rhetorical figures produce hybridity as unpredictable and unforeseen transformations. They also unsettle and scramble binary oppositions which tend to elevate notions of identity, authenticity and origins into umbrella concepts in order to resist adulterations and contaminations between the poles of the familiar and the strange, and the original and the copy.
The figure of chiasmus, which obeys the logic of substitution and exchange, produces effects of ostranenie (defamiliarization) as the familiar and the strange cross paths, and in the resulting friction, turbulence and unpredictable eruptions are produced. In contrast, an aporia marks a logical impasse. An aporetic boundary negotiation involves both possible passages and blocked passages, and is an (im)possible boundary crossing, leakage or transgression. The aporetic logic of resistance and remainder inhabits the realm of the subjunctive mood, and is a cross-border logic that typically negotiates what remains to be thought, imagined and actualized. As Jacques Derrida notes, aporias put “to test a passage, both an impossible and a necessary [one],” and “two apparently heterogeneous borders” (Aporias 17). Thus aporias question the role and function of the border itself: why it has been erected and what it guards against. Paradoxically, aporias make us think that we are stuck or barred as we face, in Salman Rushdie’s formulation, a “No Entry sign.” In actual fact the oppositional double logic of the aporia invites us to find or imagine a passage otherwise. What is at stake, argues Derrida, “is not the crossing of a given border, but the double concept of the border from which this aporia comes to be determined” (Aporias 18). While there are borders we may not wish to cross or transgress, the concept of the border as double clearly allows for a negotiation in which the duty or refusal to find a passage can be guided by an ethical relation to the other. Derrida, in fact, inserts a cautionary “but” to draw attention to the border crossing as double and mutually obliging:

The same duty [to attempt a crossing] dictates respecting differences, idioms, minorities, singularities, but also the universality of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and univocity, the law of the majority, opposition to racism, nationalism and xenophobia. (Aporias 19)

Although I use the term cultural hybridity to describe both the mixing of cultures and the process of cultural transformation set in motion by the encounter with alterity, I also use the term “transculturation” to mark a hybridized subject position, or a subject traversed by hybridity, and thus in the process of transformation and translation. The process of translation, which involves carrying over features of one culture to another, is
an essential aspect of transculturation, since without bicameral cultural literacy, hybridity cannot emerge from a boundary negotiation. Any translation involves finding a passage from one culture or language to another across a boundary, and a successful translation is a mutually transforming process in the writers I discuss. Yet the translated migrant typically remains not quite: enigmatic, other, and strange. Inhabiting the liminal in-between space of hybridity can also become a strategy for survival on the part of the displaced migrant. Cultural hybridity may even become the exclusive mark of the Other within, not the host culture. Thus hybridity can become the host culture’s way of reinscribing cultural differences between itself and the migrants: the host culture is not hybrid, only the migrant is hybrid.

Terms that articulate hybridity as a field of relations in my thesis include: heterology, heteroglossia, shift, passing, passage, a third way, the excluded third, heterogeneity, transculturation, interculturation, cross-culuration, transformation, metamorphosis, fusion, syncretism, mélange, creolization, métissage, bricolage, ensemble, assemblage, assimilation, acculturation and “mongrelization” (which is Rushdie’s term). ¹

The three writers I am discussing have multiple cultural and national affiliations. Michael Ondaatje left his native Sri Lanka at the age of nine for England, and migrated to Canada at the age of nineteen to attend university. He is a poet and an editor as well, and publishes Brick, an international literary magazine, with his wife, the writer Linda Spalding. Salman Rushdie grew up in Bombay, was sent to boarding school in England, and following graduation from university, briefly rejoined his family, which by this time had relocated from India to Pakistan. He returned to London, England, where he remained until he recently relocated to New York. Since the publication of The Satanic Verses in 1988, Salman Rushdie has been in hiding as a result of the Iranian fatwa. Since relocating to New York, however, he has begun to travel and lead a less restricted life.

¹ I have also used some of the terms in Steven G. Yau’s biological and horticultural model of hybridity, a taxonomy that can be deployed to trace intercultural cross-fertilization, mimicry, grafting, transplantation and mutation.
Bharati Mukherjee was born and educated in Calcutta. She arrived in the United States to attend the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, where she met and married a fellow student, the expatriate Canadian writer, Clark Blaise. They moved to Canada in 1966, but Mukherjee became disenchanted with Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, which categorized her as a “visible minority,” and relocated with her family to the United States in 1980. Her short story collection *Darkness* (1985), critically examines the Canadian mosaic. She now regards herself as an American writer.
Chapter 1: “A Text for Our Times”

The intercultural novels of Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje and Bharati Mukherjee explore what it means to live as a stranger among strangers. In their novels, they turn the loss of certainty associated with migration into a creative albeit disruptive force of renewal by harnessing the anguish of cultural dislocation. Their imaginative explorations of migrancy and cultural hybridity usher in new and previously unimagined ways of experiencing and belonging to a world in the process of globalization, and as a result their novels speak to readers across cultures and nations in a new way. As the writers braid together languages, traditions and cultures, a strange newness enters the world as hybridity emerges from the gaps and interstices between cultures.

In the intercultural novels, hybridity is relationally negotiated from amongst conflicting cultural claims, and the novels I discuss explore how the transcultural subject is constituted as it pushes up against alterity. In the clash of cultures, unexpected metamorphoses occur, and the encounter with the other is the crucible from which both hybridity and subjectivity emerge. Narrativizing cultural hybridity is a difficult and complex practice since it is typically left to the reader to recognize and negotiate the effects of hybridity as they erupt in the text. Moreover, since cultural hybridity emerges from a border crossing or negotiation, the narration of hybridity must first inscribe the boundary it intends to cross. As a result, the writers have to devise and develop strategies of translation and double coding to orient and guide their readers. As the novels move across worlds and vast spatiotemporal grounds, the narrative of hybridity, which always concerns an encounter with the other, creates an interwoven world.

But what or who is the Other? An icon of alterity? Something untouchable? A curiosity? An obligation? A threat? Something to negotiate, appropriate, or try to understand? Someone who takes me hostage against my will? Or is the Other another side of the Self? Are we, as Julia Kristeva claims, all split subjects and therefore ultimately strangers to ourselves?
Julia Kristeva suggests in *Strangers to Ourselves* that we look no farther than ourselves: "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode.... By recognizing [the stranger] within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself" (1). In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that by searching in the "unthought" metonymic spaces, which are "neither part nor whole," we may actually locate the other as "something else besides" as a "countervailing image" based on a "negotiation" or "translation" (64). Bhabha adds that only a theory of hybridity can accommodate the condition of not belonging, of being neither/nor, and of not being admitted, since "hybrid realities [are produced] by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought" (*Critical Fictions* 63).

Salman Rushdie’s controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* is still the paradigmatic novel about migrancy and cultural hybridity, or "mongrelization" (Rushdie’s term). In an essay in the *The Independent*, published in the wake of the novel’s tumultuous reception in 1988—which included demonstrations against the novel in London and Bradford by groups of migrants from the Indian subcontinent, followed by the Iranian *fatwa*—Rushdie wrote that, "if *The Satanic Verses* is anything, it is the migrant’s view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture, [and]metamorphosis that is the migrant condition from which I believe can be derived a metaphor for all humanity" (*Imaginary Homelands* 394). Homi Bhabha added that Salman Rushdie, in writing *The Satanic Verses* from a cosmopolitan and postcolonial perspective, had produced "a text for our times" (*Critical Fictions* 63).

What then is cultural hybridity? Cultural hybridity is a challenge to the homogeneity of identity. But cultural hybridity is also an unpredictable negotiation of difference that erupts in the interstices between identities and cultures. In a post-*fatwa* essay called "In Good Faith," Rushdie argues that the mixing and mingling of people bring newness into the world:
Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it [italics in original]. (Imaginary Homelands 394)

There is, however, a lot of ambiguity about the concept of cultural hybridity, and not everybody thinks of the hybrid space as a dynamic, playful place for the mixing, fusion and interweaving of cultures. Monstrous hybrids and apocalyptic versions of hybridity are frequently grounded in the divided loyalties and the discontent of unaccommodated strangers or dispossessed populations. Moreover, exiles, refugees, and ethnic and linguistic minorities frequently resist hybridity as a form of unwelcome assimilation or homogenization. Moreover, native informants, guides and translators are often seen as interlopers and traitors.

Edward Said, who regards exile as a creative mind set, problematizes the concept of hybridity by subsuming it under exile and expatriation, and his representation of exile is, in its turn, informed by a sense of banishment. In Said’s reflections on exile, collected in Representations of the Intellectual, there is ambivalence. Although the exilic space of hybridity clearly is a dynamic state of being in Said, it is also a site of aching melancholy and displacement. Home is elsewhere. Among the dubious pleasures of exile, Said lists “those ... eccentric angles of vision that it can sometimes afford” (59), and “the pleasure of being surprised, of never taking anything for granted, of learning to make do in circumstances of shaky instability that would confound and terrify most people” and, finally “a double perspective that never sees things in isolation” (60). In a much earlier essay called “The Mind of Winter” (1984), Said explored the exiled mind set as just such a split in consciousness or as a disrupted subjectivity. Although this view also affords fresh perspectives and “originality of vision,” it never moves beyond Said’s notion of the exile as dual and split:
Seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land’ makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is contrapuntal. (Harper’s 55)

So there is both loss and gain here; and although no attempt at fusion is made, Said’s perspective is nonetheless highly mediated. Said’s exile therefore continues to exist “in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old” (49). As a result, the exile’s existence is anguished and his loyalties are divided. This is a melancholic space, for the exile is, writes Said, “beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another. Being skilled at survival becomes the main imperative, with the danger of getting too comfortable and secure constituting a threat that is constantly to be guarded against” (49). On the whole, Said’s exile is not an innovative bridge-builder, but a dissenter, and the problematic of group loyalty haunts his discourse on hybridity.

But, ultimately, it does not matter whether we, following Said, call the turbulent hybrid state “productive anguish” or cast it as free play and unpredictable movement across fixed boundaries. Regardless of whether hybridity is a process set in motion by dislocation or is theorized as a frontier experience or even as a border zone where multiple cultures must continually be negotiated, it challenges categorical thinking. The very presence of the stranger, as Edward Said observes about immigrants and unaccommodated exiles, “complicates the presumed homogeneity of the new society in which [he lives]” (50). Newness, then, arrives with the stranger.

**Linguistic and Cultural Hybridity**

There are many forms of hybridity, but the two basic forms are, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, linguistic hybrids and cultural hybrids. Following his linguistic turn, Bakhtin theorized hybridity as a linguistic intersubjective relation, and his concept of
hybridity is always an effect of language. Bakhtin’s model of linguistic hybrids corresponds closely to the concept of creolization, a fluid mixture of linguistic and cultural elements. As a hybrid practice, creolization stresses internal variations, diachronicity, and transformations, which is how Édouard Glissant frames creolization in his Poetics of Relation. In The Dialogic Imagination, linguistic hybridization always occurs as an event or situation, which takes place inside an utterance as this speech act is transformed into a double-voiced enunciation:

What is a hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (358)

Bakhtin also distinguishes between “organic hybrids” and “unintentional hybrids.” An organic hybrid is essentially a hybridized subject, which has internalized its alterity and made the process of “mixing” and “fusion” appear more “mute and opaque” or comfortable (360), while an unintentional hybrid is a displaced and uncomfortable subject in the process of coming to terms with its alterity by constructing a hybrid subject position. A hybrid recognizes that its identity is complex, and that there are several valid world views. Bakhtin’s cultural hybrids are linguistic innovators, since languages change primarily by hybridization, “by means of mixing of various languages” as we are spoken by others (358). A hybridized subject is therefore, according to Bakhtin, “pregnant with potential for new world views, with new ‘internal forms’ for perceiving the world in words” (360). Based on Mikhail Bakhtin and contra Ferdinand Saussure, cultures and languages are not rigid structures held in place by a set of fixed rules, but dynamic and unpredictable, often chaotic, even painful processes of creolization. In the Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha approaches hybridity from a slightly different angle, by positing it as a “disruption” of the present, and he suggests that the effects of this “insurgency” have to be translated or transformed into a new “past-present” relation:
the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such an act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (6)

Bhabha’s emphasis here falls on “present” both as actual presence and temporal proximity, and he disrupts the continuity of linear time by reinscribing past events into the present, making the past present and new.

In Poetics of Relation, Édouard Glissant evokes a world in which alterity creates an interworld, or a creolized chaos-monde, which braids together languages, traditions and cultures. This is a hybridized world that rejects the “clear transparency of classicism” and opts for “baroque derangements” of excess and opacity (91). In Glissant’s creolized world, which is fluid and open, there is a constant “chorus of intertextuality” and an “incessant symphony of languages” (112-18). According to Glissant, creolization follows “spiraling and redundant trajectories” (xv), and engenders endless transformations that flow from “excess,” “errancy,” and “chaos.” Thus Glissant’s poetics of relation constructs the third space of hybridity as a baroque assemblage of confluences based on the linguistic rule of usage which “senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters … and transforms” languages by incorporating marginality (94).

Salman Rushdie’s sprawling, polyphonic novels are linguistic hybrids in Glissant’s, Bakhtin’s and Bhabha’s sense in that they mix, gather and fuse various registers of English from the demotic to the sacred, from popular song lyrics to nursery rhymes, from advertising slogans to poetry. Rushdie’s intercultural heteroglossia both challenges and innovates the English language, as he constructs new compound words, deploys macaronesia, and makes allusions to the entire novelistic canon. He also folds glossolalia, jokes, and puns in several languages into his texts. As a result, his novels emit “dual reverberations,” that resonate differently for Western and Indian readers (Conversations 2). Cultural hybridity, then, is a fluid and unpredictable practice.
Hybridity’s Racial History

There is, in fact, “no single or correct concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes,” claims Robert Young in Colonial Desire (27). Nor is the current vogue enjoyed by the notion of cultural hybridity, in which culture modifies and mediates hybridity, a new phenomenon. Culture has always been implicated in the formation of nations, peoples and races. In the middle of the nineteenth century, at the height of the British Empire, the concept of hybridity became a complex counter-force to national cultures, and the very antithesis of the homogeneous nation, in that it implied adulteration, impurity and transgression, threatening to undo and displace what national cultures and traditions had demarcated. In fact, argues Young emphatically: “hybridity is the nineteenth century’s term” (5). That is, hybridity is not a blank slate, or a late twentieth century concept, and not ‘ours’ to use with impunity, since it is a relational and historically situated term. Yet the concept has been reactivated and redefined frequently. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, for example, the English increasingly began to define themselves as a hybrid race in order to distance themselves from the Germans, who, as Robert Young observes, after unification had begun to describe themselves as a nation of pure Teutons. As Young goes on to note, “the English responded to ever-increasing Prussian rivalry by flaunting hybridity as an English virtue” (17). Young draws attention to the homogenization inherent in identity formation by observing: “Whether merged or fused, the English did not transform themselves so easily into the imagined community of a homogeneous national identity, and it became increasingly common in the nineteenth century for the English to invoke Defoe’s account of ‘that Het’rogeneous Thing, An Englishman’, and to define themselves as a hybrid or ‘Mongrel half-bred Race’” (17).

---

2 According to a study commissioned by the University of the Åland Islands (Ålands Högskola) in 1989, called “Självstyrelserregion och Minoriteter i Europa” (Autonomous Regions and Minorities in Europe), the notion of ethnic minorities developed in the wake of industrialization and the formation of nation states in response to fears of cultural homogenization. According to Erik Allardt, only two European nation states lack territorialized linguistic and ethnic minorities, namely Iceland and Portugal. Erik Allardt, “Västeuropas Språkliga Minoriteter Under Olika Samhällsformer,” Självstyrelserregioner och Minoriteter i Europa (Marihamn [Finland]: Ålands Högskola, 1989) 15-24.
But this rather swift transformation of the notion of hybridity from degeneracy to an ambivalent figure of resistance to the levelling forces of nationalism did not occur without strange detours into the quagmire of racial ideologies and biological speculations, sometimes with ironic results. For example, the assertion by the nineteenth century anatomist Carl Vogt that “heterogeneous races have by internixture given rise to raceless masses, peoples which present no fixed character,” seems (albeit inadvertently) to call the whole notion of race into question (18). In fact, the ‘mongrelized Englishman’, pressed into service as an ambivalent figure of heterogeneity, remained a product of biology: a result of the intermingling of peoples, races and tribes throughout history. There was also a tendency to conflate nation with race and ethnicity, as in the common nineteenth century usage: the British race. By the middle of the nineteenth century, hybridity had already become the focus of intense racial and cultural anxieties and speculations; hybridity was now exclusively defined in relation to the colonial other. The key question was whether the hybrid progeny of an interracial union would be fertile or not. The pathological preoccupation with race, eugenics, and hybridity, concealed the hidden ideological agenda of the new race sciences to find a way “to keep the races apart” (and not to mix them) in order to prevent “the degeneration and decay incipient upon a ‘raceless chaos’” (25). In other words, the British Empire had come face to face with its colonial others and, as Young suggests, it was “through the category of race that colonialism itself was [now] theoretically focussed, represented and justified” (180). As a result, the concept of race soon became a floating signifier, shot through with contradictions, as Young observes:

Paradoxically these ‘raceless masses’ which attain no new species through hybridization threaten to erase the discriminations of difference: the naming of human mixture as ‘degeneracy’ both asserts the norm and subverts it, undoing its terms of distinction, and opening up the prospect of the evanescence of ‘race’ as such. Here, therefore, at the heart of racial theory, in its most sinister, offensive move, hybridity also maps out its most anxious, vulnerable site: a fulcrum at its edge and center where [racism’s] dialectics of injustice, hatred and oppression can find themselves effaced and expunged. (19)
Seen through the lens of the late nineteenth century, to be “raceless” and lacking a “fixed character” was no doubt a frightening prospect, signifying a loss of identity and secure cultural moorings. Hybridity was no longer a valorized counter-concept. In retrospect, however, the notion of England as a hybridized nation constitutes a breathtaking leap into the postmodern condition of undecidability and heterogeneity *avant la lettre*. But in reality the notion of hybridity was, as Young suggests, used as an alibi to occlude the ugly political reality of colonialism: its “injustice, hatred and oppression.” Moreover, Young’s exploration shows that colonial racism was an intensely dialectical practice fuelled by a conflictual desire, alternating between the poles of attraction and repulsion. Thus the colonial origin of hybridity, which, as he puts it, “shows the connections between the racial categories of the past, and contemporary cultural discourse,” will continue to haunt the contemporary concept of cultural hybridity turning hybridity into a racist term (27). Thus, in reactivating the racialized concept of hybridity as cultural hybridity, we are doomed to reiterate and reinforce racism. Young argues that, “hybridity repeats and reproduces the sites of its own cultural production whose discordant logic manifests itself in structural repetitions as structural repetitions” (27). In other words, Young wants to deny cultural hybridity a safe harbour as an ostensibly innocent form of culturalism by marking the term as inherently racist. The postcolonial coupling of hybridity with culture, then, does not set the concept free, and his reading of culture shows culture to be as inflected by race, and as “divided against itself” as is hybridity (53), since the modern concept of culture also inscribes “its disavowed cultural other within itself” (93). Cultural hybridity thus remains a fatally flawed concept for Young. In a different context, however, he observes that there is no single concept of hybridity, and that some colonial hybrid practices, theorized as forms of resistance, did in fact manage to disrupt colonial power. The yoking together of hybridity and culture will nonetheless amplify the racism of both terms argues Young:

Culture has always marked cultural difference by producing the other; it has always been comparative, and racism has always been an integral part of it: the two are inextricably clustered together, feeding off and generating each other. Race has always been culturally constructed. Culture has always been racially constructed. (54)
What Young seems to suggest is that cultural hybridity, since it inevitably reinscribes racism, will be emptied of its critical force to resist and challenge the racist legacy of colonialism, since it is already implicated and tainted by this legacy. At the same time, he takes cultural hybridity to task for its lack of history, and suggests that the very practice of cultural hybridity occludes the fact that it carries a racist legacy. Either way, hybridity and culture are hopelessly compromised terms. How does he arrive at this rather convoluted conclusion? Is the vicious circle an effect of Young’s concept of “colonial desire” through which he deconstructs hybridity? His own conceptual coupling fuses the dialectics of colonial racism with Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of desire, turning Young’s term into a virtual desiring machine. Hybridity, as a result, becomes a split, and not a double concept, which is constituted by a lack in the desiring subject, with the racialized colonial other posited as the abject object of desire—a desire that incidentally can never be satisfied—only temporarily displaced in an endless and unsurpassable dialectic of same and other. Thus it seems to me that it is Young’s own dialectic that locks cultural hybridity into a rather tight spot. On the one hand, hybridity is a fluid, yet unnamed, excluded middle term in a dialectic of race and culture; on the other, it is an unsurpassable dialectic of same and other which is circumscribed by culture and race. In fact, Young emphatically denies even the possibility of a third term, arguing that hybridity “can never in fact be third, because as a monstrous inversion, a miscreated perversion of its progenitors, it exhausts the differences between them” (23). Strong words, indeed, and a usage which ironically repeats and reinscribes the language of scientific racism. As an unrepentant dialectician, Young has to bring the free-floating and fluid notion of hybridity under control since, as he observes, “hybridity can make difference into sameness and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer different” (26). The conclusion here seems to be that hybridity does not only transform, but homogenizes.

Young counters these tendencies by invoking closure in order to keep the notion of hybridity fixed and locked into its colonial context where he wants it to remain. In doing so, he not only reveals his own anxieties about the amorphous qualities of cultural hybridity, but he also turns his own discourse of colonial desire into a totalizing and
hegemonic one. Yet, ironically, while scientific racism ultimately did not manage to fuse species and race in order to prove that biological hybrids (or mongrels) were indeed infertile, Young now tries a similar move by conflating race with culture (and implicitly hybridity with biology) in order to question the concept of cultural hybridity and turn it into a sterile concept. Does Young’s preemptive strike actually succeed in fixing, closing down, and emptying cultural hybridity of its critical force? In view of his stated concept of hybridity as fluid, it would be ironic indeed if it did. But Young’s conception of hybridity is, in fact, antithetical to fluidity. His analyses are inherently materialistic in that hybridity manifests itself either written on the body, or it produces a new, stable form or hard surface. Frequently it manifests itself as the product of a sexual union and it is a “resolutely heterosexual category” (26). His favoured metaphors are: “amalgamation” (17); “merger” (17); “fusion or assimilation” (17); “synergetism” (24); “palimpsest” and “grafting” (173); “layered” (174). The process of hybridization is conceptualized as a dialectic involving both a reduction and a splitting—“making differences into sameness” and “turning sameness into differences”—and their inversions—“forcing a single entity into two or more parts” and “a severing of a single object into two” (26). There is also a mimetic quality to Young’s notion of hybridity, yet it is not an essentialist entity since it transforms or covers the old forms. But creolization is, for example, theorized as a fusion that “creates a new form which can then be set against the old form, of which it is partly made up” and would suggest mimesis (25). Ironically, this is a qualification that would seem to imply that hybridity does not deny its origins and has not “slipped out of the mantle of its past” (25). Other forms of hybridization veer into chaos, as in Vogt’s “raceless chaos,” since they do not manifest themselves or produce a new and palpable stable form, “but a restless, uneasy, interstitial hybridity” and a dizzying “radical heterogeneity, discontinuity—the permanent revolution of forms” (25). Young’s criticism, which is very circular, can be boiled down to three issues. 1. Hybridity is an inherently revisionist practice: it transforms old forms and produces new ones, which are unstable and unpredictable and can spin out of control. 2. Hybridity is a form of forgetting and a distraction: it does not want to remember its racist past; it transforms and dislocates it instead. Yet it is doomed to repeat it endlessly, since it carries this legacy within. 3. Hybridity is capable of homogenizing differences: it can turn differences into sameness.
How then can one break this circular argument? Can the legacy of racism be negotiated otherwise? Should cultural hybridity, perhaps, find itself another name, since hybridity, as well as culture and nation, is adulterated by racism? Is it even possible to break the circle of repetition, or what Young calls “the hybrid commerce of colonialism” (182)? I would argue that cultural hybridity as a relational limit condition is not possible without differentiations. As a precondition, cultural hybridity requires differences and distinctions to displace and reterritorialize. Thus the very condition of its hyphenated possibility lies in-between the origins and affirmations of culture and its negations and distortions. In other words: cultural hybridity does not, as Young suggests, allow us to “remain unaware of how much [colonial] otherness both formed and still secretly informs our present” (179). What it does do is open up new ways of negotiating between the past and the future. If, however, it is to be defined as a racist term that belongs to the nineteenth century, it will be fossilized, and become useless. Young’s argument, then, seems to be directed towards a postmodern deployment of hybridity, rather than the practice itself. Ultimately, Young’s argument is not with hybridity per se, but with postmodern notions of undecidability, unpredictability and uncertainty, which also inform the practices of cultural hybridity. To find another name to describe the practice of cultural hybridity, would be both to deny and avoid taking responsibility for its racist legacy, and I would argue that its real effectiveness as a critical term depends on recognizing and confronting, rather than denying and suppressing that legacy. What will keep cultural hybridity relevant as a critical term is not a new name, but a negation of the racist practices of the past committed in the name of hybridity. Such a negation of the structures of racism, past and present, will not only break the cycle of repetition, but broaden the scope of the concept. Young has, in effect, provided a text which allows cultural hybridity to revisit its past in order to redeem itself.

With Stuart Hall I will argue that ultimately culture is a struggle over meanings, “a struggle that takes place over and within the sign.” Thus every sign “must be and is made to mean” (Grossberg 157). Hybridity and culture, then are floating signifiers, which in Hall’s sense can be recoded and rearticulated: made to mean, and not fixed to a
meaning. Moreover, the narrative of cultural hybridity always inscribes the boundary it is about to cross, before it transforms or dissolves it. Thus identities can be contested, set in motion, and transformed.

**Hybridity and Identity**

What then is a hybrid subject position? Essentially, it is a subject caught between two cultures that has to learn to speak from both sides of the boundary. It is also a subject that knows it could be constituted otherwise. From a hybrid perspective, subjectivity is relational, and emerges from a complex negotiation of alterity, which is in Said’s sense "contrapuntal" yet mediated by the boundary. It does not replace identity, but sets identities in motion. When Foucault, in the introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, states: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same” (17), he throws his own notion of a stable, fixed identity into crisis, and begins to think instead about subjectivity as a lifelong process of exploration and fluidity akin to Julia Kristeva’s *subject-in-process*. In doing so he echoes the ontological dilemma faced by the protagonists in the novels I will discuss. Bharati Mukherjee, in particular, constructs a series of fluid identities, which her protagonists shed before assuming new ones as they insert themselves into the host culture. In contrast, Michael Ondaatje turns identities into ambiguous sites, and his protagonists resist the pressure to “fit in.” By declining to make an either/or choice, Ondaatje’s protagonists suggest that the process of becoming cannot be arrested or fixed in a single identity but must be negotiated and is open-ended. Thus, in denying his characters any kind of static or authentic identity, Ondaatje underwrites Foucault’s suggestion that “[m]aybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are” (*Foucault Reader* 22). Michel Foucault here signals that identities and self-identifications, secure though they may seem, are to be actively resisted to make room for “new forms of subjectivity” (*Foucault Reader* 27). The fact that the translation of the latter text records Foucault as using the relative pronoun “what” rather than the personal pronoun “who” (a use which he did not shy away from using in the earlier text), not only signals a rejection of enclosed identities, but suggests that identities have the potential to become forms of imprisonment. In *The Ground Beneath*
Her Feet, Salman Rushdie begins to explore the notion of autopoiesis, and creates virtual kaleidoscopes, which capture the tenor of the times, as does the catalogue of the many self-inventions of his shape-shifter Vina Apsara. In the novel, Rushdie’s Goddess of rock ‘n’ roll is eulogized as:

Professor Vina and Crystal Vina, Holy Vina and Profane Vina, Junkie Vina and Veggie Vina, Women’s Vina and Vina the Sex Machine, Barren-Childless-Tragic Vina and Traumatized-Childhood-Tragedy Vina, Leader Vina who blazed a trail for a generation of women and Disciple Vina.... She was all of these and more, and everything she was, she pitched uncompromisingly high. There was no Self-Effacing Vina to set against Vina of the Screamingly Stretched Extremes (339).

Identities then can be created and publicly performed, even used to stage a personal adventure. This is a form of narcissism that reduces identity to a plaything: a role played for the other. In *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, Emmanuel Levinas warns that identity conceived as exteriority (or a projection) ultimately means that “[n]o one is identical to himself. Beings have no identity. Faces are masks.... I am as if enclosed in my portrait” (24). Yet the Other in Levinas is irreducible to understanding, and any attempt to conceive or grasp the Other is an appropriation which “carries out an act of violence and of negation” by enclosing the Other in a concept (10). In Emmanuel Levinas it is the face-to-face relation (constituted in speech or “the saying”) that structures the relation to the Other, since only the face that speaks signifies otherwise. Only as interlocutors do we approach the person behind the mask as a singularity, but paradoxically only to discover the multiplicity and alterity of the Other, whether as friend and foe. In Levinas, it is the face of the Other that demands respect for his or her alterity, and the face also calls the subject to responsibility and justice since “the face that looks at me affirms me” (34). In Levinas’s double articulation, then, facing up to the other is also a way of seeing ourselves as singular, chosen, and unique. This is the moment, which Levinas refers to as the epiphany of the Other, when we discover the freedom inherent in affirming, rather than limiting or denying one another.

What then can be gained by being unsettled and risking change in response to the alterity of the Other? Rejection of and indifference to the other have long been the norm.
Heidegger’s bleak existential comment in *Being and Time*: “everyone is the other, and no one is himself” (120), posits authenticity as the basis for a genuine self, and in doing so reveals a world-view devoid of human interaction in the formation of subjectivity. Heidegger’s quest for authenticity, which directs us to search for a true self inside ourselves, or a “self which has explicitly grasped itself” (121), dismisses the encounter with the other as nothing more than an act of acting. In Emmanuel Levinas’s reading of Heidegger, the meaning of *Being* also turns on authenticity, defined as “answerability.” This, claims Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, is an existential resolution, “of setting out to answer for one’s very being on one’s own,” presumably in the solitude of sameness (xvii). In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno suggests that Heidegger’s quest for authenticity is “an elitist claim” (75). Adorno frames this aspect of Heidegger’s *jargon* as “that thinking oneself superior which marks people who elect themselves” (75), and “sells self-identity as something higher” (76). While Adorno’s forceful rejection of authenticity placed self-identity as a concept under erasure, other critics, Julia Kristeva among them, began to stress the role of the Other in subject formation, arguing that in order to actualize the self, we have to acknowledge the stranger since we are constantly required to be others for others, even others to ourselves.

The production of identities, then, is based on a two-valued logic, in which the underside of inclusion is exclusion. Thus identifications and differentiations can become potential “rituals of exclusions” (Foucault’s term), since identity formations also produce a Them. What then is the difference between identity and identification? A psychoanalytic definition of identity posits identity as construed by a subject that identifies itself by reference to an other, as does Julia Kristeva. In contrast, identification is a process whereby the subject recognizes itself as other (through a misrecognition in Lacan), which ultimately produces a split, speaking subject. But it is also possible to think of identification as a desire to be like the other, as a mimesis or even a narcissistic self-recognition in the other.

The postmodern subject may be a site of contestations, but it is certainly not as turbulent as the one that emerges from Freud’s theory of identification, which Diane Fuss
in Identification Papers describes as “a [subconscious] field of divisions, hostilities, rivalries, clashes and conflicts,” in which “the ego prevents open strife between the warring factions of the subject” by occupying “the space of a borderlander” (49). Although there are no correct or incorrect, legal or illegal, identifications in Freud’s unconscious borderland, Fuss’s telling metaphor of the ego on duty as a border patrol or gate keeper charged with expelling “wayward identifications,” does underscore the conflictual nature of all identifications. Moreover, it depicts this border negotiation as a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion that simultaneously creates and keeps strangers at bay:

The ego patrols the borders of identity by means of a policing mechanism of its own: identifications. Those objects that cannot be kept out are often introjected, and those objects that have been introjected are frequently expelled—all by means of the mechanism of identification. Identification thus makes identity possible. (49)

Identity then follows identification, and the objects of identification are screened, fixed and policed by the ego. In other words, all identities are shored up and held in place by mimetic or imaginary identifications. Agency in the subject then has to be theorized either as resistance to being subjected to an identity, or as the subject’s right to fashion its subjectivity through an ongoing process of identifications. From a transcultural perspective, subjectivity is relational, and agency emerges from a complex negotiation of alterity, which in Bhabha’s phrase, also implies the possibility of “a differential reading of the other” (Location of Culture 31-32), while identity typically is negatively marked as homogeneity produced through a problematic negative dialectic of exclusion and inclusion.

But the term identity may have become overdetermined, as Judith Butler argues in her essay “Collected and Fractured,” in which she observes that “what we expect from the term identity [is] cultural specificity, and ... on occasion we even expect identity and specificity to work interchangeably” (Identities 441). There is also, as Diane Fuss observes, “an equivalency of subjectivity and identification [in that] the subject is the sum of its identifications,” while there is “a silent presumption” that all “identities
correspond [seamlessly] to identifications” (6), when many (mis)identifications may in fact go into the formation of an identity. The ambiguity stems from the fact that subjects are typically negotiated through the lens of one identity at a time through the optics of difference. Moreover, identity is produced as the more public/external entity (*res publica*)—which is more easily recognized, sanctioned or challenged—while subjectivity is a more private/interior and occluded space (*res privata*). Such exteriority can, however, argues Judith Butler, be empowering since an identity makes the speaking subject more intelligible, locatable and responsible. By the same token, identities can deliberately be turned into utterly confusing and playful sites of complex misrecognitions by the subject. Since identities can be publicly recognized and affirmed, they can also be publicly challenged and refused. But an identity can also become a form of self-objectification. For it is clearly possible to become imprisoned in specific identities, particularly if one’s ethnicity, race or gender are constantly foregrounded.

If hybridity can throw identities into crisis, so can racialized passing. The practice of passing, which historically has been posited as a crossing over, can also be theorized as “passing for” (hence a form of mimicry) or “passing through”, depending on the race, gender, ethnicity, and the cultural context and trajectory of the passing subject.

According to Samira Kawash’s *Dislocating the Color Line*, the practices involved in the “cultural logic of race and passing,” ultimately revolve around the “circulation of contaminated copies,” not originals and copies (147). Is passing then a doubling or a splitting? That depends on how the bicameralism of passing is unpacked, and whether the “assumed whiteness” of the passing “black” subject is seen as a dilemma of doubling or as an identity crisis requiring an either/or splitting along a boundary.

Kawash’s reading of James Weldon Johnson’s novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), which chronicles the life of a man “named black” who passes for white is such a study. In her reading, Kawash notes that the narrator’s relation to his blackness is “as inauthentic as his relation to whiteness; rather than being both black and white, or either black or white, he is in fact neither. While he may copy whiteness and blackness, the copy is always contaminated by its very inauthenticity” (147). Having
diagnosed the protagonist’s bicalmer alienation, Kawash quickly turns the tables on traditional representations of passing and posits passing as a fluid concept, and not a crossing or trespassing from one identity to another, but an ongoing negotiation, which ultimately reveals the border to be artificial construct. In fact, she suggests that there is both an epistemological and ontological crisis in passing since,

there is no authentic, original identity that could be hidden or imitated; there are only copies and copies of copies that give the impression of originality. In effect, it is identity that follows from passing. Identity is not what we are, but what we are passing for. (147)

Based on this transposition, Kawash posits passing as a hybrid practice, but qualifies her diagnosis by adding: “[the] individual is not hybrid; rather hybridity constantly traverses the boundaries of the individual. Hence, hybridity appears for the racially constituted subject as that which cannot appear” (217). In other words, the hybridized passing subject successfully resists all representations. All distinctions become blurred, paradoxical and absurd since, “the body named as black passing for white is not what it appears to be,” and because in the act of passing, the “body exposes all appearance as absolutely disjoined from the being, the depth or invisible essence, that is supposed to be expressed, represented and reflected in appearance” (147). The passing subject, then, is never what it appears to be, since as a hybridized subject-in-passing it is uncontainable and constantly in the process of becoming. In her reading, passing is not based on a misrecognition, but race and identity are. Ultimately, in Kawash only a fluid subject position can accommodate the condition of not belonging, of being neither/nor or both and neither.

But identities are also produced for us as normative social categories and formations through which, following Althusser, society begins to interpellate or hail the subject, which is startled into recognizing and accepting its assigned identity. Similarly, in the disciplinary society, which Foucault dissects in Discipline and Punish, identities are produced as categories through a process which “ceaselessly characterizes, classifies, and specializes” by means of “surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification.” These disciplinary regimes are minutely calibrated categories which
normalize, homogenize and imprison us in "systems of limit and exclusion" (209-12). These are all assigned identities which the subject can either incorporate or attempt to resist. But there is also a concomitant process of "subjectivization" at play, which Jacques Rancière defines as a process of "disidentification or declassification" through which a subject is stripped of a previously available political identity, such as a working class identity or citizenship (Identities in Question 67). This is a process through which outcasts or non-beings are produced since the subject can no longer be named and identified. To be subjectivized is to become spectralized, invisible, and placed beyond identities and outside history.

Hybridity, the Nation and Globalization

In The Location of Culture, Homi Bhabha locates the promise of agency for marginalized and historically displaced postcolonial subjects within the interstices of the discourse of modernity. Bhabha wants to find a way of translating and reinscribing submerged colonial struggles, and he turns to cultural hybridity as a possible means to his ends. From a postcolonial perspective, Bhabha focuses on the "struggle[s] of translation" occurring in "events that are outside the 'great events' of history," and located in the split between modernity as an "event and enunciation" (242). As I read it, it is in this split, or in the interval between the actual unfolding of history as a series of contested events and the official narration of colonial history, that Bhabha locates postcolonial hybridity, as a submerged spectre and spectacle of the not-one, and a belated source of agency for the disrupted colonial subject. In doing so, he also goes in search of a site from which postcolonial agency can emerge. The postcolonial subject can now articulate a hybridized narrative, which includes what was lost, buried and excluded, thus reconnecting a new past with the present. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, in rearticulating themselves across space and time, postcolonial subjects can "finally [become] what they are" (Grossberg 143).

Bhabha’s designation of hybridity as a postcolonial subject position, has implications for all theories of subject formation, and in particular for transnational subjects. Mass migration and the forces of globalization, which are felt everywhere,
although at varying intensities, have begun to render the old borders permeable, and the
country state, or to use Bhabha’s term “the narration of the nation,” is now in the process
of losing its founding characteristic of homogeneity. Yet in “Freedom’s Basis in the
Indeterminate,” Bhabha argues that the “right to signify” will always be contested within
the confines of the host nation, and he suggests that migrants can typically speak only of
their own experience and from the margins (Identity In Question 51). Moreover, as
Derrida suggests in Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, for transnational writers there is
also the ancient impasse between “the host’s duty (devoir) of hospitality” and “the
guest’s right (droit) to hospitality” to overcome (5). Bhabha argues that migrants may
actually have to wrestle “the right to signify” away from those who would deny their
alterity, and contest their agency as sources of different meanings and values (Identity in
Question 49). In other words, the right to signify differently has to be won from within
the nation and, in the case of the writers I discuss, this is also how the battle has been
won. It has, however, been a long and difficult process for all of them. Bharati
Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie have all been challenged from within
the host nation about their transnational status as writers.

Bharati Mukherjee lived in Canada between 1966 and 1980, and while living in
Montreal and Toronto she wrote The Tiger’s Daughter (1971) and Wife (1975), novels
which fictionalize her own transculturation as a passage from the old world to the new.
Mukherjee recalls that she was asked in an interview “How can you call yourself a
Canadian writer if you didn’t play in snow as a child?” (Saturday Night 39). In the same
article she ironically notes that, “an Indian slips out of invisibility in this culture at
considerable peril to body and soul” (39). Mukherjee here refers to the unfortunate
multicultural coupling of “visible minority” which in Mukherjee’s experience turns the
equivocal term “visibility” into a challenge to national cohesion, and makes the alterity of
the migrant into a target for racism. In the foreword to Darkness (1985), she notes that as
a Canadian she was expected to straddle the border and think of herself as an expatriate
Indian, and she argues that the attendant ambivalence about belonging also informed her
writing. “In my fiction and in my Canadian experience, ‘immigrants’ were lost souls, put
upon and pathetic” (1). In 1980, Bharati Mukherjee abruptly left Canada for the United
States, and in the introduction to Darkness, she ironically notes that Canada “proudly boasts of its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation” (2). In leaving Canada, she shed her ambivalent self-identification as an expatriate Indian, and opted for ‘assimilation’ as an American.

In Michael Ondaatje’s case, the criticism has not been so much about perceived or imposed divided loyalties as about his subject matter and its relationship to his ethnicity. The Canadian critic Arun P. Mukherjee, has, for example, repeatedly taken Michael Ondaatje to task for being neither Sri Lankan nor Canadian in his writing, or too international. For example, she observes that Ondaatje’s success as a poet “has been won largely through sacrifice of ... his past, and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada” (Oppositional Aesthetics 113). Arun Mukherjee argues that in “remaining silent about his experience and dislocation” which “is generally known to be a traumatic experience ... Ondaatje also stifles ‘the voice of otherness’ in himself” (65). In other words, Ondaatje is not ethnic enough. In a subsequent essay, the same critic took issue with Ondaatje’s postmodern fictional autobiography Running in the Family (1982) in which she argues that Ondaatje “exoticizes” Sri Lanka (Oppositional Aesthetics 101). Arun Mukherjee also notes that in Coming Through Slaughter “the Buddy Bolden of Ondaatje has no colour” (101). Ironically, Arun Mukherjee confirms Homi Bhabha’s observation that displaced writers can only speak about their “own experience” with impunity and must do so from the margins.

Although Salman Rushdie has family ties to Pakistan in addition to his Indian heritage, and is adept at negotiating his divided loyalties, the hostile reception of The Satanic Verses (1988), a novel that explores both the immigrant experience and his loss of faith as a Muslim, threw Rushdie’s own identity into crisis. In an article in The Observer (1988) following the fatwa and the riots in Bradford, England, he wrote: “This for me, is the saddest irony of all ... that I should see my book burned, largely unread, by the people it’s about, people who might find some pleasure and much recognition in its pages” (Critical Fictions 96). This was a cruel reception for a writer who was attempting to forge an imagined community based on what Rushdie perceived to be their shared
migrant condition. Thus, any self-identification or identity can be problematic for the intercultural writer since admittance can be blocked. In an essay, Rushdie ironically observes, “in my own case, I have constantly been asked whether I am British or Indian. The formulation ‘Indian-born British’ writer has been invented to explain me” (Imaginary Homelands 67). In 2000, Rushdie relocated to New York, where he now lives. The lure of the giant American melting pot has finally become irresistible to Rushdie, the migrant, and the United States also figures prominently in several of his recent novels. The Ground Beneath Her Feet, for example, which he calls his “first American novel,” is mostly set in the United States, as is Fury, a novel which chronicles a life crisis and has a protagonist who seeks sanctuary in the United States.

In Outside the Teaching Machine, Gayatri Spivak argues that “the main agenda” of the “struggle of the marginal in metropolitan space” is to “explode the fantasmatic ‘whiteness’ of the metropolitan nation” (64). Although Spivak approves of what has come to be known as “strategic essentialism”—or a strategic blindness in evoking ethnicity—her implicit message in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, “a book that forages in the crease between global postcoloniality and postcolonial migrancy” (373), is that immigrant writing ought to concern itself with the class struggle of the marginal in metropolitan space. Yet metropolitan migrants are also taken to task for portraying “the world as immigrant” (Spivak’s term), and for exoticizing their country of origin or themselves. Thus, intercultural writers often find themselves in a double-bind, and it is interesting to note that Salman Rushdie remains hesitant about his own right or ability to inhabit non-Indian characters. In an interview he observes: “It will be some time before I can think of having a non-Indian leading character or major characters” (Conversations 15). In contrast, Bharati Mukherjee, who regards herself as an American writer in the immigrant tradition, has been able to cross this barrier. In The Holder of the World (1993), her narrator as well as her main protagonist are American. Of the three writers I discuss, Michael Ondaatje has shown the least hesitation in this regard, but his characters are often marginal nomads, vagrants or outcasts, or characters he refers to in The English Patient (1992) as rootless “international bastards” (251). The major theme of Ondaatje’s
fiction is in fact the unstable, ambiguous and enigmatic nature of all identities. Thus, there are still intercultural boundaries to cross.

As a challenge to hegemonic discourses, Bhabha’s theory of hybridity raises questions of the value of resistance and disruption as a means to effect change beyond the colonial context. Central to Bhabha’s theory is the colonial mimic, a hybrid who disrupts and disturbs colonial representations. In the current debate over the globalization of culture, it could be argued, as does Simon Critchley, that resistance and disruption as hybrid tactics of mimicry ultimately may end up reaffirming the inevitability of the process of globalization, perhaps even speeding it up, by not staging a forceful enough challenge to it (Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity 138-9). Or, in Alberto Moreiras’s words: “hybridity might in the present come close to becoming, on its performative side, a sort of ideological cover for capitalist reterritorializations” (Exhaustion of Difference 267). On this logic, all hybrid practices signal a willingness to negotiate only minor modifications, since hybridity produces contingent transformations. Globalization is typically regarded as a powerful levelling and homogenizing force—usually as the Americanization of global culture with the attendant dominance of the English language. But global culture can also be posited as a fluid and contingent assembly of unfinished and competing meanings, hence as a third space of hybrid negotiations in-between cultures. On the logic of Bhabha’s analysis of the colonial situation, global culture is a hegemonic discourse, and globalization a levelling force, which cunning hybrid practices such as mimicry can disrupt and subvert, that is: hybridize.

The analogy between global culture and the culture of colonialism underscores the real value of Bhabha’s pioneering project, which posits acts of resistance as hybridizing counter-forces in the face of hegemonic cultures. That is, hybrid practices can be used as multiple sites of resistance to an ostensibly hegemonic discourse, particularly since Bhabha’s theories inflected through the aperetic logic of the double-bind, also reveal that global culture may prove to be not quite as hegemonic as it is perceived to be. What is more, his theories reveal that the impact of acts of hybridized resistance have real effects. Thus every engagement has a value in that it inscribes global culture otherwise as
an open-ended and fluid hybrid assemblage. This is, of course, what Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje, and Salman Rushdie do by folding the margins into the middle, to create a third space in which the formerly excluded become transformers of culture, producing unsettling distortions and unexpected metamorphoses. Yet from the perspective of the nation, cultural hybridity is frequently seen as a contagion rather than a source of cultural renewal.

According to Édouard Glissant, creolization will always meet resistance. Yet in his Poetics of Relation, Glissant confidently argues that the turbulent and chaotic practice of creolization will ultimately produce a new interdependent world, in which relational practices will extend and enlarge human relations. Moreover, he posits the process of hybridization as an “entanglement” and “interweaving of cultures” and intimates that a creolized global culture will likely arrive “by stealth.” He predicts that “it will be a long time before we finally recognize [creolization] as the newness of the world not setting itself up as anything new” (159-60). Thus, Bruno Latour’s suggestion to Michel Serres in Conversations on Science, Culture and Time, that “if philosophy can’t go beyond the limit of the knowable, let literature go [there]” is heeded by Mukherjee, Ondaatje and Rushdie in their explorations of the chaos and turbulence unleashed by mass migration and the forces of globalization (73).

Since global culture is disseminated and amplified by new information technologies, closed borders enacted in the name of cultural nationalism will no longer produce closure as certainty and predictability. Yet the economic and cultural upheaval of globalization turns the politics of multiplicity and cultural hybridity into a problematic practice. However, in The Exhaustion of Difference, Alberto Moreiras observes that cultural hybridity, in theory, holds out the possibility of moving beyond “dwelling in ambivalence” and uncertainty into “a politics of cultural hybridity” or “a political culture of hybridity,” and if “hybridity thinking” replaces identity thinking, this turn may ultimately effect a paradigm shift (289). As Bakhtinian genres, the discourse of hybridity can also be conflated with the novel, and national traditions with the epic, and the stage would then be set “for a lengthy battle for the novelization of the other genres,” as
Bakhtin saw the global paradigm shift happening in “Epic and Novel” (Dialogic Imagination 39). How then are transcultural subjects constituted? How do they translate themselves from one culture to another? How can they speak otherwise? What kind of resistance do they meet?

Any cultural translation is a formidable undertaking, which can be gleaned from an analogy with Walter Benjamin’s juxtaposition of original (art) and copy (reproduction) in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” and his concept of aura in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” both collected in Illuminations, in which photography stands for copy and painting for original. In comparing the two art forms, Benjamin observes ironically that, “to the eyes that will never have their fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty,” adding that in this crisis of perception photography is decisively implicated in “the decline of the aura” (187). In the essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin defines aura as a “unique manifestation of distance,” and therefore an effect of age, depth and unapproachability. The aura, then, is a distinction of aesthetic discrimination and taste, based on belonging and pedigree. But in his essay on mechanical reproduction,” he begins to undermine the concept of aura in earnest by ironically connecting it to concepts of authenticity, tradition and uniqueness as well as ritual and cult, before taking issue with the notion of aura as a form of sentimentality. Art is now resolutely assigned “cult value” as a form of magic, while the reproducibility of photography becomes a mark of modernity, progress and accessibility:

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (224)

In many respects the advent of mechanical reproduction provides a close analogy to the contemporary globalization of culture, which permits expressions of culture to be
disseminated and transformed—not just duplicated—across cultures and national boundaries. From the vantage point of the migrant, however, the issue of accessibility to the host culture is the most urgent one. Understandably, the strange customs and the hidden codes of a foreign culture will initially appear inaccessible to a foreigner, surrounded as they are by an impenetrable aura of authenticity. As Benjamin suggests, these sentimental cultural fortifications are both counterproductive and counterintuitive on the part of the host culture. Or as Bhabha argues in “Freedom’s Basis in the Indeterminate”: “Culture as a strategy for survival is both transnational and translational” (Identity in Question 48). In other words, it is the value of reproducibility, not authenticity, that is the crucial one since all cultures are ultimately performed and transformed, and unless they can be reproduced and disseminated to and by outsiders, they will remain closed and exotic entities—literally frozen in time by that aura of an uncontaminated original. A politics of dissemination, then, requires conditions of translatability, while a politics of authenticity, underpinned by notions of purity, which distinguishes between original and copy, will result in cultural stasis. A culture will rapidly become meaningless unless it can be reproduced, since all meanings depend on reproducibility. In fact, the vitality of any culture depends on exchanges (or barter) since as Adorno observes in Negative Dialectics, closed systems which can neither be reproduced nor accessed are bound to be finished (27).

Similarly, all national traditions can also be regarded as strange forms of ritual or magic, or powerful discourses which effectively bar access to those who are not already initiated, for as Benjamin observes, “cult value does not give way without resistance” (Illuminations 225). All national traditions, or “narrations of the nation,” as Bhabha names them, are hegemonic narratives in Gramsci’s use of the term, since they are discourses we inhabit, and as Néstor García Canclini observes in Hybrid Cultures, all hegemonic discourses demand compliance with “a system of ritualized practices” which leave out the foreign as an element which “challenges the consecrated order and promotes skepticism” (113). Moreover, national traditions are full of shibboleths for, adds Canclini: “Every group that wants to differentiate itself and affirm its identity makes tacit or hermetic use of identification codes that are fundamental to internal cohesion to
protect itself from strangers” (111). In dissecting the discourse of identity and origin in Monolingualism of the Other, Derrida establishes that the foundational concepts embedded in the narrations of the nation state are: “birth as it relates to soil,” “a language called maternal” and “birth as it relates to blood” (13). All of them are concepts of inclusion/exclusion, and Derrida contrasts the markers of national belonging to his own “disordered” cultural identity as a diasporic postcolonial Algerian-Maghrebin-Jew living in France, issuing from a “disintegrated ‘community’, cut up and cut off” (55). Thus his state of non-belonging forces him to continuously construct, invent and improvise himself in a hybrid-hyphenated fashion. In fact, Derrida’s entire deconstructive project, which involves the dissection and dispersal of concepts that are founded on identity and origin, is in effect a hybrid practice, and Drucilla Cornell is surely correct when she suggests that deconstruction should be referred to as a philosophy of the limit.

In Colonial Desire, Robert Young observes that postcolonial discourse analysis has conclusively established that “[no] form of cultural dissemination is ever a one-way process whatever the prior [power] relation involved. A culture never repeats itself perfectly away from home. Any exported culture will in some way run amok, go phut or threaten to run into mumbo-jumbo as it dissolves in the heterogeneity of the elsewhere” (174). In other words, cultures have always imported, mixed and transformed “borrowings” from other cultures. Thus cultural dissemination inevitably produces cultural hybridity; its transnational effects can, however, be contested, affirmed or denied. In light of Bakhtin and Bhabha it would seem clear that all intercultural translations have to be thought of as processes of carrying over features from one culture to another, cultural features which in the process of translation are transformed and acquire new meanings. As a cultural practice, translation is a form of hybridization, which, as Bakhtin argues, creates new continuities as the foreign elements are integrated into the narrative of the nation. Uncannily, the foreign invades the familiar and makes it more complex, as it transgresses, overlaps, cross-cuts, and criss-crosses binary divisions such as familiar/strange, inside/outside and original/copy since intercultural translations are defamiliarizations which take place in the doubling space of hybridity. How then are
these translations actually routed, carried over and folded into the fabric of the other culture?

**The Poetics of Hybridity: Mimicry, Translation, and Doubleness**

The Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, whose dialogic theories are always underpinned by a stubborn refusal to synthesize and appropriate the other, provides plenty of liminal meeting spaces where understanding is a “creative” and “mutually enriching” event. When these mutually enriching encounters occur “[t]wo points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically” (360), as he explains in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Thus, Bakhtin marks the border or threshold as a potentially creative double-bind, as does Derrida.

Central to Bakhtin’s dialogic universe is his notion of “creative understanding,” which is a mutually enriching, open, and non-hegemonic encounter with the other. For Bakhtin, a dialogue involves a meeting between two others—not a self and another—and the meeting place is marked by alterity, situated outside and beyond the self. In a letter to the editors of *Novyi Mir* collected in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Bakhtin states that, “outsideness is a most powerful factor” in understanding, as is the position of the observer, who must be “located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture” (7).

What Bakhtin sets up is not a dialectic (since that would involve either a reductive synthesis or a contradiction broken apart), but the conditions for creating new meanings through dialogue. To do so, he dissolves the double-bind in the opposition between the critical eye of the outsider looking in, and the presumed blind spots of the insider looking out, thus swiftly turning both participants into singular others in relation to each other. In Michael Ondaatje’s novel *Anil’s Ghost*, an asymmetrical relation of Otherness is problematized and realigned to create a more symmetrical Bakhtinian relation: “On the first day [of school] he was called native by a classmate. He stood up at once and
announced to the teacher, ‘I’m sorry to say this, sir, but Roxborough doesn’t know who I am. He called me a ‘native’. That’s the wrong thing to do. He’s the native and I am the visitor to the country’” (141). In a decolonizing move, Ondaatje here turns the tables on the colonizer to produce a mutual othering on postcolonial terms. How symmetrical the postcolonial relation is turns on how the participants in the dialogue (and the reader) construe “native” and “visitor.” In any case, the realignment sets the stage for mutual incomprehension, since in Ondaatje as in Bakhtin, all identities are sites of contestation, and alterity is an unassailable value. In Bakhtin, mutual alterity is a prerequisite for creative understanding, which is a movement from fixed positions. Thus, to do away with situated knowledges or cultural assumptions, would be to posit the participants as essentially the same, and without differences no creative understanding is possible, nor is the transformative and creative process of hybridity, which in Bakhtin depends on negotiating and recognizing such differences as infinite possibilities with totally unforeseen outcomes and effects. In Bakhtin, the alternative is closure or monologues.

According to Bakhtin, all texts/subjects (there are no objects) and all interpreters, observers, participants are chronotopically (Greek for chronos-time and topos-place) marked, and for Bakhtin these mutually enriching encounters occur across time and space as well as across cultures, and “each retains its own unity and open totality” (7), or otherness. The notion of openness is the operative one here:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (7)

Creative understanding, then, creates a third, hybrid meeting space, marked by heteroglossia and alterity. In this encounter, aspects of either culture are hybridized, or filtered through otherness, in the form of multiple, unfinalizable meanings. (It should come as no surprise that for Bakhtin the ultimate hybrid/third space is the novel!) In other words, difference produces difference and is predicated on and mediated by difference, since what is understood is not only dependent on difference, but is always altered by a chronotopically situated other:
We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign responds to us by revealing to us new aspects and new semantic depths. (7)

So the fact that as observers we are chronotopically marked, does not mean that in meeting the other we are held captive by our own alterity in relation to the other. On the contrary, our creative understanding of the other’s world and the meanings we construct from it, depend on recognizing outsideness as a strength, since “without one’s own [chronotopically marked] questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign” (7). Thus all utterances must be filtered through our own chronotope for us to understand, even notice them. In fact, argues Bakhtin, there are no valid meanings mediated by insideness since all understanding is conditioned by alterity and difference:

There exists a very strong, but one-sided and untrustworthy idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one’s own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture.... Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its own place in time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. (Speech Genres 6-7)

In Bakhtin’s dialogic model, then, understanding turns on difference and is situated outside the self and dependent on others. In fact, Bakhtin’s “creative understanding” posits hybridity as a form of intersubjectivity, and as a direct response to the alterity of the Other. In Bakhtin, all understanding is contextual, open-ended and contingent, and his subject is inter esse, or inter-est-ed in the other. Bakhtin’s inter-subjective understanding then flows from a keen interest and ethical curiosity in the other, and his participant-subject is both responsible and responsive. In Bakhtin’s symmetrical relationship between two singularities, understanding is not transformed into knowledge, which appropriates, distances or alters the Other. Instead, the meeting produces an infinite play of meanings, and these meanings belong to a separate intersubjective space of hybridity situated between the speakers. In Bakhtin the participants have to meet in good faith and risk rather than resist change. Thus the subject-object relation (whose Latin etymology implies sub- (under), jactus (to throw) and ob- (in front]) does not come into play in
Bakhtin since he does not *subject* the other to understanding or reify the other as a distant *object* of knowledge. In other words, in Bakhtin alterity is a given.

The Bakhtinian model is particularly useful as a theory of the creative potential of otherness, since it begins to explain under what conditions and in what forms, in Rushdie’s phrase, “newness enters the world” (*Imaginary Homelands* 396). Bakhtin then theorizes hybridity as a complex effect of alterity and, more importantly, locates it in a fluid third space of cultural transformations. As a result, following Bakhtin, hybridity is no longer a problematic excluded middle, since these intervals and gaps no longer harbour impossibilities, distortions or untruths, but new intersubjective and intercultural forms of creative understanding. Yet, even as a third in-between space, hybridity still requires an outside as well as an inside. For, paradoxically, its very non-identity depends on demarcations and differentiations. But the hybrid place for working out cultural differences across identities is not the self, the culture, the nation or the group. It is the *topos* of a dialogue, and an interval between identities.

Within the postcolonial framework it is Bhabha who most forcefully has championed the concept of cultural hybridity, which he characterizes as a negotiation across cultural boundaries that produces a double consciousness. Bhabha’s third space is located between the postcolonial present and the colonial past, and his articulation of hybridity owes a lot to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism in its most subversive and ironic form: hybridity as a disruptive force, in which two points of view contest each other inside a *single* utterance or a *monologue*. According to Bhabha, hybridization occurs when, *within* a monologic utterance, the voice of authority begins to break up to reveal the presence (or *trace*) of another subsumed voice: the voice of the colonial subject. This is when the monologue of power and authority stops and suddenly becomes *double-voiced*. Bhabha promptly seizes this rupture in the colonial monologue to transpose Bakhtin’s linguistic disruption of despotism to the colonial situation, framing it as a turning of the tables: as a performance which at times even suggests the Korjevean metaphor of “the enslaved master, and the unmastered slave” (*Location of Culture* 131). Bhabha traces the split in the discourse of authority back to colonial acts of mimicry, and
he suggests that the effects of mimicry cause the “signifiers of authority [to] ... become enigmatic” in a way which is both “less than one and double” (119). As a result, it is also a Lacanian space, a third locus, which is “neither my speech, nor [that of] my interlocutor” (184), adds Bhabha.

What then is the role of mimicry? In The Location of Culture, Bhabha variously describes hybridity as “a permeable boundary,” a temporary and strategic “melting together of self and an otherness,” which is not located on the outside of the self ... but on the inside, and also as “a hybrid displacing space” (44). Through his concept of mimicry as a spectacle, Bhabha brings the act of resistance down to the level of the colonial subject who deploys mimicry, a peculiar strategy of “duplicity” and “doubling,” to challenge and disrupt colonial authority (49). In doing so, Bhabha suggests that resistance to the colonial hegemony at least has the potential to produce split, discontinuous subjects prepared to assume political agency as colonial subjects through hybridized practices or acts of subordination. Bhabha then claims mimicry as a subversive and disruptive colonial practice, which creates an undecidable actor; a hybrid, which as Alberto Moreiras observes, is capable of “preempting the closure of any discursive position around either identity or difference” (Exhaustion of Difference 291).

Bhabha argues that hybridity is an effect of the colonial enunciation which produces rather than reflects the spectacle of mimicry. This occurs when mimicry is turned into a “contingent and liminal” site (179), and a process “by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience” (178). In this transcendental space of hybridity—which is neither the space of one nor the other—Bhabha posits mimicry as a cunning strategy and form of resistance which is also “a mode of appropriation” (120), and (following Lacan) “a form of camouflage, of being mottled” (121). Moreover, the temporary fusing of the colonial and the colonizer into an uncanny spectacle of duplicity makes the mimicking hybrid “uncontainable [and dangerous because mimicry] breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (116). Thus the crisis of colonial identity, brought on by mimicry, both reflects, distorts, and produces a warped mirror image since, “colonial specularity, doubly
inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and its doubling, the hybrid” (114). As a result, from the colonizer’s perspective, the most frightening aspect of mimicry is not its implicit challenge to colonial authority, but the objectification of the colonizer inherent in mimicry. As Derrida observes of miming in “The Double Session,” since the mimic is at once screen and mirror, “the mime does not read his role; he is also read by it” (Between the Blinds 224), implying effects of doubling as well as splitting. As Derrida observes, this is no “dumb show” then, for there is both allusion and illusion, going in both directions. And Bhabha echoes this sentiment by repeatedly stressing mimicry as a contestation of colonial authority, for even though its effects can only be traced back through the discourse of the colonial master, the spectacle does leave traces and creates images. In order to defer the effects of the spectacle, Bhabha, however, has to unground the direct impact of the performance, and he accomplishes this by staging mimicry as an “ambivalent turn,” and the word “ambivalence” here stands revealed as a point of maximum stress:

Hybridity represents that ‘ambivalent turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority. To grasp the ambivalence of hybridity, it must be distinguished from an inversion that would suggest that the originary is, really, only an ‘effect’. (113)

The “ambivalent turn,” is an ironic as well as hybridizing moment, which not only reveals the many unsettling “hybrid tongues of the colonial space” (101), but also marks the colonial inscription of the other as a moment of acute paranoia when the master, at the very point of enunciation, becomes a monstrous Bakhtinian unintentional hybrid, speaking in the language of neither one nor the other. The ambivalence flows from a doubling, a splitting and a vanishing act produced by the colonial discourse. Yet the colonial other is present, but only as an object of a paranoid projection. In other words, Bhabha’s spectralizing deflects and distances the effects of hybridity from the mimicking colonial subject to the colonizer as spectator, and this move effectively prevents the colonial other from being theorized as a speaking subject with agency without a mediation. In fact, following this move, the colonial hybrid qua subject vanishes from the colonial stage, and is now located beyond agency as a spectre spoken and imagined by
the colonizer. There is a compelling reason for this theoretical move, as the spectralization allows Bhabha to in effect “deny an essentialist logic ... and a mimetic referent” in one fell swoop (26). Based on Lacanian logic, the colonial other is now always a misrecognition, never a recognizable form or figure, and as a monstrous and haunting presence of colonial discourse, the camouflaged and shape-shifting colonial mimic can never become an essence, and must always resist signification. In effect, Bhabha suggests that colonial discourse records the impossibility of fixing the colonial other or subaltern as a recognizable representation, not because the colonial other is spoken by the colonizer, but because “mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask” in the first place (88). Moreover, since the colonizer does not survey the colonial scene as a panoptic spectator, but by scrutinizing a double image in a distorting mirror, mimicry does not produce transparent “reality effects,” but “a negative transparency that ... [is] constructed on the boundary between frame of reference/frame of mind”; that is, in the mind the colonizer (114). But since Bhabha also claims that “mimicry repeats rather than represents” (86), he implies that even as a vanishing act, the spectacle of colonial mimicry does generate representations which would seem to require a mimetic referent at their vanishing point.

The refusal of unmediated agency has other ramifications. According to Bhabha, the real menace of mimicry is its “double vision, which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse, also disrupts its authority” (88), and “terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” (115). Bhabha has in Moreiras’s sense turned hybridity into “a non-site” and “ambivalence itself” (Exhaustion of Difference 292). In order to reclaim hybridity as a subversive colonial practice and set the stage for a postcolonial rearticulation, Bhabha therefore has to stage a further challenge to the colonial authority of presence. Bhabha does this through a transposition, which allows him to turn the postcolonial writer’s absence from the colonial scene into a tactical advantage in a swift gesture of “deauthorization” (Bhabha’s term), which takes a leaf from colonial history. For elsewhere he observes about colonial representations that, “the figure of authority must always be belated, after and outside the event” in order to have any claim to authority (100). Bhabha thus paves the way for the postcolonial writer to
assume a position of authority based on his or her absence from the colonial scene. This transcendental gesture also allows Bhabha to leave the Manichean boundary in place.

I contend, however, that from the perspective of cultural hybridity, metropolitan mimicry has to be inscribed as a form of *mimesis*, and not as a subversive mocking or tomfoolery. Colonial mimicry and metropolitan mimicry have different purposes and effects. In the metropolitan situation, the migrant has to make the boundary passable in order to set the process of acculturation in motion. What then is the relationship between mimicry, mimesis and mockery? In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig observes that on one of his expeditions, Charles Darwin and the crew on the “Beagle” were relentlessly subjected to the taunting mockery of the Terra Fuegians, and notes that the members of the crew were clearly unsettled by the spectacle of mimicry: “The instant they see a sailor, they yield into his shape, his speech, his gait, and of course, his face. ‘As soon as we coughed or yawned, or made any odd motion, they immediately imitated us’” (81), notes Darwin, who, while bemused, did not fail to record both the distorting and alienating effects of mimicry as well as the irony of self-recognition. The Terra Fuegians were in effect using mockery to both familiarize and defamiliarize the strange European others. Similarly, in Michael Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of A Lion*, the migrant labourers use mimicry to learn English. Their mimicry is a form of mimesis by which they learn the foreign language of the host culture. “Most immigrants learned their English from recorded songs, or until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on stage ... the actor’s speeches would be followed by growing echoes as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated the phrases after a half-second pause, trying to get the pronunciation right” (47). Thus, there is no time for tomfoolery here, nor is that the intent (although the copies may indeed be distorted).

Beyond the colonial moment, Adorno’s implicit valorization of *mimesis* as the capacity to identify with the other rather than as the other also leaves the opposition between copy and original intact. According to Drucilla Cornell in *The Philosophy of the Limit*, Adorno’s claim that “mimesis lets the object be” (23) allows him to create a mimetic relationship with the other “forged in sympathy and appreciation” in which the
other remains unassimilated and unique “beyond the heterogeneous and beyond what is one’s own” (24). Adorno’s mimetic alternative turns on the concept of a constellation—an encompassing term which he borrows from Benjamin—which posits alterity as “something more-than-this”; that is, as excess revealed through a situated and contingent relation in which juxtaposed objects illuminate one another suddenly and unexpectedly. According to Adorno, a constellation is a gathering which “illuminates [a] specific side” of the other, and opens up a fleeting recognition of the other as many-faceted, “in its relation to other objects” beyond the monism of fixed identities (Negative Dialectics 162-3). Thus, in Adorno, a constellation is a mimetic relation which respects the other’s right to remain as it is no matter how “devoid of qualities” the referent may be (173). In other words, the mimetic referent is still something strange and other that cannot be referred to or dismissed as “nothing” (173). Similarly, the aporetic logic of the double-bind suspends the impasse along the either/or and neither/nor poles long enough to create a dynamic interval for hybridized effects to “flash” across the boundary the way Walter Benjamin suggests mimetic similarity catches the eye:

Its perception is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash. It slips past, can possibly be regained, but really cannot be held fast, unlike other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and as transitorily as a constellation of stars. (Qtd. in Taussig 226)

In the colonial situation, however, there is no boundary crossing except by decree, hence the mimicking colonial vanishes from the scene and history leaving the Manichean boundary in place.3 But Alberto Moreiras suggests that Bhabha has, in fact, located “an atopic site” (294), which permits hybridized spectral incarnations to continue

---

3 Macaulay’s Minutemen cannot readily be theorized as colonial subjects who perform savage acts of resistance. Yet as an interpreter, go-between and translator, the babu of the Indian Colony is a cultural hybrid. The Anglicized education policy, which Thomas Macaulay articulates in his infamous Minute on Indian Education, sets out to form a hybridized colonial class by decree: “It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreted between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (87). In The Location of Culture, Bhabha calls the native informant an “ironic compromise” (86), since the babu is an “authorized [version] of otherness” (87). Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 86-87
to cross over and haunt colonial history, thus opening up “the possibility of another history” (294). Alberto Moreiras’s interpretation of Bhabha’s mimicry in The Exhaustion of Difference, posits Bhabha’s “savage hybrid” as “the beyond,” since “hybridity needs a corrective counter concept to reveal its limits” (267). In Moreiras, hybridity is in effect a beyond the beyond, or an impasse which nonetheless permits unexpected flashes of alterity to cross cultural boundaries, since the trace is an element that ultimately cannot be enclosed. Thus, the trace will out, and produce a hybridized eruption. Although Bhabha’s deployment of mimicry downplays the mimetic effects of hybridity, I will, however, continue to argue that Bhabha’s colonial spectacle marks an important break in postcolonial theory, since the colonial subject is ultimately given agency as a cunning practitioner of mimicry, and is no longer theorized as a hapless victim of the colonial power structure. For the fact that something is mediated does not necessarily diminish its immediacy, force or impact.

The same holds true for intercultural translations. All translations have to cross fragile bridges, which when they actually succeed in crossing over make them seem like miracles. Derrida also qualifies the prospect of a successful translation in a similar way. While he locates hospitable niches for the other inside the language of the host in The Monolingualism of the Other, he also asserts that “the miracle of translation does not take place every day; there is, at times, a desert without a desert crossing” (72). What then is a successful translation? And do translations always involve a negotiation between an original and a copy? If so, is the copy always flawed and inferior? Is it possible to rethink the original/copy binary in order to realign this hierarchical relationship, as Benjamin has done in theorizing mechanical reproduction?

In “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin begins to rethink the task of the translator, and what constitutes a successful translation. He quotes the German translator Rudolf Pannwitz’s theory of translation with more than a nod of approval. What distinguishes a good translation from a bad one, argues Benjamin through Pannwitz, is that the translation does not become an appropriation of the foreign other, but remains a site of alterity even after it has been carried over. And Benjamin adds: “A real translation
is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light” (Illuminations 79).

The often quoted Italian saying Tradutore, traditore, which implies that to translate is to betray the original, is here transposed to say that it is the translation (or the copy) which is betrayed by a bad translation, not the original. Pannwitz writes:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from the wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German, instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English ... the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by a foreign tongue. (Illuminations 80-81)

Pannwitz here raises two spectres: that of alterity as a contagion, and that of atrophy due to lack of cultural dynamism. Bakhtin, who regards the novel as a hybrid genre and site of newness, transformations, and translations, argues that “the novelistic hybrid is an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another, the carving out of a living image of another language” (Dialogic Imagination 361). From the perspective of hybridity, Bakhtin’s idiom (“carving out of”) should be read as a means of making one language manifest within another on its own terms, the way Pannwitz suggests a successful translation does. Both Benjamin and Bakhtin, then, turn an old commonplace about translations on its head, i.e. that something is always lost in translation, by arguing that in a good translation something new is gained from the excess inherent in alterity. This upending has implications for a transcultural subject position, which negotiates both loss and gain, as it translates itself from one culture to another. A related commonplace asserts that poetry is always a casualty of translation. But is it always lost? Or does it metamorphose into a different poetics beyond notions of original and copy? A new poetics, which as Benjamin and Bakhtin both suggest, is inflected and enriched by the voice of the other.

In Monolingualism of the Other, Derrida begins to explore this new poetics of polyphony as he maps the conditions of inhabiting “the monolingualism of the other” (67). Derrida frequently deploys figures such as “prostheses, grafts, translation and transposition” (67), but also “scratches” and “scars” to illustrate both the trauma and
creative potential inherent in the process of translating oneself into the monolithic language of the host. For “the monolingualism of the other” has, Derrida notes, at least on the surface “the threatening face and features of colonial hegemony” and domination (69), even though for him the possessive “‘of’ [of the other] signifies not so much property as provenance” (68); in other words, not roots as much as routes. According to Derrida, there is no such thing as the language, nor a language, not even a given language, only generic or situated languages, and no language is either “monological or tautological,” but “for the other, coming from the other, the coming of the other” (68). On this point, Bakhtin and Derrida seem to agree; both regard languages as open-ended hybrid assemblages over which the user has some agency. Derrida asserts:

it is always up to a language to summon the heterological opening that permits it to speak of something else and to address itself to the other.... It can also be given over, without betrayal, to other inventions of idioms, to other poetics, without end. (Derrida 69)

As a result, standard linguistic concepts such as vernacular, accent, a dialect and an idiom (typically regarded as defects or adulterations) remain problematic for Derrida (9), who argues that even though we may think that we only speak one language, in fact, “we never speak only one” (10). In other words, we are all situated subjects spoken by others, and thus we are all not quite. Ultimately, then, it is the deconstruction of the (mono)logic of monolingualism that Derrida, Bakhtin and Bhabha, want to perform:

For the phenomena that interest me are precisely those that blur these boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there and actually capitalize themselves there interminably. (Derrida 9)

The hybrid location of culture then remains a contested site of indeterminacy, ambivalence and aporia; a site which Bhabha in his essay “Freedom’s Basis in the Indeterminate” characterizes as an inherently antagonistic locus. Thus the hybrid subject must actually be prepared to wrestle what Bhabha calls the right to signify otherwise away from those who would deny its alterity and contest its agency and legitimacy as a source of “differential meanings and values,” since all hegemonic narratives erase those
(id)entities which they do not include as excluded middles, adulterations or distortions, usually by pushing them to the margins, beyond the reach of its own distinctions (Identity in Question 49). But the hybrid subject position also has ontological advantages, adds Bhabha, in that “it makes one increasingly aware of the construction of culture, the invention of tradition, the retroactive nature of social affiliation and psychic identification” (49). In other words, in order to signify otherwise, the hybrid subject has to fashion a dwelling based on the double logic of not one without the other, and continue to contest all attempts to split, diffuse and deny the inclusive logic of hybridity along the differential either/or and neither/nor axes.

Yet as Robert Young observes, there is no one concept of hybridity, and cultural hybridity, which both negotiates and delivers the shock of the new, replaces the nostalgia for roots with new modes of uprooted belonging. These new dwellings clearly are unhomely to those who feel at home among their own, regardless of whether they are located at the centre or the margins. Moreover, critics who want to protect the cultural cohesion of ethnic communities, typically invoke the current conventions and norms of cultures and subcultures as fixed and immutable. Thus, hybridity will continue to encounter resistance and remain a contested and complex third site of cultural transformations. Or, as Édouard Glissant observes about his own Franco-Caribbean background: “métissage exists in places where categories making their essences distinct were formerly in opposition” (Poetics of Relation 92). He goes on to note that métissage, as it became naturalized in the Caribbean world, tended to become “a commonplace [and] a generality” (92), and the same antagonistic processes likely hold true for a world in transformation.

How then can cultural hybridity be thought of both as an antagonistic and transgressive and a creative and transformative process? In The Exhaustion of Difference, Alberto Moreiras suggests that a hybrid double consciousness is akin to “a simultaneous dwelling,” which allows the hybrid unencumbered access to two registers. In the double articulation of cultural hybridity, one register may be transgressive and the other transformative, and “one can work as an automatic corrective of the other” (289). Thus,
hybridity holds out the possibility of "dwelling in ambivalence," not as a chaotic and abysmal condition, but as an ethical and democratic practice of freedom staged as an infinite dialogue which does not require a dialectical reconciliation. But, cautions Moreiras, "the world is something more than the sum of its subjects" (Exhaustion of Difference 267), and since "the world cannot be reduced to the subject," the strategic task for hybridity politics is "not to reconstruct or salvage either identities or differences, but to explore the possibility of moving beyond identity and its dissolution, and the infinite play of differences, into a more inclusive mode of thinking" and being (271). Moreiras suggests that ultimately the politics of cultural hybridity has to move beyond "all difference and all identity" in order to include, rather than exclude, that which is "beyond the subject," and that it is the trace or the remainder which is teased out from an aporetic suspension at an ultimate limit releasing the excess that is "undecidably other" (293). According to Alberto Moreiras, this chimera is an (im)possibility that cannot be (en)closed, and therefore hybridity defies a conventional either/or logical resolution. As a result, hybridity thinking is an infinite negotiation which produces a "negative universality" (Moreiras's term) since we are all particular and peculiar, or in Emmanuel Levinas's idiom, unique and chosen, and thus ultimately undecidable--but not unreachable--as others by others. Cultural hybridity, then, is not an attempt to erase contradictions, or reify alterity, but an unfinalizable negotiation of the excess of alterity without encompassing the other as the same.

Despite the ever-present turbulence of change, there is a strong utopian impulse in the narration of hybridity in the intercultural novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie. All three hold on to the notion of emancipation from a disenchanted and fragmented world in a movement towards an interconnected world and a civil society in which alterity will not be erased or relegated to the margins. The writers evoke possible worlds in which the real and the possible enter into new and unexpected combinations producing hope for a more tolerant world under the sign of diversity. Typically, this exploration takes a detour into myths, or variant versions of history, which as Roland Barthes suggests, provide them with a metalanguage, or a second language in
which worlds begin to speak to each other, and the writers to their readers about new ways of belonging to the world (Mythologies 145-6).

In their novels, Mukherjee, Ondaatje and Rushdie navigate through ethnopolitically turbulent places where migrants from the former colonies lead conflicted, and often diminished, lives as marginalized strangers in the West. Typically, their characters inhabit a space that Mary Louise Pratt has categorized as a “contact zone,” or social spaces where “cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power ... as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Imperial Eyes 78). Mass migration from the periphery to the centres has created multiple contact zones at the heart of the Western metropoles, and it is in these contact zones that the notion of cultural hybridity has taken hold as the paradigmatic, metropolitan way to cross cultural boundaries. In writing both from the margins and the centre, these writers name and put a face on the Other in the figure of the migrant, the orphan, the vagrant or the nomad. But they also illuminate the creative and ontological potential inherent in moving their characters into uncharted and unpredictable realms where the known encounters the unknown, the strange the familiar, the fantastic the mundane, and in doing so they open up new vistas and ways of seeing the world. In the stories they tell, their characters move across a vast spatiotemporal ground akin to Bakhtin’s “great time”--revealing a world full of potentialities and possibilities as they connect and rewrite the past, the present and the future. In doing so, they suggest that alterity is a potential asset to any culture because it introduces newness into the world.
Chapter 2: Monstrous Hybridity in *The Satanic Verses*

In Rushdie’s oeuvre, the still controversial *The Satanic Verses* (1988), his iconoclastic novel about migrancy, mutability and change, remains a groundbreaking exploration of the liminal condition of cultural hybridity. In his *Tanner Lectures* (2002), published in *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie argues that “there has never been a period in the history of the world when its peoples were so jumbled up” (356). Yet he notes that the world is full of borders, which he interprets as a sign that we live in a “frontier time, one of the great hinge periods in human history” (381), in which “the old refuses to die, so that the new cannot be born,” and as a result “all manner of morbid symptoms arise” (286). Rushdie, however, insists that the advent of “the frontierless nation is not a fantasy” (357), and argues that the migrant, “the man without frontiers is the archetypal figure of our age” (356). Thus, Rushdie assigns the migrant a pioneering role as a cultural hybrid pushing up against national boundaries.

I have always tried to stress the creative aspects of ... cultural comminglings. The migrant, severed from roots, often transplanted to a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community, is forced to confront the great questions of change and adaptation. (356)

A frontier is both a borderline and a borderland: a demarcation between us and them, but also a zone of mutability and uncanny transformations. In Rushdie the frontier is a “wake-up call” since in stepping across “we see things as they are” (353). To cross a frontier is to be transformed. But seeing things differently, in a new light, not as they were, but “as they are,” also means that to step across a border is to feel disoriented and lost. The ground shifts and suddenly the world is out of joint. The arrival of the migrant also upsets the settled world of the nation, since it shatters the illusion that the way things are is the way things ought to be in the world. In Rushdie, a boundary crossing is always a fall into uncertainty and doubt, but it is also an opportunity for the migrant to realize the creative potential inherent in displacement. This, then, is the moment that sets the process of mongrelization in motion, and the migrant’s survival depends on accepting inauthenticity, uncertainty, and change. In Rushdie the migrant is an agent of creative
change, but from the perspective of the host culture the migrant is strange and alien, and typically demonized.

There are strong echoes of Mikhail Bakhtin in Rushdie’s comments about a “borderless world” and the creative effects of cultural displacement. In “Notes on Writing and the Nation,” Rushdie tacitly acknowledges the influence of Bakhtin: “Connections have been made between the historical development and the twin ‘narratives’ of the novel and the nation-state” (Step Across This Line 59). In Bakhtin’s universe the dialogic novel with its multiple perspectives, temporalities and voices heralds an inevitable emancipation from the monoglossic bondage of national cultures with their habitual way of apprehending the world through the reductive optics of the nation. In Bakhtin, the dialogic novel is an open-ended conversation with a changing world as it unfolds, about new ways of perceiving and inhabiting the world, and a transmission of new ideas across national and cultural boundaries. In Bakhtin, heteroglossia enters the novel “through another’s speech in another language,” and by analogy Bakhtin argues that it is through the novel’s “dialogic relations” and “hybrid combinations” that newness enters the world (Dialogic Imagination 27). Thus, it is no coincidence that the central question Rushdie’s novel explores is: “How does newness come into the world?” (8). In Rushdie the world is unfinished and in the throes of mongrelization. In “Notes on Writing and the Nation” he argues that “[g]ood writing assumes a frontierless nation” (61). In a mise en abîme in The Satanic Verses, the poet Baal is charged with imagining such a borderless, mongrelized world, and Baal’s poetics evokes Rushdie’s novelistic world as he conjures up chimeras of form, lionheaded goatbodied serpented impossible whose shapes felt obliged to change the moment they were set, so that the demotic forced its way into lines of classical purity and images of love were constantly degraded by the intrusion of elements of farce. (370)

In Bakhtin, it is the dialogic novel that ushers in a new heteroglot world, and since “every literary work is inherently sociological” the world and the novel are one and the same (Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics 276). According to Bakhtin, the paradigm shift from an epic to a novelistic world requires “a verbal and semantic decentering of the old
ideological world” and “a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness” (Dialogic Imagination 367), and he argues that it is the speech diversity of the dialogic novel, its “heteroglossia,” that reveals the creative potential of homelessness. In Rushdie, the fall into homelessness and uncertainty occurs in crossing over from one culture to another. In Bakhtin, national cultures are akin to ideological strait jackets, and he regards them as epic, hermetically sealed-off, and oblivious to the fact that they are “only one among other cultures and languages” (Dialogic Imagination 370). Thus, Bakhtin ultimately regards all national cultures as confining, while Rushdie wants to enlarge the nation into a spacious and welcoming place. His migrants want to arrive, make a new life for themselves, and they are prepared to change and adapt. As Bakhtin plots the demise of the epic world, he offers us not only new, global ways to think about nations and cultures, but also about novelistic freedom and epic unfreedom. He argues that the displacement of the heroic epic by novelistic irony and parody is a joyous emancipation, a playful subversion of power, official language, and official thought, ushering in “for the first time a truly free investigation of the world, of man and of human thought” (Dialogic Imagination 24-5).4

In The Satanic Verses, however, the emancipation from the fetters of the old, epic world in which everything is finalized, frozen in time, and “utterly finished” (Dialogic Imagination 13), is far from joyous, as Rushdie’s protagonists in Bakhtinian fashion interact across time and space, and rub up against people who are utterly unpredictable, speaking in different, even deranged, voices “talking about everything in every possible way” (Imaginary Homelands 429). The epigraph to The Satanic Verses, taken from Daniel Defoe’s The History of the Devil, points to some anxiety on the part of Rushdie about homelessness. Defoe’s Satan is “confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition,” and to be without “a fixed place” or “abode” is figured as a form of “punishment” (1). But homelessness as punishment can also be turned into sustenance, and in Rushdie it is the migrant’s condition of uncertainty and doubt that is the engine of renewal and the site of rebirths. But in a world that is for the most part still epic,

4 The etymology of the word “novel” is the French word nouvelle: news, tidings and short story.
“stepping across” offers no immediate emancipation for marginalized and silenced voices.

As a result, Rushdie rearticulates the migrant’s quest for a new life as a Faustian pact with the devil: a fall from grace and epic certainty into a hellish labyrinth of change, doubt and confusion. In the chaos of a still dying world, his displaced and disoriented migrants push up against ever new boundaries as they negotiate their crisis-ridden lives as victims and perpetrators, heroes and villains, angels and demons. Predictably their stories take fantastic as well as apocalyptic turns. Moreover, Rushdie’s intrusive narrator is a sly and cunning master dialectician, who clearly sympathizes with the devil (at times this narrator identifies himself openly as the devil), and he resolutely embraces the notion that we are mutable and multiple rather than fixed and unified. In a Manichean world of black and white, good and evil, true and false, it is the devil who sows doubt and advocates complexity and change, as does Rushdie’s satanic narrator in a double-voiced discourse:

A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator’s role, according to one way of seeing things; he’s unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk: not all mutants survive. (49)

Siding with the devil has the uncanny effect of pushing Rushdie’s metropolitan, hybridized migrants into the vanguard, since in this novel it is the devil who advocates mutability and new ways of being in world. If the world of the hybridized migrant seems out of joint, it is because the satanic narrator of the novel has interfered and staged a fall: “great falls change people ... not much of a price to pay for survival, for being reborn, for becoming new” (133). But at what cost? Does the old have to die for the new to be born, as Gramsci suggests?5

5 The phrase, “To be born again you first have to die,” is ironically referred to in The Satanic Verses as “the old Gramsci chestnut” (85).
How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine? Is birth always a fall? Do angels have wings? Can men fly? (8)

Rushdie’s narrator suggests that it is the fall from certainty into doubt that ultimately produces newness, not death. Birth is a fall. Thus without the fantastic free fall from the exploding hijacked plane, engineered by the devil, there can be neither birth nor rebirth for Gibreel Farishta or Saladin Chamcha. To migrate is to risk mutation, to grow wings, and Icarus-like learn to fly, and fall. Survival depends on the ability to change and metamorphose into a hybrid “under the stress of a long plunge” (133). But the past, in the form of lost or discarded lives, does not dissolve into thin air in that long, miraculous tumble into mutability “from heaven-light to hell-fire” (133), for the “debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home” mercilessly continue to haunt the migrants (4).

In Rushdie’s cosmology, then, there is no release from the chains of the past. The past remains an “unfinished business” to be resolved, and the migrant’s art of survival depends on new “conjoinings,” translations, and improvisations in which the old and the new, the strange and the familiar, creatively transform, rather than block, each other. Hybridity, then, “is an endless paradox: looking forward by always looking back” (205), and not a “revolution of water-carriers, immigrants and slaves” (101; 363). In this novel, both of the main protagonists are haunted by the past, which neither of them has managed to integrate into his life, and the narrator frequently admonishes them: “Watch out Chamcha, look out for your own shadow. That black fellow is creeping up behind” (53). When Gibreel Farishta, convinced that he is the messenger of “the fellow upstairs,” rather than the devil, expresses doubts (318), he is tricked by his inner voice to conjure up a hybrid: “Whether we be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridization ... or whether we be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here” (319). Both protagonists are confused, feeling double, spectral, disembodied, surreal, possessed and haunted, and they are frequently deranged. Strangers to themselves, both blame “inner demons” or the
other as the “embodiment” of their adversary: “Not I. The other”; “Not I. He” (324; 340; 355). “‘Talk of the ‘devil,’ Saladin pointed. ‘There the bastard goes.’ He turned towards Gibreel: but Gibreel had gone” (430).

Just how essential the fall is in order to set the transformation of the migrant in motion, becomes clear when Gibreel Farishta finds himself face-to-face with the Imam in his dimly lit London flat. The narrator frames the Imam’s exilic mindset in both epic and mock heroic terms:

The exile is a ball hurled high into the air. He hangs there, frozen in time, translated into a photograph, denied motion, suspended impossibly above his native earth, he awaits the inevitable moment at which the photograph must begin to move, and the earth reclaim its own…. His home is a rented flat. It is a waiting room, a photograph, air. (205-6)

Even the air is stale in the Imam’s Kensington flat behind the thick, drawn curtains in order for its occupant to remain “unsullied, unaltered, pure” (207). This is a spectral, arrested and suspended life. The Imam’s exilic resistance to change takes on epic proportions in its denial of space and time, and the narrator observes that “paranoia is a prerequisite of survival” for the exile in order to keep the illusion of home alive and frozen in time, since “otherwise the evil thing might creep into the apartment: foreignness, Abroad, the alien nation. The harsh fact that he is here and not There” (206). Rushdie's satire here both constructs and deconstructs the Imam’s discourse of timeless and monologic resistance to change in order to challenge his notions of authenticity and origins, since “in exile all attempts to put down roots look like treason: they are admissions of defeat” (208). Home is a legendary, distant and unchanging elsewhere. The cleric/warrior makes his home in an epic, eternal time, “Utime,” or a mythical “timeless time that has no need to move,” which is made abundantly clear by the Imam’s “disembodied voice,” his wizard-like features and the delight he takes in “smashing
clocks” in order to break the “chains of Time” (214). Airborn, timeless and epic, he refuses to fall into mutability and chaos.6

The fantasy of a return to origins is not only deconstructed from the perspective of the exile’s attempts to stop time, but also from the bewildering experiences of the returning migrant. When Saladin Chamcha returns to Bombay as a member of the touring Prospero Players, he meets up with his childhood friend Zeeny Vakil, a physician and art critic who has written a book called The Only Good Indian, in which she argues that Indian culture is hybrid, “based on the principle of borrowing whatever clothes seem to fit, Aryan, Mughal, British, take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest” (52). Rushdie uses the character of Zeeny Vakil to establish that India is a hybridized and heterogeneous nation. Although her book states that there is “no good, right way” to be an Indian, and that to argue to the contrary would amount to “Hindu Fundamentalism,” Zeeny Vakil, still unsettles Chamcha by noting that “these Asians from foreign got no shame” (53). Sardonically, she adds: “You come back after so long and think godknowswhatofyourselves” (53). Chamcha’s rejoinder here marks him as diasporic: “the earth is full of Indians” (54). In fact, “the world is made up of Indies, East, West, North. Damn it, you should be proud of us ... the way we push against frontiers. Only thing is we’re not Indian like you” (54). Despite his valiant self-assertions, Chamcha still feels caught in a bundle of contradictions, as if “India [were] measuring him against her forgotten immensity” (54), and he retorts:

‘Well, this is what’s inside’, he blazed at her. ‘An Indian translated into English-medium. When I attempt Hindustani these days, people look polite. That’s me’. Caught in the aspic of his adopted language, he had begun to hear, in India’s Babel, an ominous warning: Don’t come back again. When you have stepped through the looking-glass you step back at your peril. The mirror may cut you to shreds. (58)

---

6 This is clearly an allusion to The Wizard of Oz, and in his essay of the same title, Rushdie reveals that he wrote his first story at the age of ten, called Over the Rainbow (9). Rushdie regards The Wizard of Oz as “the ultimate fable of emigration” and he argues: “At the heart of The Wizard of Oz is a great tension between ... the human dream of leaving, a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing force of roots... of making a new life....Over the Rainbow ‘[evokes a] place ... where the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true. It is the hymn to Elsewhere.’” Salman Rushdie, The Wizard of Oz (London: British Film Institute, 1992) 23.
In an interview with Ameena Meer in *Bomb*, Rushdie describes his own fall and rebirth as a similarly traumatic crisis of authenticity, but one that ended up opening up new creative vistas for him as a writer. Besides, “[the] experience of belonging to the diaspora is more interesting than trying to pretend that I am what I am not. That shift in my way of looking at it was this novel [*The Satanic Verses*]... I’d have been very upset if people reading *Midnight’s Children* thought it was an outsider’s book. I didn’t want it to be. I wanted it to be written from an insider’s position” (71-72). Thus, it is in writing his migrant novel that Rushdie discovers the impossibility of continuing to write out of India as an Indian. His dislocated past has become a fiction, in the same way that Rushdie’s character, Zeeny Vakil, taunts Chamcha: “What do you know about Bombay? Your own city, only it never was.... That was Wonderland, Peristan, Never-Never, Oz” (55). As India turns into an imaginary place, Rushdie’s Indianess now has to be performed in order to pass for authentic, even though, as his narrator observes, “most migrants ... can become disguises ... concealing for reasons of security [their] secret selves” (49). On Spivak’s terms, Rushdie here realizes that he can no longer “represent himself as transparent” (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 275), and his shift of perspective means that he can begin to explore other, possible worlds, confident that his Indian cosmology will continue to fuel his imagination, but in entirely new and unpredictable ways from a diasporic perspective. Thus, like his protagonists in *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie has to take a (sinister) transcultural turn as the ground shifts beneath his feet:

What Saladin understood that day was that he had been living in a phony peace, that the change in him was irreversible. A new dark world had opened before him (or: within him) when he fell from the sky, no matter how assiduously he attempted to recreate his old existence, this was, he now saw, a fact that could not be unmade. He seemed to see the road before him, forking to the left and the right. Closing his eyes, settling back against taxicab upholstery, he chose the left-hand side. (419)

Since the epic world of the novel sets up authenticity and resistance to change as ‘good’ and inauthenticity and mutability as ‘evil’, the reader has to side with the devil in order to negotiate multiplicity and change as creative rather than destructive forces. The
satanic narrator is explicit on this point: "Angels are easily pacified.... Human beings are tougher nuts, can doubt everything, even their eyes ... angels they don’t have much in the way of a will. To will is to disagree; not to submit; to dissent" (92-93). Rushdie’s narrators also use irony, satire, parody and distancing devices such as nightmares and delusions in which notions of good and evil and true and false are undermined and begin to slide. How then does a reader approach this complex, intensely dialogic and dialectical novel with its exuberant heteroglossia? Rushdie clearly needs a reader who is prepared to enter into a dialogue with the novel about the nature of belief, doubt and dissension, but also about cultural transformations and mutability on a global scale. In deploying several competing narrative voices, among them an omniscient narrator, and an intrusive, satanic one, Rushdie sets the stage for a wide-ranging dialogue, in which the satanic narrator cautions his readers to consider "What kind of idea is he? What kind am I?, Who am I?" (111). In order to negotiate the effects of hybridity, the reader must remain mindful of the fact that the narrator has transposed the conventional moral binaries of ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ and ‘false’ and ‘true.’

Who, then, is Rushdie’s implied reader? Although Rushdie, post fatwa, has suggested ("Is Nothing Sacred?") that the novel was written for the South Asian migrant community in London, it is clearly addressed to a global reader, although the text will clearly resonate differently for Indian and Western readers. Since Rushdie’s main protagonists are not Indian subalterns but diasporic migrants, and the cultural hybridity he fictionalizes is far from triumphalist or celebratory, Rushdie’s postmodern narrative of the lives of metropolitan migrants and their struggles would seem to escape Gayatri Spivak’s materialist deconstruction of the double-bind of postcolonial representations addressed to Western readers. Rushdie’s novel deals with what Spivak calls “the hybrid life of cultural collisions,” and in A Critique of Postcolonial Reason she suggests that a different standard of literary evaluation is in order from “the (im)possible perspective of the native informant as a reminder of alterity, rather than remaining caught in some identity for ever” (335). Yet culture is “a regulator of how one knows” (352-6), and in The Post-Colonial Critic, Spivak suggests that when “we look at the word ‘culture’ we should see it as the site of a struggle” (123). In Spivak’s essay “Reading The Satanic
Verses,” she notes that although Rushdie writes as a migrant, “the migrant as metropolitan” is not the main conflict of the novel (220), but “the postcolonial divided between two identities: migrant and national,” and “national” here means India, not Britain (219). Spivak observes that while the novel offers “a cosmopolitan challenge to national culture,” the novel is also “a persistent critique of metropolitan migrancy,” and she notes that “the message and the medium in this book are marked by that conflict” (Outside the Teaching Machine 222). Thus, Spivak places Rushdie on the cusp between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, torn between his Indianness and Englishness, and credits him with interrogating and unsettling both, yet leaving the conflict unresolved and in tension. If Spivak’s use of the word “challenge” here does not identify cultural hybridity as the source of that unresolved tension, it is because, from her global perspective, the migrant “is in First World space” and therefore negatively marked as a lost cause from the perspective of the Indian nation (Postcolonial Reason 382). In Spivak, the postcolonial subject in the Third World needs to “resist mere celebration of global hybridity” in its metropolitan form (157). According to Spivak, the word “hybridity” only serves to “obliterate the irreducible hybridity of all language” (164).

Hybridity is Bakhtin’s term and model for linguistic innovation. According to Bakhtin, hybridity is “one of the most important modes in the historical life and evolution of all languages. We may even say that languages change historically primarily by means of hybridization” (Dialogic Imagination 358). In Bakhtin, the novelistic hybrid is not only double-voiced, but double-accented, and double-language, and “the novelistic hybrid is an artistically organized system for bringing different languages in contact with one another, a system having as its goal the illumination of one language by means of another” (361). Rushdie’s novel is a linguistic hybrid and hetroglossic novel that resonates not only with different registers of the English language, but also with the cadences and utterances of at least two Indian languages, Urdu and Hindi, and some Arabic as well.

A novelistic hybrid that crosses, parodies, and dissolves conventional genre boundaries, and creates tensions in the text between the message and the medium, can
clearly not be framed in terms of any one genre. One subgenre, however, the double-voiced fantastic mode, does unlock some of the novel’s ambiguities. The dream episodes linked to the imagination of Gibreel Farishta, for example, can be approached through the fantastic mode, as can the surreal events surrounding Saladin Chamcha’s possession and sudden metamorphosis. The fantastic mode requires doubt, and confronts the reader with the dilemma of what to believe and not to believe as it straddles the boundary between the explicable and the inexplicable, the believable and the doubtful. Protagonists in the fantastic mode are, as a result, split and confused since, as Tzvetan Todorov explains in *The Fantastic*, “[the] hero continually and distinctly feels the contradiction between two worlds, that of the real and that of the fantastic, and is himself amazed by the extraordinary phenomena which surround him” (26). In the novel, the narrator suggests that Saladin Chamcha’s macabre transformation into a goat-man and incarnation of the devil, “had precisely to do with the idea that normality was no longer composed (if it had ever been) of banal, ‘normal’ elements” (280). His double, Gibreel Farishta, explains his own recurring dreams as a form of possession, revealing an antagonistic split, which he projects onto his double: “[as] if he’s the guy who’s awake and this is the bloody nightmare. His bloody dream: us. Here. All of it” (83). Thus, both of them find a way of rationalizing the irrational by marking it as (ir)rational.

I will argue that Rushdie’s deployment of the fantastic mode allows him to make the point that there is nothing predictable or transparent about hybridization, and as a result both protagonists must undergo entirely unpredictable transformations. In Rushdie, hybridity is an ongoing process staged as an intercultural dialogue and interrogation of alterity, and he uses the fantastic technique of suspension by interposing alterity between the real and the fantastic. As Philip Engblom observes in his essay “A Multitude of Voices,” Rushdie does so in the dialogic mode as well:

In Rushdie’s work the most vividly contradictory, conflicting viewpoints are juxtaposed--forced together and made to respond to each other. Not, however, in order to attain some dialectical resolution of their differences, some ideal static synthesis. The dialogue itself is the point. Nothing is resolved, rounded off, excluded. The operant point is massively inconclusive; it resists closure and containment of any kind. (*Reading Rushdie* 295)
Some of the recurring episodes generalize the fantastic to the point where a topsy-turvy, nightmarish, Kafkaesque world becomes the norm. Todorov quotes Sartre’s description of this world as one where “these preposterous manifestations figure as normal behaviour” (174). Gibreel’s catalogue of Brickhall life is cast in this generalized fantastic mode to evoke the legitimate outrage of the marginalized migrant community, as Gibreel turns into Azraeel, the avenging migrant/angel. The narrator correctly observes that looking through the eyes of an angel at the jumble, “you see essences instead of surfaces” (320), but there is also movement, chaos, outrage and confusion in the tableau:

Low-cost, high-rise housing enfolds him.... The towers stand up on stilts, and in the concrete formlessness beneath and between them there is the howling of a perpetual wind, and the eddying of debris; derelict kitchen units, deflated bicycle tyres, shards of broken doors, dolls’ legs, vegetable refuse extracted from plastic disposal bags by hungry cats and dogs, fast-food packets, rolling cans, shattered job prospects, abandoned hopes, lost illusions, expended angers, accumulated bitterness, vomited fear and a rusting bath. He stands motionless while small groups of residents rush past in different directions. Some (not all) are carrying weapons. Clubs, bottles, knives. All of the groups contain white youngsters as well as black. He raises the trumpet to his mouth and begins to play. (461)

Interestingly, Todorov’s basic definition of the fantastic as a genre turns on the figure of the devil: “Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings. The fantastic occupies this uncertainty” (25). Todorov also suggests that if as readers we choose one explanation over the other, we enter the realms of the uncanny (“the experience of limits”) or the marvellous (fairy tale/fantasy). Todorov here constructs the fantastic mode in the same way that Bakhtin conjures up “the clown” as a composite figure of doubling by fusing “the rogue” and “the fool” (Dialogic Imagination 404). Similarly, in Todorov, the uncanny and the marvellous co-inhabit the fantastic mode, which also can be generalized or pushed all the way into the grotesque. Gibreel’s double vision is a case in point. Suspended “between two realities, this world and another that was also right there, visible but unseen” (351), the narrator notes that he is desperate for a plausible explanation for his delusions and dreams in which he turns into the archangel Gabriel:
[Gibreel] had had a lucky escape from death, a subsequent delirium of some sort, and now, restored to himself, could expect the threads of his life— that is, his old life, the new life he had planned before the interruption— to be picked up again. He felt the pull of the great city beginning to work its magic on him, and his old gift of hope reasserted itself, his talent for embracing renewal, for blinding himself to past hardships so that the future could come into view. (190)

According to Todorov, the fantastic mode requires an ongoing suspension—hesitation, uncertainty and doubt— or the same perplexing and multivalent neither/nor and it-was-and-it-was-not worlds that Rushdie’s implied readers and protagonists have to negotiate throughout The Satanic Verses. The fantastic creates ambiguity for purposes of “making strange” in what Bakhtin refers to as “the world of conventional pathos” in terms of the fool, and Bakhtin notes that the protagonists in the novel may even be “the object of the [narrator’s] scorn” rather than his sympathy and solidarity (404). There is, however, always an either/or plausibility loophole in the fantastic mode: readers can use either the embedded marvellous (sheer fantasy) or the uncanny (unsettling, strange) to call the fantastic realm of the suspended neither/nor into question, just as it is possible to split Bakhtin’s motley clown into its constituent parts (rogue and fool). Thus, it is up to the reader to set limits for the explicable and the inexplicable, or mix them into a hybridized mode. In contrast, Rushdie’s characters, who in Spivak’s idiom are pawns trapped inside a “phantasmagoria” and “shadow play” and left to their own devices, must confess to delusions and nightmares to maintain their own fiction of rationality in the wake of unpredictable and monstrous transformations (“Reading The Satanic Verses” 225-26). The bewildered Gibreel, when pushed to the limit of the believable, for example, valiantly tries to maintain his sense of “the real” by refusing to sleep in an attempt to keep the inexplicable at bay, a strategy that only makes matters worse since what “happens in [his] waking time is so much worse” (339). Rushdie’s narrator frequently provides escape hatches for the reader, however, and typically in the form of a prolepsis in the parodic mode, before he breaks the illusion. Thus Rushdie’s transcultural imagination deploys a hybridized version of Brecht’s alienation effect to peel off the layers of the fantastic, but through the optics of the ludic as often as “the real” presumably to make his readers consider a parabolic interpretation of the fantastic tale,
and alert them to the possibility that when the writer is most outlandish, he is also most serious. In Rushdie, then, phantasmagoria, miracles and marvels, staged in the fantastic mode, are often surreal aspects of the real, and a vehicle for exploring strange, even bizarre, new ways of apprehending and being in the world.

Rushdie is often categorized as a magic realist, but in the mode of magic realism, the spell is as a rule not broken, while in this novel it typically is. In splitting the disorienting effects of cultural hybridity between Gibreel Farishta who arrives as a conqueror and displays signs of megalomania, and Saladin Chamcha, who arrives prepared to be changed and becomes a ventriloquist, the reader not only has to mediate between the two figures, but also pay attention to how each negotiates his alterity, in order to tease out hybridity from the complex and multivalent tension that Rushdie maintains before he dissolves it. In a fit of angelic megalomania, clearly triggered by nostalgia for India, Gibreel, for example, decides to “tropicalize” London. Here, Gibreel’s (partial) wish list oscillates between the uncanny and the marvellous, and is further undercut by satire and parody. Framed in the fantastic mode, this surreal tableau can clearly be either/or since the reader can either be enticed by the fantasy or shrug it off as uncanny. It is also possible to keep the enumeration of incongruous items in suspension indefinitely:  

increased moral definition, institution of national siesta, development of vivid and expensive patterns of behaviour among the populace, higher-quality popular music, new birds in the trees (macaws, peacocks, cockatoos), new trees under the birds (coco-palms, tamarind, banyans with hanging beards). Improved street-life, outrageously coloured flowers (magenta, vermillion, neon-green), spider monkeys in the oaks. A new mass market for domestic air-conditioning units, ceiling fans, anti-mosquito coils and sprays. A coir and copra industry. Increased appeal for London as a centre for conferences, etc . . . (355)

When Gibreel opens his eyes to inspect his transformation of London, we learn that he is delusional and sequestered in an asylum for the insane. Giving his readers a(n) (im)plausible explanation (delusions) releases them from the fantastic suspension (if they can make a choice), but a point about the transformative effects of cultural hybridity and migrancy has nonetheless been made parabolically: migrants arrive in the metropolis
prepared to change and adapt, but they also transform the host culture. Gibreel’s tropicalization can also be read as a metafictional *mise en abîme* of what Salil Tripathi, in a conversation with Rushdie in India in 1983, refers to as Rushdie’s postcolonial, “Indian assault on the English language” by making “the ordinary bizarre and the bizarre ordinary” (*Conversations* 21; 24). Rushdie frames his response about his use of fantastic imagery and linguistic innovations, by suggesting that his “assault” is “[a]fter all a way to enrich the language, not just to damage it” (24). Thus, Rushdie claims to be a Bakhtinian linguistic hybridizer. In an interview with Jean W. Ross, Rushdie explains that his narrative strategy is to deliberately double-code to create images and symbols which resonate both with Indian and Western readers, but in entirely different ways (*Conversations* 2)—a method which Bakhtin calls “the illumination of one language by another” (361).

As the novel opens, Rushdie’s two main protagonists, the avenging migrant, Gibreel Farishta, a schizophrenic Bollywood film actor, who is haunted by a series of paranoid dreams in which he turns into his namesake, the archangel Gabriel, and Saladin Chamcha, a London actor and translated Indian, both resist the notion that a liminal, multiple, open-ended and eclectic hybridized identity can be successfully negotiated. Caught between the flight from origins and the dilemma and lure of fixed identities, for them there is no easy “union-by-hybridization” (319). While one stubbornly clings to his adopted Englishness, the other remains resolutely Indian. Yet, they are both inhabited by multiple selves, hear voices and have visions, and are mercilessly haunted by phantoms from their past, or what Rushdie calls “their component parts” (49). The narrator reveals that they are “conjoined opposites,” each “the other’s shadow.... One seeking to be transformed into the foreignness he admires, the other preferring, contemptuously, to transform” his new (un)reality rather than be changed and adapt to his altered state (427). Using authenticity as a measuring stick, the unreliable narrator frames Gibreel’s confusion, his Prospero-like efforts to transform reality, and his refusal to abandon his Indianess as ‘good’ and ‘true’ while Chamcha’s willing embrace of Englishness is ‘evil’ and ‘false’. The narrator’s didactic discourse here suggests that each is persecuted by his double, and is, in fact, nothing more than an incarnation of his repressed other:
Well, then, are we coming closer to it? Should we even say that these are two fundamentally different types of the self? Might we not agree that Gibreel, for all his stage-names and performances; and in spite of born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses; --has wished to remain, to a large degree, continuous--that is joined to and arising from his past--that he chose neither near-fatal illness nor transmuting fall; that in point of fact, he fears above all things the altered states in which his dreams leak into, and overwhelm, his waking self, making him that angelic Gabriel he has no desire to be--so that it is still a self which for our present purposes we may describe as ‘true’. (427)

Whereas Saladin Chamcha, is a creature of selected discontinuities, a willing reinvention, his preferred revolt against history being what makes him, in our chosen idiom ‘false’? And might we not go on to say that it is this falsity--call this ‘evil’--and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened for him by his fall?--while Gibreel, to follow the logic of our established terminology, is to be considered ‘good’ by virtue of wishing to remain, for all his vicissitudes, at bottom an untranslated man. (427)

Yet Gibreel’s dismay is rooted in his fear of the unknown, and he feels like a walking fiction, an impostor, a phoney, a charlatan, a poser and fake, having rejected hybridity in favour of a bounded and more predictable self as a displaced Indian. But how successfully is cultural hybridity fictionalized in The Satanic Verses? In his essay “Philosophical Materialism in The Satanic Verses,” Pierre François suggests that Rushdie has not succeeded, and that he, “the god-basher,” becomes “tediously verbose and long-winded only when he depicts the godless, hybridized, intellectual quarters of Bombay” where Zeeny Vakil, Chamcha’s “instructor in cultural hybridity” resides (316), concluding that “Rushdie may have sown off the literary branch on which he has been sitting” (Reading Rushdie 318). As an unreconstructed dialectician, François clearly wants to keep categories and distinctions firmly in place, and he decides to push hybridity aside as a contagion. In Rushdie’s novel, the idea of becoming otherwise is clearly not a dialectical synthesis, but an unfinalizable negotiation across cultural divides through the refracting lens of alterity, and as I have argued, Zeeny Vakil is primarily a figure deployed by Rushdie to mark India as hybridized, and to deconstruct and set identities in motion. As I have also argued, transcultural hybridity has to be teased out from the novel’s heteroglossia, satire and juxtaposed episodes, since no synthesis or thread is
provided by a reliable narrator to lead the reader out of the maze the novel constructs (and deconstructs). Moreover, the novel is clearly a thinking piece: cultural hybridity unfolds in many voices and modes, and across many worlds. In the process, the Englishness of the English language comes under intense pressure as the distance between the metropolitan worlds of Bombay and London, or “Bombabel” and “Babylondon,” shrinks:

How far did they fly? Five and a half thousand as the crow. Or: from Indianness to Englishness, an immense distance. Or: not very far at all, because they rose from one great city, fell to another. The distance between cities is always small; a villager travelling a hundred miles to town, traverses emptier, darker, more terrifying space. (41)

Ironically, it is Zeeny Vakil, the Bombay hybridizer and author of a book “on the confining myth of authenticity” (52), who forces Chamcha to confront and ultimately accept the inauthenticity of his Englishness as well as his Indianness: “You know what you are, I’ll tell you. A deserter is what, more English than your Angrez accent wrapped around you like a flag, and don’t think it’s so perfect, it slips baba, like a false moustache” (53). Vakil’s taunt provokes Chamcha to add some dangerous supplements to amplify the range and versatility of his disembodied English voice:

He made carpets speak in warehouse advertisements, he did celebrity impersonations, baked beans, frozen peas. On the radio he could convince an audience that he was Russian, Chinese, Sicilian, the president of the United States. Once, in a radio play for thirty-seven voices, he interpreted every single part under a variety of pseudonyms, and nobody ever worked it out. (60)

Zeeny Vakil immediately grasps the metonymic significance of Chamcha’s disembodied voice: “They pay you to imitate them, as long as they don't have to look at you. Your voice becomes famous but they hide your face” (60), she howls, and Chamcha finally realizes that his difference has rendered him invisible as an Englishman, forcing him to shed his body in order to put on English voices. Indian in England, and English in India, he has become a ghost, a voice-over, who can pass for an authentic voice, but whose face betrays him as an outsider in England. Saladin Chamcha’s alterity has made him
(in)visible, and as is generally the case in passing, the fear of discovery haunts him. Invisible in his Englishness, he has become a sad mimic and clown. As a displaced Indian, he courts the risk of becoming an eternal stranger in England.

Can a national culture then become oppressive? Since the nation-state posits birthright as its natural order, migrants automatically rank differently as outsiders, and are expected to accept their lot as marginalized others as if it were normal and sanctioned. Racial difference amplifies the marginalization, as Zeen Vakil’s diagnosis of Saladin Chamcha’s reduction to a voice illustrates, and her diagnosis is a wake-up call:

[When] you forget people are watching, you just look blank. An empty slate, nobody home ... the big star whose face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs, who has to travel to wogland with some two-bit company, playing the babu part on top of it, just to get into a play. They kick you around, and still you stay, you love them, bloody slave mentality. (61)

Thus, cultural membership restricts people’s freedom to make life choices by setting limits to what their legitimate expectations should be, while freedom implies choices among a wide range of options. Chamcha is reduced to a voice, or to accepting ethnic parts on the stage. From the perspective of migrants, being ranked as an outsider or insider is the crucial distinction. As Michael Walzer argues in Spheres of Justice, situated “within the shared social meanings of a culture, people see themselves as entitled, or not entitled, to the options that make the good life possible” (8). While ostensibly inclusive, enculturation can be construed not only as normalizing, but as exclusionary and oppressive, as Andrew Kernohan insists in Liberalism, Equality and Cultural Oppression, in which he argues that cultural practices function much like “hidden codes that exercise a diffuse power over people’s life choices” (17). From a liberal, egalitarian perspective, such as Kernohan’s, a culture is harmful if it blocks social mobility, preserves inequality, and prevents access to a better life based on difference. “But in order to understand the
power of culture to harm, we must understand cultural power as an accumulative phenomenon devoid of agency” (17), argues Kernohan. 8

The initial reaction to Saladin Chamcha’s grotesque metamorphosis into a goatman-satyr-devil illustrates Kernohan’s point. What puzzles Chamcha most is that his bizarre metamorphosis “was being treated by the others [in the police van] as if it was the most banal and familiar matter they could imagine” (158). Everybody takes his new shape as natural and proper. As Chamcha is sequestered in the detention centre with other immigrants turned into manticores, wolves, water buffalos, giant insects, and slithering snakes, he continues to search for a plausible explanation for his monstrosity, refusing to accept his grotesque transformation as deserved, normal or permanent. “‘But how do they do it?’ Chamcha wanted to know. ‘They describe us,’ the other [inmate] whispered solemnly. That’s all. They have the power of description, and we succumb to the pictures they construct” (168). When the metamorphosed migrants finally break out, the narrator notes that “the monsters ... were out, free, going their separate ways, without hope, but also without shame” (171), indicating that their fantastic and grotesque transformations reflect internalized views of their own worth and stations in life.

Rushdie’s use of the figure of metonymy is striking in this novel. He uses the rhetorical figure as an incisive reduction and versatile vehicle to explore complex ideas about mutability and change. Horns can, for example, signify both good and evil as Rushdie carnivalizes Chamcha’s demonization by turning him into a devil-hero among the migrants in Brickhall. Soon “the symbol of the goatman raised in might began to crop up on banners at political demonstrations” (287). But he also constructs entire catalogues of juxtaposed images which expand the sharp metonymic details into vivid, allegorical Mughal tapestries, or hyper-realistic Dutch Renaissance paintings brimming with life, as he begins to unsettle Chamcha’s tenuous hold on Englishness. The double-voiced discourse reveals that Chamcha, already reduced to an English voice, also married a voice which not only signifies Englishness, but rank and privilege. Here, Rushdie weaves

---

8 Kernohan, who is Canadian, uses the predicament of women as his litmus test to gauge the effects of cultural oppression.
a tapestry around the significance of the English voice out of skilfully spun, metonymic strands, which massed together reveal hidden cultural codes that inform and energize the parody. One of the ironies of the novel is that Pamela Chamcha is a social activist who is trying to bring about a more inclusive nation, while Saladin Chamcha tries to hold on to the old England her ancestry represents. As Rushdie takes his protagonist apart and puts him back together again, a marginalized and alienated Chamcha emerges from the collage:

Pamela Chamcha, née Lovelace, was the possessor of a voice for which, in many ways, the rest of her life had been an effort to compensate. It was the voice composed of tweeds, headscarves, summer pudding, hockey-sticks, thatched houses, saddle-soap, house-parties, nuns, family pews, large dogs and philistinism, and in spite of all her attempts to reduce its volume it was as loud as a dinner-jacketed drunk throwing bread rolls in a club.... Chamcha was not in love with her at all, but with that voice stinking of Yorkshire pudding and hearts of oak, that hearty, rubicund voice of ye olde dream-England which he so desperately wanted to inhabit. It had been a marriage of crossed purposes, each of them rushing towards the very thing from which the other was in flight. (180)

According to Kernohan, it is exclusion based on difference that is ultimately at play in cultural practices which preserve rank and privilege in the process of enculturation. The “accumulative harm” inherent in these exclusions, an effect he calls “cultural oppression,” occludes a different, more egalitarian set of options, since these options or templates are placed out of reach of the migrant. The good life simply becomes too hard to imagine for those who become marginalized by the dissemination of cultural beliefs that accept inequality as natural. In this scenario, which Kernohan bases on Foucault’s well-known deconstruction of the subject within the context of identity politics, cultural practices are “a form of power” without agency, or “a technique” that “subjugates and makes subject to” (Critical Inquiry, 781) by enculturating and normalizing individuals to the ideology of the established order. Thus, cultural practices, although devoid of agency, condition and subject all individuals to a culture’s hidden codes and totalizing norms. Indeed, in Foucault, authenticity, origins and identity all become oppressive forms of a culturally imposed ‘truth,’ closing down individual choice and alternative life options.
This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. (781)

Thus, cultures condition people to tacitly accept their station in life by subjecting them to coding, categorizing, and ranking. Since signification is embedded in all cultural practices, culture functions as an ideology, and its diffuse form of power creates a society that relegates certain groups to the margins using alterity as an instrument of marginalization.

In *Democracy and the Foreigner*, Bonnie Honig, a political scientist, argues that modern nation-states typically deploy a “politics of foreignness” which sets in motion a dynamics of demonization with its “insistence on total identification with an idealized object—the nation” (117). Honig suggest that this politics “drives the subject to split the beloved object into two (the good object and the bad), and to defend the former against the latter, setting the nation against the foreigner ... the good citizen against the bad immigrant; the giver against the taker” (117). This is a point that Rushdie drives home as he explores Indianness and Englishness in the novel. It is also interesting to note that Honig traces the emergence of the politics of foreignness to the widely held conviction that “the supplement of foreignness unsettles” the nation, and she argues that the idea of the disruptive foreigner is ultimately “driven by failed efforts to insist on the unity of the nation” (122). This is, paradoxically, the same argument that Rushdie redeploy to argue in favour of a “borderless nation” and to justify the role of the hybridizing foreigner as an agent of transcultural renewal. From the perspective of the nation, Honig wants to make foreignness visible in shaping the imagination of the nation by harnessing “democracy’s cosmopolitan impulses” (104), and she recognizes in the migrant a potential catalyst for a long overdue pluralization of the nation-state. Thus, Rushdie’s more inclusive and tolerant “borderless nation” becomes in Honig a nation committed to a “democratic cosmopolitanism” rooted in the nation, which makes room for “alternative sites of affect and identity against which states often guard” (104). In his essay “In Good Faith,”
Rushdie argues in a similar vein, but from a global perspective, that new intercultural ways of being, becoming and belonging are “the great possibility that mass migration gives the world” (Imaginary Homelands 394). Thus, Rushdie and Honig both posit migrants as politically and uniquely positioned to challenge nationalisms to include rather than exclude them in the name of alterity. The historical exclusion of migrants in the narration of the nation (in which “immigrants occupy a precarious position within a divided loyalty” for “not being” or “not being allowed to be nationalists”) would thus have to be transformed and inverted into a political advantage and valuable cultural capital for the nation, with alterity figured as a site of newness (106). In other words, from the perspective of the nation, the figure of the migrant would be turned from a “taker” into a “giver.”

How realistic is the utopian vision of Honig and Rushdie of immigrants and water-carriers metamorphosing into agents of democratic cosmopolitanism? Who will recognize and advocate the potential of alterity to generate new borderless nations? Bonnie Honig’s line of inquiry is based on the recognition that the figure of the lawgiver and the narratives of foundation typically involve a foreigner, as is the case with Rousseau’s social contract and the Bible’s “foreign-founder,” Moses (21). It seems to me that a movement of doubling and splitting is required here though, or a hybridization of the concept of the nation. The discourse of nationalism has to slough off its patriotism, suppress its xenophobia, and accept that foreigners typically have double or divided loyalties. But will the centre hold? Bonnie Honig and Salman Rushdie clearly think that it will, and that the time has come to move migrants and foreigners from the rearguard into the vanguard of the nation. In Strange Multiplicity, James Tully, a Canadian constitutional philosopher, argues from the centre that cultural diversity requires a different model for negotiating alterity, a model Tully borrows in part from Haida culture.

---

9 Honig’s argument here is based on Gayatri Spivak’s ideal of internationalist feminism.
10 In times of war and international political crises, any permeability in the boundary between natives and foreigners is typically fortified as lines of division are redrawn. I discuss this phenomenon in connection with Michael Ondaatje’s figure of the “international bastard” in The English Patient.
In theorizing the aspectival view of identity, James Tully collapses the same/other distinction altogether by positing the experience of otherness as “internal to one’s own identity” (13). Tully’s self/other is a contextual position produced by recognizing and respecting the otherness of self as well as others. Moreover, in Tully, the experience of cultural difference is “internal to a culture,” or nation: “This is the most difficult aspect of the new concept of culture to grasp. On the older, essentialist view, the ‘other’ and the experience of otherness were by definition associated with another culture” (13). In the new, aspectival view, no culture is homogeneous, and “the experience of otherness is internal to one’s own identity, which consists in being oriented in an aspectival intercultural space” (13). As contexts, or horizons, shift we all become others in our turn, since “cultural identity changes as it is approached from different paths and a variety of aspects come into view “ (11). As a consequence, it no longer becomes possible to think of others as distant in space and time. Cultural difference and the crisscrossing and overlapping of cultures and identities, become the norm, not the exception, and therefore “the modern age is intercultural rather than multicultural,” states Tully, adding:

The interaction and entanglement of cultures has been further heightened by the massive migrations of this century. Cultural diversity is not a phenomenon of exotic and incommensurable others in distant lands and at different stages of historical development, as the old concept of culture made it appear. No. It is here and now in every society. (Strange Multiplicity 11)

Tully is clearly describing both a paradigm shift and an intercultural meeting place, where hybridity has already begun to familiarize strangeness and traverse and scramble identities. This is a vision of the nation as plural and heterogeneous. Moreover, his complex negotiation of alterity is not based on conquest, battle, submission, homogenization, rejection or exploitation of the other. Nor is the other used as a spectral ‘othering machine’ to constitute the self. The other remains other, and does not become absorbed into the self. Tully’s strange multiplicity recognizes that every other is inherently unique and strange, and that ultimately we are all others to the other.
In the context of Rushdie’s migrants, however, it could also be argued that the decision to migrate is a form of chance taking, and the decision to “leave home” may in retrospect turn out to have been misguided, since the will to integrate, change and be changed—or in Rushdie’s words the willingness “to learn the ways of a new community”—may not lead to a wider choice of life options. As Rushdie observes in The Wizard of Oz: “the human dream of leaving [is] a dream at least as powerful as its countervailing force of roots ... of making a new life, [and] Over the Rainbow [evokes a] place ... where the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true” (23). Thus, migration is an inherently risky practice since there is no guarantee that immigrants will realize the potential of their alterity as a catalyst for new ways of being in the world and of belonging differently to the nation. From Kernohan’s liberal egalitarian and Foucauldian perspective it is the “diffuse power” of “cultural oppression” that makes inequality based on difference seem natural and induces groups of people to want less than their fair share” (25). In the novel, the self-acceptance of alienation and invisibility is evident in Saladin Chamcha who in a mood of dejection reflects: “A being going through life can become so other to himself as to be another, discrete, severed from history” (288). Chamcha’s acceptance of his alterity as a ground for exclusion here hinges on the word “discrete” to mark the paradox of his visible invisibility.

What then counts as “the good life” in the immigrant community in the wake of cultural dislocation? For example, in the world of the Shaandaar Café in London, Hind, wife of unemployed Sufyan, and the new breadwinner of her family, has settled into a spectral life mired in nostalgia in which “everything she valued has been upset by the change; had in the process of translation been lost,” and “the miasma of defeat” hangs around her dislocated life “like a bad breath” (249). London is a place of uncertainty and fear, and she feels and behaves like a hostage despite a potentially empowering role reversal. In her case, the overt violence and covert discourse of racism illustrate and amplify the “diffuse” and “accumulative” power of cultural practices to derail and circumscribe her life choices:
They] had come into a demon city in which anything could happen, your windows shattered in the middle of the night without any cause, you were knocked over in the street by invisible hands, in the streets you heard such abuse you felt like your ears would drop off but when you turned in the direction of the words you saw only empty air and smiling faces ... best thing was to stay home, not go out for so much as to post a letter, stay in, lock the door, say your prayers, and the goblins would (maybe) stay away. (250)

Chamcha’s altered state appears no less natural or deserved to him, and from the attic of the Shaandaar Café where he has taken refuge, he is slowly and painfully facing up to his monstrosity: “I am the incarnation of evil, he thought. However it happened, it could not be denied. I am no longer myself, or not only. I am the embodiment of wrong, of what-we-hate, of sin. Why? Why me? For what was he ... being punished?” (256). Paradoxically, the monster haunts the monster here. Bitterly, he recalls Zeeny Vakil’s “eclecticism, hybridity. The optimism of those ideas! The certainty on which they rested: of will, of choice” (288). In fact, the pronoun “we” in the compound “what-we-hate” (256), although mimicking the hypocritical self-righteousness of the host nation, strikes a jarring note, which reveals that he has internalized his own demonization. He has become a demonized other, a monster to himself, an example of monstrous hybridity.

Etymologically monstrum means both “that which reveals” and “that which warns” (Monster Theory 4). Chamcha’s fall from grace into monstrosity, from having “lived among them,” to living among “his own kind” in an altered state, certainly reveals how precarious his hold on Englishness has become:

Had he not pursued his own idea of the good, sought to become that which he most admired, dedicated himself with a will bordering on obsession to the conquest of Englishness? Had he not worked hard, avoided trouble, striven to become new? ... Could it be that in this inverted age ... he was being victimized ... precisely because of his pursuit of ‘the good’?--That nowadays such a pursuit was considered wrong-headed, even ‘evil’?--Then how cruel ... to instigate his rejection by the very world he had so determinedly courted; how desolate, to be cast from the gates of the city one believed oneself to have taken so long ago! What mean small-mindedness was this, to cast him back into the bosom of his people, from whom he’d felt so distant for so long! (257)

In Chamcha’s discourse notions like ‘good’, ‘evil’ and ‘new’ are sliding signifiers, as is the shifter “we,” which he inhabits to cling to his fiction of Englishness. Thus, if the devil
is an incarnation of “what-we-hate”--then his mutation can be explained only by his origins, by his being cast as an immigrant, outsider and other. His resentment at having been transmogrified from Englishness back to Indianness, literally sent back from ends to origins, can, from an egalitarian perspective, be construed as ‘evil’ only in terms of his diminished prospects. In an attempt to explain his inexplicable transformation, he is forced to conclude: “Not choice, but--at best--process, and, at worst, shocking total change” (288). Thus, his confusion here has a social and cultural explanation, as a gauge and limit of his life choices. Yet, as David L. Clark observes, “Monstrosity is not only a figure of alterity, but also a figure for the uncontrollable figuration of alterity” (Monster Theory 65). Thus the monster is a figure which calls attention to a cultural boundary that should not be crossed--or rather--one that cannot be crossed with impunity: “Newness, he had sought a different kind, but this was what he got. Bitterness too, and hatred, all these coarse things, he would enter into his new self; he would be what he had become: loud, stenchy, hideous, outsize, grotesque, inhuman, powerful” (288-89). As Jeffery Jerome Cohen observes, “monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, or perception about difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them” (Monster Theory 20).

In Rushdie’s novel, in which the natural order of things is neither sacred nor fixed, ‘evil’ is a complex force that can be harnessed for apocalyptic as well as creative forms of renewal. Predictably, Chamcha is magically restored to his human shape only after the devil is satisfied that his mutation and fall have transformed him from a sycophant into a creature capable of wreaking havoc. Ironically, at the very moment when he sheds his monstrous shape of a devil/goat, he turns into a human monster disguised by his normal shape, determined to emulate “the enigma of Iago” (424). Saladin Chamcha directs his hatred at his double: “Mr. Gibreel Farishta, transformed into a simulacrum of an angel as sure as he was the Devil’s mirror-self” (294). Blind-sided by envy and hate, he seeks revenge rather than renewal, and sets out to destroy his adversary double in the figure of Gibreel: “Oh God, the cruelty of it, that he, Saladin, whose goal and crusade it was to make this town his own, should have to see it kneeling before his
contemptuous rival!” (426). Gibreel has “become the sum of Saladin’s defeats” (425), and Saladin Chamcha drives him into a jealous rage by singing doggerel full of sexual innuendo over the phone. Stalking through the streets of London, Gibreel “wrestles through his stories and dreams” (457), and realizes belatedly that Saladin Chamcha, the man of a thousand voices, is his disembodied adversary. Despondent and deranged, Gibreel who failed to “tropicalize” London, studies the streetscape and notices red brick buildings in the Dutch style, dating back to William of Orange, and the ‘displaced’ buildings reveal that, “Not all migrants are powerless.... Conquerors and migrants from the past were clearly able to “impose their needs on their new earth, bringing their own coherence to the new-found land, imagining it afresh” (458). Feeling omnipotent and “walking in a world of fire” (456), Gibreel blows the trumpet of the exterminating angel Azreel, and sets ‘Babylon’ on fire to cleanse it by burning it to the ground. In a final irony, it is Chamcha’s adversary double, Gibreel, who rescues Chamcha from the burning inferno, which claims the lives of migrants and natives alike.

In Rushdie, a rebirth requires a constructive confrontation with the past. Thus, Saladin Chamcha’s unresolved Indian “business” has divided him against himself all along. Chamcha constructs his alienation from his father in India as a rejection, while his father addresses his son as if he were a spectre (and traitor): “‘When I die ... what will I be? A pair of emptied shoes. That is my fate that he has made for me. This actor. This pretender. He has made himself into an imitator of non-existing men’” (71). Saladin Chamcha has become neither/nor--neither Indian nor English.

It should come as no surprise then that Chamcha’s fall from his quest for authenticity occurs in India, where he finally learns to embrace inauthenticity or hybridity, as the prodigal son returns to his father’s deathbed in search of forgiveness and reconciliation. The narrator records his epiphany: “‘Now, I know what a ghost is, he thought. Unfinished business, that’s what’” (540). In India he experiences a rebirth: “To fall in love with one’s father after the long angry decades was a serene and beautiful feeling; a renewing, life-giving thing” (523). Standing at “the window of his childhood” (546), he realizes that there is no return to that miraculous land. India has changed, and so
has he. He did not come to stay, but he might do so, and Rushdie leaves that possibility wide open: “Childhood was over, and the view from this window was no more than an old and sentimental echo. To the devil with it! Let the bulldozers come. If the old refused to die, the new could not be born” (547). It is worth noting that his rearticulation of Gramsci’s ironic phrase here turns on a “refusal to die,” that is, on resistance to change and the birth of “the new” rather than a reincarnation, a second chance or a rebirth marked by “again”: “To be born again, first you have to die” (85). In fact, he has already experienced a rebirth in falling from the exploding airplane. But having come face-to-face with death, his second chance “felt like a perpetual ending,” and “the inescapability of change; of things-never-the-same; of the no-way-back” which made him afraid and confused and turned the past into “unfinished business” (260; 205). In rejecting authenticity and nostalgia as cures for his alienation, Saladin Chamcha has fallen once again, but this time into a new hybridized state of creative discontinuities. He has stepped across the line, and can finally see things in a new light, “as they are,” not as they were, and that insight includes seeing India differently. As Salil Tripathi perceptively observes about Rushdie’s imaginary homeland in his writing about the Indian world of Midnight’s Children: “The India [Rushdie] has reclaimed may not exist, because it is an India of memory, gossip stories, anecdotes. It is not an oracle, not what India is like; but what his India is like. It is an India he is willing to belong to, rather than one that may have existed” (Conversations 24).

In contrast, Gibreel Farishta, who has also returned, and who thinks of life in terms of continuities, or what Rushdie ironically calls “the Indian talent for non-stop self-generation” (Imaginary Homelands 16), is unable to reconnect to his lost Indian life and commits suicide. Thus, Gibreel’s chant as he tumbles out of the airplane: To be born again, first you have to die did not prepare him for a rebirth in India; he was expecting a homecoming, not another fall.

In discussing The Satanic Verses, I have argued that “No, not death: birth” (87), is the seminal phrase about hybridity in Rushdie’s novel in which “Hell is not other people” but the notion of an authentic and bounded self (Conversations 71). In Rushdie it is
possible to be “beastly dead” (188), as a culturally fossilized self in the wake of
displacement. In Rushdie the search for an authentic self is based on a binary logic of
either/or, which leads to the exclusion of an other who is spectral or double. This other or
double is turned into a fantastic hybrid that is internalized as abject and monstrous and
must be destroyed. Inauthenticity, however, opens up a different horizon. Rushdie’s
realization that inauthenticity, rather than authenticity, lies at the core of identities and
traditions, can be traced back to Mikhail Bakhtin. In Bakhtin’s dialogic universe, hybrids
are heterologies, formed through a dialogue in and with the world, and their ontological
ground and condition of possibility is homelessness or outsideness. In an interview,
Rushdie frames The Satanic Verses as an exploration of his own fall into homelessness:
“I wanted to write about a thing I find difficult to admit even to myself, which is the fact
that I left home” (Qtd. in Spivak; 1993, 222). In leaving India, Rushdie clearly
experienced a traumatic fall into uncertainty, and his homelessness is lodged between the
terror of change and the terror of stasis, not nostalgia for an imaginary home. From the
perspective of the migrant “the point is to arrive” (94), since “exile is a soulless country”
(208). Stepping out into the world, and facing the contingencies of life, set the process of
mongrelization in motion, and for the migrant “the step across” is irrevocable since there
is no return to origins or roots: once severed they are lost, preserved only in the aspic of
memory. The past becomes a foreign country. Thus, in Rushdie, the challenge of
hybridity depends on the migrant’s willingness to embrace uncertainty, and resist closure.

In Rushdie’s fiction, cultural hybridity is an unfinishable rearticulation of the
self, conceived as a series of “conjoinings, translations, and improvisations” (205), set in
motion by a fall into uncertainty and doubt. The fall into mutability and chaos is a
traumatic and violent event, both an unmooring and a crucible, but there can be no
transformation or rebirth without this fall. Although Chamcha, whose name means
“sycophant” and “opportunist,” is of the devil’s party, and cuts a pathetic figure—a man
alienated both in London and Bombay who embraces violence and evil—it is his
willingness to change and transform himself that is nonetheless pursued in the novel. It is
his very inauthenticity and plasticity which ultimately allow him to reconnect with his
past in a creative way. His past does not become a site of self-destruction, as it does for
his adversary double, Gibreel Farishta, but a redeemable ground of hope, renewal and becoming. In negotiating Rushdie’s “endless paradox” about hybridity, Chamcha comes to understand that one “[looks] forward by always looking back” (205), which is different from looking back over one’s shoulder expecting demons and monsters to materialize.

In Rushdie, the demonization of migrants—who turn into fantastic hybrids and demons before our eyes—implicates the dominant culture as the source and origin of these distortions and projections. In The Politics of Recognition, Charles Taylor argues that we are “far away from the horizon in which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident,” and cautions that it is not “peremptory and inauthentic judgments of equal value” that will bring about what Rushdie calls the “borderless nation,” which in Taylor’s formulation hinges on “a willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our [ethnocentric] horizons in the resulting fusions” (72). Similarly, Gayatri Spivak suggests in discussing the problematics of cultural translations in Outside the Teaching Machine that “to imagine the other as an alterity…. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical” (183). The marginalization of the migrants is, as Andrew Kernohan argues, also an effect of the self-identifying alterity of the migrant others which coerces members of a culture to accept their difference as natural, thus reaffirming the prejudices of their hosts. In internalizing the cultural difference or alterity projected onto them by the host culture, the migrants are in fact imprisoning themselves in the straightjacket of an essentialized and imaginary ethnic culture, denying themselves the scope to actualize and hybridize their difference. Thus, Rushdie’s migrants are figures of the split self. Culturally displaced, they are typically double, neither here nor there. As a result, they feel like ontological impossibilities, until they are traversed by hybridity, which gives them the agency to set themselves in motion, and the license to explore new and unpredictable ways of being in the world.
Chapter 3: Hybridity and Palimpsests in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*

In *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), the past is a world of hybridized diversity, while the present unfolds as a tragedy under the sign of fundamentalism culminating in an apocalypse. Through Rushdie’s optics of cultural hybridity, the novel records “the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity, the defeat of Many by the One” (408). In this epic battle between the forces of good and evil, the vanquished world is not completely lost, however, but remains a possible world and a source of hope that is still “glimmering like the faint traces of an overpainted picture beneath” (237). These are the traces that Rushdie attempts to make visible again. The novel evokes a bold vision of India’s historical diversity as a vibrant world in which “horizons were broad and free” in the wake of invasions, conquests and colonialism (232). As the forces of singularity violently vanquish the utopian vision of diversity it is pushed beneath the surface (180). The novel is structured like a palimpsest, and the “underneath” (India’s cultural diversity), although submerged, remains a dynamic world in which crossing lines made “possible what was impossible” (221), while the “overneath” (Hindu fundamentalism) is evoked as a dystopian and monolithic world.

Many of the themes from *The Satanic Verses* are revisited in this novel, such as the fall into chaos and uncertainty, the eruption of monstrous hybridity, which in this novel is followed by a rebirth through storytelling, and the need to rearticulate and redeem, rather than erase, the “unfinished business” of the past in order to open up a possible world under the sign of multiplicity. Rushdie deploys the eponymous figure of the Moor catachrestically to illustrate that a possible world of diversity not only has to be imagined, but actualized as well. The Moor fails to do so, and becomes an agent of its destruction instead. Since it is the past that provides a utopian vision of a hybridized world of multiplicity, its defeat becomes a cautionary tale that must be passed on.

Yet it is not until Rushdie’s Moor actually begins to tell his story that he realizes that he has been cast in a dystopian fiction and must tell his tale to change the course of
history. But, as James Clifford observes in “The Fort Ross Meditations,” attempting to change history by asking “what if?” is essentially a losing proposition since history has already “stacked the deck.” Only in retrospect is everything “all too clear” (329). Clifford, however, argues that “the counterhistorical work of reaching into the past for alternative futures is not about claiming that it could--or should--have been different. It’s a process of thinking historically in the present, breaking the spell of inevitability” (Routes 329). In the novel, Rushdie’s Moor inhabits several worlds, historical as well as legendary otherworlds. Mooristan is the hybridized world his mother, the artist Aurora Zogoiby, creates by imaginatively mixing and fusing images of Moorish Spain and India’s historical diversity. To break history’s “spell of inevitability,” Rushdie stages a fall into pandemonium, as the Moor, expelled from his mother’s vision of a hybridized world, tumbles towards history, into an infernal underworld of mayhem and communal violence. As he plunges, the Moor disintegrates, and with him the vision of a hybridized world of diversity:

I had fallen from grace, and the horror of it shattered the universe, like a mirror. I felt as though I, too, had shattered; as if I were falling to earth, not as myself, but as thousand and one fragmented images of myself, trapped in shards of glass.

(279)

Although the novel stresses the world-making power of the imagination, Rushdie suggests that the memory of lost worlds of hybridized diversity has to be kept alive as possible worlds or they will fade from view. Thus, unless the Moor picks up the shattered pieces of his life, he is destined to become a quintessential errant, “a poor soul fated to wander restlessly ... outside of history” to paraphrase one of Benjamin’s fragments (Illuminations 185). The Moor, however, argues that everybody is implicated in his story, and that there are no heroes and villains: “for the Barbarians were not only at our gates, but within our skins. We were our own wooden horses, each one of us full of our doom” (372). Is it reasonable then to expect heroism in pursuit of a different vision of history? Walter Benjamin, gives a partial answer in his “Theses on History” when he suggests that “no subject will take the leap in the open air of history alone: it must be persuaded to trade the security based on fragile norms for the promise that its life may be transformed
and justified anew in the history that follows it" (Illuminations 229). Rushdie can offer no such guarantees, but nor is he willing to stay on the sidelines, outside history, for as his protagonist eventually realizes,

beneath this glittering ... vision there lurked a hidden layer of activity, awaiting revelation, beneath everything I have ever known--And if the reality of our being is that so many covert truths exist behind Maya veils of unknowing and illusion, then why not Heaven and Hell too? (334)

Unlike The Satanic Verses in which Rushdie leads his readers into a labyrinth of doubt and uncertainty, in this novel of comic and tragic reversals, the polarity between good and evil is never abruptly upended, in contrast to love and hate. As a result, there can be no doubt about Rushdie’s position here; in this novel the forces of evil are destructive world-bashers, and history will eventually vindicate the vanquished and their vision of the world--but not without an imaginative effort to keep the memory of the ‘lost’ or submerged worlds of India’s diversity alive. Although his protagonists are complex characters who err and turn to violence, they are still agents, capable of making moral choices; they are not just hapless pawns or victims of history. Thus, in this novel, fate is not destiny, as Rushdie’s narrator, the Moor, would like his readers to believe.

In my discussion of The Satanic Verses, I suggest that the fantastic mode allows the reader to break the suspension between the rational and irrational. In this postmodern metafiction a different reading strategy of displacement is required to tease out hybridity and confront “the bogey of authenticity” (Imaginary Homelands 67). As Roger Y. Clark observes in Stranger Gods, Rushdie typically puts “a metafictional distance between believing and doubting the narrator’s stories,” and Clark suggests that a fitting label for Rushdie would be metacist (29). At stake in this novel is once again a judgement call on the part of the reader as to when to believe and doubt the narrator’s stories. Clark situates the hybridizing space between worlds, “between the habitual personalities of his characters and the selves into which they metamorphose, and between worldly and metaphysical versions of reality” (19). In The Moor’s Last Sigh, in which the submerged worlds are palimpsestically layered in history, the metafictional disruptions call attention
to the boundary between worlds. In a felicitous formulation, Clark allows *meta* to mark and perform "a [transworld] strategy of displacement [and] a tendency to place [other worlds] at a distance from, beneath and above" the actual world (19). Thus Rushdie’s metafictional disruptions direct us to look beneath the surface to discover palimpsests of otherness beneath the illusory surface of unity.

I will also argue then that from the perspective of cultural hybridity, the complexity of this novel resides in the obtuse narrative voice of the figure of the Moor, whose retrospective narrative has to be deconstructed in order to yield a more nuanced story than the Moor would like his readers to assemble. His self-exposure is carefully and cunningly scripted under a deceptive cover of cheerfulness. Moreover, in this performative text full of figures of distancing, doubling and displacement, Rushdie also constructs his characters as palimpsests, and permits them to display ambiguous, deceptive and elusive facades. Rushdie’s Moor, for example, who claims to be an avatar of the Spanish Moor, Bobadil, the “prince turned fool” (80), who broken-hearted rides out of Andalusia without attempting to defend his hybridized world, is in fact an active participant in the destruction of Bombay's diversity. Rushdie’s Moor, then, does not metamorphose into a romantic prince, but turns into a “modern Lucifer,” a harlequin, and a monster.

Even though the Indian Moor--whose family name Zogoiby means “unlucky” in Arabic--eventually realizes that he has taken a wrong turn and become the Spanish Moor’s monstrous incarnation, his retrospective narrative continues to mask and deflect his own culpability in the destruction of Bombay: “A tragedy was taking place all right, a national tragedy on a grand scale, but those of us who played our parts were--let me put it bluntly--clowns. Clowns! Burlesque buffoons, drafted into history’s theatre on account of the lack of greater men” (352). The word “tragedy” is carefully chosen here to indicate that a continuum has been broken, suggesting that for Rushdie the vanquished worlds evoked in the novel remain possible paradigms and points of intersection between the past and the present under the sign of hybridity. In an interview with Charlie Rose in
Conversations with Salman Rushdie (1996), Rushdie contextualizes the novel and the vanquished world of Moorish Spain embedded in the narrative:

The title is a translation of a phrase in Spanish, *el ultimo suspiro del Moor*, which is a tag attached to the story of the fall of Granada at the end of the Arab period in Spain.... And this moment, the end of Arab Spain and the weeping of the last sultan is known as the Moor's last sigh. So the story enters this novel ... as a metaphor for modern India and for the ruptures of cultures not only in India, but in the modern world. (202)

In this novel, Rushdie articulates the idea of an originary mixing and mingling of cultures as the occluded norm not only in India, but throughout human history. At stake is cultural diversity, and it is the buried legacy of India's minority cultures, the many traces left by invaders, traders and colonizers "across the face of Mother India" that now begin to occupy the writer (299). The metropolitan culture of Bombay is the real battleground. The city is "the red fort" that the forces of evil have to capture in order to vanquish India's other worlds of hybridized diversity (226). According to Rushdie, "imagination is the enemy of authoritarian rulers" (Conversations 177), and as a diasporic Indian from a minority culture, Rushdie is clearly sensitized to the plight of minority cultures everywhere. In the novel, he notes that Bombay's cultural diversity dates back to its founding in the sixteenth century as a trading post by the Portuguese, and that it is the city's hybridized diversity that makes it "Indian":

Bombay was central, had been so from the moment of its birth, the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding, and yet the most Indian of cities. In Bombay all Indias met and merged. In Bombay too, all-India met what-was-not-India, what came across the black water to flow into our veins ... what was beautiful in Bombay was that it belonged to nobody, and to all.... Those who hated India, those who sought to ruin it, would need to ruin Bombay: that was one explanation for what happened. (350-51)

In this exuberant novel of disillusionment, Rushdie argues that cultural diversity has to be nurtured and made visible as a defence against the powerful historical forces of singularity, otherwise the paradigm of multiplicity will vanish from view "with only a tear for its passing"--with the homonym "tear" here evoking both rupture and regret (4).
In the novel, history is a series of narrative conquests and reconquests, each inscribing their vision of the world by erasing or overwriting a vanquished one. Although Rushdie’s imaginative counter-story about India’s historic diversity, told in “a hyperabundance of imagery” (60), as “a bestiary, a travelogue, a synthesis, [and] a song” (84), ends on an apocalyptic note, as Bombay, the very incarnation of India’s cultural hybridity, is blown apart, the novel suggests that this is only the destruction of one possible world, not the end of the world. In this novel, in which the willingness to transgress cultural boundaries and risk transformation is valorized, laughter ultimately emerges as tragedy’s twin, directing the reader to imagine the future differently.

In this novel, Rushdie frequently symbolizes hybridity by evoking monuments and ruins which fuse cultures. They are typically constructed as complex palimpsests. Thus, when confronted with an exterior shell or hard surface, as readers, we have to negotiate the complex alterity embedded in the image. Moreover, we have to do so by responding to these images from our own position of alterity in order for hybridity to emerge from the traces and ruptures of history. In Bergsonian terms we have to make the multiplicities visible in our own image of the object. In an interview, in which Rushdie discusses the novel, he refers to cultural hybridity as a “composite entity” or a “mélange”—a mixture, a conjoining, a collage, and a series of layered palimpsests. Rushdie also argues that “creative energies” emerge as newness whenever cultures collide or rub up against each other:

Well, what happened in the Arab period in southern Spain, in Andalusia, was that a kind of composite culture grew up. Although the Muslim sultans were the rulers, there were Christians and Jews and Muslims living side by side for hundreds of years, and their cultures affected each other. So the Muslims were no longer completely Muslim and likewise the others. And this composite culture of Andalusia is something ... people have always found very attractive. Out of it came great poetry and great architecture and so on. And then it was destroyed by what [might be called] Christian fundamentalism. (Conversations 203)

11 The etymology of symbol (symbolon) is of a document or parchment torn in half which has to be realigned in order to yield its meaning.
But in the face of defeat, how can hope for a diverse world and the memory of submerged worlds be kept alive? In The Theory of the Novel, Georg Lukács suggests that "by a strange and melancholy paradox the moment of failure is the moment of value," adding that in the novel of disillusionment "[e]verything that happens may be meaningless, fragmentary and sad, but it is always irradiated by hope or memory" (126). In the novel, Rushdie's narrator echoes Lukács when he observes about his own tale that, "in the end, stories are what's left of us, we are no more than the few tales that persist" (110), and Rushdie's diasporic imagination, with its privileged access to several worlds, can still access India's storehouse of "legends, polished and fantasticated by many retellings" as a rich source of counter-memory (11). Thus, the struggle for voice and visibility is ultimately a struggle for historical being and belonging. As the novel plumbs India's historical plurality, overpainted and submerged cultures are brought to the surface and set in motion across time as tableaux vivants. Illuminated and animated, the overpainted images begin to undermine and disrupt the surface, as the agents of authenticity and purity begin to claim their golden age and a different truth buried in history:

He spoke of the golden age 'before the invasion' when good Hindu men and women could roam free. Now our freedom, our beloved nation, is buried beneath the things the invaders have built. This true nation is what we must reclaim from beneath the layers of alien empires. (299)

The allusions to the recent destruction of the Muslim mosque at Ayodhya are inescapable as the novel's "Battering Ram"--a thinly disguised caricature of Balasaheb Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena--marshals history in support of Hindu fundamentalism. In the process, he inadvertently turns the contested site into a palimpsest, thus undermining his own illusion of a unified surface as he varnishes Rushdie's truth.12 Thus, the battle lines

---

12 In 1992 the sixteenth century mosque at Ayodhya was torn down by Hindu fundamentalists since they believed that the mosque had been built on a sacred Hindu site, on top of an ancient temple dedicated to the god Rama. Roger Y. Clark notes that over 1,000 people died in the riots. Rushdie's novel chronicles the event briefly on page 363. Rushdie notes that the legend of the grounds being the birthplace of Lord Ram "wasn't a hundred years old" and was based on a vision reported by a Muslim worshipper (363). Roger Y. Clark, Stranger Gods (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001) xxii.
are drawn by those in the Hindu majority who regard multiplicity as a form of “deadly layering” (185), in which Indian Islam and other minority cultures lie plastered “palimpsest-fashion over the face of Mother India” disfiguring her beauty and purity (299). In contrast, the Moor argues that the face of Mother India is inscrutable, complex, fluid and multiple, and stands for “uncertainty ... deception and illusion” (88), and therefore cannot be claimed by one dominant culture with historical impunity. Notions of purity are an aberration, not the norm, suggests Rushdie, and any attempt to separate the layers of a palimpsest, by peeling off one layer to expose another, is an act of wanton destruction. In the novel, it is a madman who orders this irreversible act:

It was the varnish that made the task possible. Two worlds stood on her easel, separated by an invisibility; which permitted their final destruction. But in that separation one would be utterly annihilated, the other could easily be damaged. (427)

Over and against the violence of separation and destruction, Rushdie puts his trust in the power of love, suggesting that the human need to flow together and create new, possible worlds of diversity is unstoppable and that the lure of those vanquished worlds shimmer akin to a “defeated love that is greater than what defeats it” (433). Thus, the novel does not snatch victory, only hope, from the jaws of defeat. And Rushdie locates his hope for a diverse and borderless world in time, remembering that other monuments to alterity have endured. Unlike the destroyed mosque at Ayodhya, the recent flash point of Indian sectarian violence, “Alhambra, Europe’s red fort, sister to Delhi’s and Agra’s ... that monument to a lost possibility has gone on standing, long after the conquerors have fallen” (433). Rushdie’s intervention, then, consists in searching the archives and scanning the landscape for vestiges of cultural diversity across time, beyond the ‘barbarism’ of the past and the vandalism of the present. To Benjamin’s observation that “there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Illuminations 256), Rushdie adds and incorporates Derrida’s statement that all cultures are ultimately colonial in origin. Cultures, then, are hybridized palimpsests of embedded and embedding cultures, created in the wake of successive invasions and
conquests (Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness 57). Vanquished cultures may be brutally suppressed but they cannot be completely erased, and in Rushdie’s universe, terms such as “barbarism” and “civilization” can behave like shifters, as Rushdie tracks hybridity as movement, mobility and fluidity between the two poles. In Rushdie’s world there are ultimately no original cultures, and the ‘barbarian’ monuments left behind by a succession of invaders remain ‘alien’ markers only to those who believe in an unchanging condition of purity.

What then is the dynamic role of memory in Rushdie? In particular, the diffuse memory of embedded worlds of multiplicity? According to Lukács, memory becomes a creative and transformative force in the novel of disillusionment if it is used to surmount duality (127), and orchestrate “the subject’s return home to itself” (128). Here Rushdie and Lukács part company, but not entirely. Rushdie clearly wants to “surmount duality,” but unlike Lukács, he does not search for a home in unity and authenticity, but beyond notions of home and away in a world of multiplicity. One could, in fact, argue that Rushdie appropriates aspects of both Lukács and Benjamin as he searches the nation’s cultural memory for traces and fragments in which duality and multiplicity have been harnessed to create a world of hybridized diversity. In doing so, Rushdie ultimately sides with Bakhtin in valorizing unfinalizability and acceptance of homelessness, for in this novel even the search for a home become a finite and totalizing act, since it domesticates and homogenizes the world instead of expanding its horizons, and one person’s home and world inevitably become the other’s prison. But the notion of “home” can also be deterritorialized and reconfigured as time, as a form of transcendental homelessness, a concept which Rushdie as a thinker of distance seriously begins to explore in this text. Ironically, the notion of transcendental homelessness belongs to Lukács, who later dismissed it, since homelessness in his view produces inauthentic and rootless “nowhere indigenous souls” (Exile and Creativity 265). For Rushdie, however, it is the very

---

15 In discussing the foundational violence of nation states and cultures, Derrida observes that, “before the modern forms of what is called , in the strictest sense, ‘colonialism,’ all states (I would dare to say, without playing too much with the word and etymology, all cultures) have their origin in an aggression of the colonial type.” Jacques Derrida, Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness (London: Routledge, 2001) 57.
*inauthenticity* of a “nowhere indigenous soul” that holds the potential for new ways of being in the world. Yet, as Rushdie’s Moor suggests, the metaphor of the country as a mother is a pervasive one: “it’s a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land is our mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet” (136), a comment which anticipates the title of Rushdie’s next novel, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. How then does one make a home in homelessness?

In his essay, “Homelessness in the Theory of the Novel,” John Neubauer observes that Bakhtin’s and Lukács’s novelistic theories are “infused with notions of homelessness” which connect both “to each other and to their own experiences of exile” (*Exile and Creativity* 263). Neubauer argues that to side with Bakhtin is to convert Lukács’s “idealist melancholy” into Bakhtin’s future oriented “promise” (277). Neubauer notes that in an early essay, Lukács defines “novelistic action” as “a fight against time, its temporality revealing [a] transcendental homelessness,” which permits individuals to begin to locate “sense and substance” in their “nowhere indigenous soul” (263). In the later *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács begins to rescue pockets of epic timelessness, observing that “the really great novels have a tendency to overlap into the epic” (129). From Lukács’s perspective of exile, it is “the theme of homecoming” and “its relation with the transcendent homeland [childhood], which lie on the far side of time [that] makes this overlapping of the novel with the epic necessary” (129). Thus the timeless, epic qualities that Lukács wants to rescue for the novel, are ultimately tied to nation building, community and kinship—and I would add nostalgia:

> The epic hero is strictly speaking, never an individual ... and [the] theme [of the epic] is not personal destiny, but the destiny of a community.... The significance which an event can have in a world that is rounded in this way is therefore always a quantitative one; the series of adventures in which the event expresses itself has weight in so far as it is significant to a great organic life complex--a nation or a family. (66-67)

According to Neubauer, it is Lukács’s notion of transcendental homelessness which allows Bakhtin to move from the dogma of “undialogized” narratives—which “permit only epic and monologic novels”—to “dialogic double-voicing and ‘hybrid’ narrative
constructions” (274). Bakhtin does this by transforming Lukács’s melancholy “nowhere indigenous soul” into an alienated speaking subject, liberated from the fetters of “a single and unitary language” and free from “the feeling for language as myth” (274). Bakhtin also stages a return to the epic world, but via the prehistory of the novel, in order to contemporize and novelize the epic world. Bakhtin in fact also hybridizes and demythologizes the epic world, and sets time in motion, as Neubauer suggests:

[As] Bakhtin ... extends the novel’s temporal life far back into history, he telescopes it internally by claiming that it eliminates epic distance and “contemporizes” the epic world in diverse ways: through parodies and travesties ... above all by overcoming reverence. The language of depiction “now lies on the same plane as the ‘depicted’ language of the hero, and may enter into dialogic relations and hybrid combinations with it.” (276)

Following Bakhtin, Rushdie’s task, then, becomes to fictionalize India as a constellation of many Indias, as a dialogue in as many voices and styles as possible across space and time. In this novel, homelessness is a spectre haunting his characters’ need to belong otherwise. It is interesting to note, that in After Empire, Michael Gorra observes that narratives which offer resistance to dogma often deploy oral, storytelling techniques, which include “wizardry” and “acoustical fluctuations of tempo, tone, inflection and pitch” to evoke lost or unredeemable worlds (125). Rushdie’s narration is similarly performative, and it unfolds in many genres as well: as a Baroque comic opera, a Bollywood masala movie, a quixotic quest, a farce, a melodrama, a romance, and a tragedy. But can buffoonery, slapstick and social criticism go hand in hand? In Rushdie, they clearly can, and his jokes, witticisms and profanities are treated as social phenomena which must be told to evoke India’s immense cultural diversity. They are not just idle supplements, but registers of alterity which ripple across the surface and carnivitalize the text. It is worth reiterating that when Rushdie is most funny and irreverent, he is also most serious, but he can also quickly shift registers and turn didactic. In a metafictional intervention his narrator draws attention to the impending tragedy percolating under the

14 Bakhtin’s essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse” extends the genre to Greek romances, Hellenistic and Roman adventure novels and satires, and he includes the works of Apuleius, Ovid, Lucius and Petronius in the prehistory of the genre. Michael Holquist, ed., The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
layers of hilarity by suggesting that it is “easy to revel in the carnival without listening to
the Barker, to dance to the music without caring for the message in the song” (227).

Thus, it is a daring vision of an archipelago of many diverse worlds unfolding in
the wake of conquests, invasions, and colonialism that Rushdie makes visible as he
attempts to redeem a suppressed version of India’s history. He accomplishes this by
conjuring up a scrambled world of many Indias: a costume ball of metamorphosis and
disguise in which everything is in flux and nothing remains in its proper place for long:
“Christians, Portuguese and Jews. Chinese tiles promoting godless views; pushy ladies,
skirts-not-saris, Spanish shenanigans, Moorish crowns ... can this really be India? Bharat-
mata, Hindustan-hamara, is this the place?” (87). Here the enthusiastic
narrator/protagonist seems aware of the difficult task facing Rushdie, and in a bombastic,
mock-heroic voice he comes to the defence of the diasporic writer: “Majority, the mighty
elephant, and her side-kick Major-Minority, will not crush my tale beneath her feet. Are
not my personages Indian, every one? Well, then: this too is an Indian yarn” (87). In one
of the novel’s many ironic reversals, the rhetoric of the majority’s resistance to a diverse
image of India is displaced onto Vasco Miranda, an artist who prides himself on
disrespecting “all shibboleths, conventions, sacred cows, pomposities and gods” (155).
Yet on the eve of India’s independence, and in the wake of sectarian violence, Miranda, a
Goan who identifies himself as Portuguese, and thus is an immigrant to India, launches a
vitiolic attack on the Moor’s family by questioning their Indianess:

This isn’t your night. Bleddy Macaulay minutemen! Don’t you get it! Bunch of
English-medium misfits, the lot of you. Minority-group members. Square-peg
freaks. You don’t belong here. Country as alien to you as if you were what’s-the-
word lunatics. Moon-men. You read the wrong books, get on the wrong side in
every argument, think the wrong thoughts. Even your bloody dreams grow from
foreign roots.... Piece of good advice for you all. Get on the boats with the British!
Just get on the bleddy boats and buggeroff. This place has no use for you. It will
beat you and eat you. Get out! Get out while the going is good. (166-7)

Distanced as the ravings of Vasco Miranda, an artist, who will eventually choose exile in
Spain and become a mad recluse, the double-voiced utterance lampoons nationalist and
anti-imperialist discourses even as it warns that postcolonial India will have trouble
"describing herself to herself" as a diverse nation (173). Ironically, Vasco Miranda will in his turn be castigated by a Spanish official who tells him: "Men and women who leave their natural places are less than human. Either something is lacking in their souls or else something surplus has gotten inside--some manner of devil's seed" (327). While fundamentalist and nationalist discourses attempt to homogenize history and silence the voices of diversity, Rushdie gives voice to his India, by upending and pluralizing the Hindu fundamentalist vision. Rushdie's India is a plurality of knowledges and alterities:

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that--as far as India is concerned, anyway--it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw. The only people who seriously believe in this are religious extremists. The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a mélange of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. To say nothing of Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Christian, Jewish, British, French, Portuguese, Marxist, Trotskyist, Vietnamese, capitalist, and of course Hindu elements. (Imaginary Homelands 67)

In his novel, Rushdie uses fragments in the same way that Benjamin does, to create new relations between dispersed moments in time through his art of constellations. In Benjamin--as in Bakhtin--moments of past and present do not confront each other as old and new events, but as a creative conjoining of now and then, and in these spatiotemporal montages, new combinations and configurations are released into an extended present (Jetztzeit). But these moments have to be illuminated, for "[the] past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again," writes Benjamin. He also warns that, "every image that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" [my italics] (Illuminations 255). Thus, Rushdie here writes both against and for time to evoke a different composite time; a constellation of discontinuous moments, which will continue to crystalize and create previously unknown connections and continuities as they are illuminated and made visible and present. Rushdie, then, turns to time, and in its continuum of discontinuities he asserts that cultural distinctions and traditions are only

---

15 The German word Jetztzeit is a compound made up of jetzt, meaning "now" and Zeit, meaning "time"--i. e. "nowtime"--a notion that comes close to Bergson's continuum.
different narratives and perspectives on the world. Or, as Niklas Luhmann suggests about distinctions and categories in *Observations on Modernity*, “we have the ability to designate something (in contrast to something else) that is a place ... far away, a path in the direction of ... an event seen from today as past or future (or seen from a point of time past or future of today). The world has no predilection for any of these boundaries” (87).

Within the palimpsestic frame of Mooristan, where the Moor is the unifying principle, Aurora Zogoiby, the novel’s hybridizer, creates many transworld constellations of “now” and “then” and “here” and “there.” Once the Moor steps out of the epic frame, however, the constellations come apart, and his legendary double becomes a burden, a figure of predestination rather than an icon of transcultural fluidity. As long as the Moor clings to fate, rather than claiming agency for himself, he remains trapped in Aurora’s parabolic universe, “as someone special, someone with a meaning, a supernatural Entity who did not truly belong to this place, this moment, but whose presence here defined the lives of those around him, and of the age in which they lived” (220). Thus, the legendary Spanish Moor becomes his own story, and he thinks of himself as an epic hero or automaton who is not permitted to be or become otherwise. But he is also happy to belong to the fabulous world of Mooristan since it provides an escape from the harsh realities of life, “because the story unfolding on [Aurora’s] canvas seemed more and more like my autobiography, than the real story of my life” (227). When he flees the apocalypse in Bombay for Spain in search of Mooristan he feels as if he has “slipped in time,” but he is not sure “whether into the future or the past” (381). Predictably, contemporary Spain does not live up to his image of Mooristan and there is no sense of homecoming. The Spanish culture is alien and disorienting: “I had come to a place where I did not know the names of things or the motives for men’s deeds” (385). Outside the epic frame, then, Rushdie's Moor cannot actualize a hybridized world tied to a specific time or space, and must attempt to do so in his own outsideness and alterity. As the old ties to India dissolve, he begins to sense a new disorienting freedom beyond time and space in his own homelessness. His old fear of disintegration and fragmentation is replaced by a vague sense that “home” and “away” are fixed notions, tied to origins, not ends. Although he faces an uncertain future, he seems confident that he can transcend his
homelessness, and find new ways of inhabiting the world. But as he inscribes, erases, and reinscribes identities, they slip away from him, and refuse to cohere into a composite being:

I am a Jew from Spain.... I told myself, to see if the words rang true. They sounded hollow.... I am like the Catholicised Cordoba mosque, I experimented. A piece of Eastern architecture with a Baroque cathedral stuck in the middle of it. That sounded wrong too. I was nobody from nowhere, like no-one, belonging to nothing. That sounded better. That felt true. All my ties had loosened. I had reached an anti-Jerusalem: not a home but an away. A place that did not bind, but dissolved. (388)

But this freedom is short-lived, and the ties that bind the Moor to his unresolved past continue to haunt him. In the end, it is the tale that sets him free and belatedly allows him to find some redemption in his tragic life, if only to pass it on as a cautionary tale. For as Michael Gorra observes in After Empire, storytelling is a “form of resistance” that gives one “a way to survive one’s experience by comprehending it, by crafting an interpretation that will make it meaningful” (124).

Once the Moor realizes that he is not his own invention, but a composite assemblage of many times and places, he understands that “one of the true wonders of India” is its “historical generosity of spirit” (33), embodied in his grandfather’s willingness to permit the “coexistence of conflicting impulses” (32). This is a union of opposites, which the Moor ultimately fails to actualize for himself, but has nonetheless been able to visualize. Not until the very end of the Moor’s story does the reader become aware that his retrospective narration has been a final act of defiance, and a race against time as he, in Scheherazade-fashion, writes his story under the threat of being killed, thus echoing Rushdie’s own predicament. The Moor’s quixotic narration often ranges from the bombastic to the obtuse, and as a narrator he is unreliable. Although not a fool, the narrator claims that, “in the matter of resemblances, I was always a little slow” (311). His voice is also full of “sound and fury” as pity, regret and self-justification drive the narrative (4). But there is also a lyrical voice in evidence to express his longing for a
different world of multiplicity, for a road not taken, which in typical Rushdie-fashion is regularly pushed into doggerel:

I wanted to cling to the image of love as the blending of spirits, as mélange, as the triumph of the impure, mongrel, conjoining the best of us over what there is in us in the solitary, the isolated, the austere, the dogmatic, the pure; of love as democracy, as the victory of no-man’s-island, two’s company. Many over the clean, mean apartheiding Ones. (289)

It is the Moor’s mother, Aurora Zogoiby, who keeps the memory of India’s historical diversity alive in a series of palimpsestic canvases. Her paintings, which interweave many worlds, unfold as an idealized counter-narrative or “romantic fiction” embedded in the Moor’s story. Her canvases evoke a world in which Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains are made visible in “dense crowds without boundaries” (60). As her vision of India turns “inwards, to the reality of dreams” (179), the Hindu majority’s version of Indianness is gradually overpainted to make room in the Indian crowd for its minorities. But she also distances and displaces India in order to reimagine it as a diverse nation,

In a way these pictures were polemical pictures ... an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation; she was using Arab Spain to reimagine India, and this land-sea-scape in which the land could be fluid and the sea shore dry was her metaphor--idealized”? sentimental? probably--of the present and the future that she hoped would evolve. (227)

The title of the first section, “A House Divided,” stands both for India and the family saga of the da Gama-Zogoiby spice dynasty, since lines are regularly drawn and transgressed in each generation, and not all of them with impunity. In this story, it is the women of the family who are the real protagonists; they are all bold risk takers who are willing to defy conventions and break rules in order to enlarge their worlds. But since they are powerful and transgressive, they are also transformed into crones, witches, unblinking lizards, and demonized as vampires and devouring mothers who turn love into hate. The male protagonists are all Oedipally marked: they limp or have deformed or missing limbs and their transgressions continue to haunt them in brutal images of
excoriation and mutilation, since in stepping across, they do so without a backward glance or concern for the worlds they have left behind. Petrified and fearing disintegration, they construe their differences as divided loyalties, but since they are divided against themselves and antagonistic towards their past, they turn destructive, as Abraham and the Moor do, after the break with their powerful mother figures. Thus, cultural transgression comes at a price, and typically as the sacrifice of a child. But in Rushdie to stay put, to refuse to step across, marks a spiritual loss, since it closes the door to the hidden richness of unknown worlds and other potential and possible lives. At the end of the novel, Rushdie frames this lost potential as a lost or defeated love by putting his own sentiments in the ‘speech bubble’ of the Moor’s second Chimène: “[a] defeated love is still a treasure, and those who choose lovelessness have won no victory at all” (425).

The spirited Flory, a Cochin Jew, who as a young girl transgresses gender lines, and scratches challenges into the earth with a twig, daring her adversaries “to step across this line” in order to take them on (74), also lives to see a time when “nobody would cross the lines she went on drawing [as] she sat ... besieged within her own fortifications” (74). Flory is unable to actualize the potential of her own difference, since she keeps challenging those who step across to fight, and gradually her combativeness comes to signal her own unwillingness to change. Ultimately, she creates a divided universe in which her difference becomes a fortress against “all things unclean” (70). In contrast, Aurora’s vision of India as an exuberant horn of plenty can be traced back to her own act of transgression in falling in love and marrying Flory’s son across a religious divide. Yet her own grandmother’s curse: “A house divided against itself cannot stand ... may your house be for ever partitioned, may its foundations turn to dust,” continues to haunt Aurora’s imagination even though she continues to defy it (99). At the end of the novel, and the end of his life, the Moor, is indeed the last surviving member of the family. The marvellous vision of Mooristan that Aurora evokes in her paintings has also turned to dust. But the legacy of generations of transgressive women who in daring to step across borders “made possible what was impossible, demanding to be allowed to come-to-be” lingers (221), and to them the Moor dedicates his story of love, “to that most profound of
our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the
dropping of the boundaries of the self” (433). Thus, the Moor suggests that love, or the
desire to be loved, is a route or passage to the world of the other. Love, then, promises
transformations.

But, as Niklas Luhmann observes in Love as Passion, love, figured as a system
capable of interpenetrating worlds, assumes that there is “unity in difference” even
though “one cannot ‘found’ anything on ‘difference’. Thus there is [really] no basis for
love.” Yet he quickly adds that love is a passion which obviously “lays down its own
laws”(177). In this novel, love is figured both as hope and illusion, and betrayed love
“leaves a dreadful vortex,” observes Rushdie (Conversations 190). Love, then, is not a
magic open sesame wand to the world of the other, but typically a distorting illusion; a
looking-glass reflection which idealizes cultural differences as it creates a Protean,
mutable other. But unlike hate, which distorts and demonizes differences in order to
annihilate or distance the other, love is tied to hope and is a form of risk taking. In
Rushdie, it is also a step across which typically leads to a fall: “Closing our eyes, we leap
from that cliff in the hope of a soft landing. Nor is it always soft, but still, I told myself,
still, without that leap nobody comes to life” (289).

Although love and hate are passions that occupy equally irrational domains in this
novel, ultimately, only love transports while hate consumes. Thus, love creates complex
palimpsests in this novel on many levels regardless of whether the love object is India,
home, parents, children or whether the love is seen as romantic or erotic. Rushdie’s
unfortunate and errant Moor is cursed in love, as well, cruelly fated to fall in love with an
illusion and to be thrown out of his family because of a bizarre love affair. Yet as a
Rushdean protagonist, he must like Icarus attempt to fly, and having soared and crashed,
though defeated and bruised, he still remains hopeful that somehow he can “make
possible what was impossible”-- find love and affection (221). But it is above all
maternal love that he yearns for, and at the end of the novel, the Moor reflects that his
mother “never gave him back what he needed, the certainty of her love,” and he refers to
her as the “Snow Queen” (432).
The Moor, the novel’s icon of hybridity turned avenger, then, is the progeny of secular parents: an upwardly mobile Cochin Jew who marries into a wealthy Catholic-Portuguese-Indian family. Thus his world is hybridized. Yet the defiant tone and profane, sharp language of the Moor’s autopoeisis reveal that even in Bombay his liminal status as “both and nothing” is radically unstable and negatively marked. “I, however, was raised neither as Catholic nor as Jew, I was both and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. I was, what’s the word these days?—atomized. Yessir: a real Bombay mix” (104). The Moor, then, is traversed by cultural hybridity, and he codes hybridity as an unstable negotiation between good and evil, love and hate, which at the end of the novel he comes to think of as a draw:

There is in us, all of us, some measure of brightness, of possibility. We start with that, but also with its dark-counter force, and the two of them spend our lives slugging them out, and if we are lucky, the fight comes out even. (428)

As the unifying subject of Aurora’s Mooristan paintings, he becomes a magic child and time traveller. As Bobadil, the Moor is turned into a palimpsest, destined to negotiate his world as “a masked particoloured harlequin, a patchwork quilt of a man” (227). Gradually, she transforms her son from an anomaly and outcast with a deformed hand and an aging disorder into a fictional assemblage of diversity, and imparts to him her pluralist philosophy. She also provides him with wings, imagining him as “a glorious butterfly, whose wings were a miraculous composite of all the colours in the world” (227), and suggests that he may one day want to use them: “Maybe you just take off, and zoom-o right out of this life into another space and time. Maybe—who knows?—a better” (220). In an ironic metafictional gesture, Rushdie promptly collapses the boundary between dream and reality inside his fiction as Aurora’s vision of a new dawn fades, and she buys her son a ticket to Spain, admonishing him: “Only don’t go to the English. We had enough of them. Go find Palimpsest; Go see Mooristan” (235). As one narrative comments on the other, her gift of an airline ticket becomes both an image of escapism and an admission of defeat. But to keep a ticket in one’s pocket is also a disturbing
metaphor for the threat of expulsion that haunts the novel. The Moor tucks the ticket away:

I kept my back door open, and made sure there was a plane standing on the runway. I had begun to come unstuck. We had all. After the Emergency people started seeing through different eyes. Before the Emergency we were Indians. After it we were Christian Jews. (235)16

The metafictional evocation of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Measures is a disruption of “the real” and an indication that more than one world is breaking down as dreams and reality clash. As Mooristan retreats into the realm of the metaphysical, and with it the dream of a hybridized India, contemporary India becomes a nation divided against itself along communal lines. Suddenly, Aurora is categorized as a “Christian artist”, even on one occasion as “that Christian female married to a Jew” (234). At first Aurora shrugs off these new “formulations,” but her son takes note of “how easily a self, a lifetime of work and action and affinity and opposition could be washed away under such an attack” (234). Yet Aurora’s name, which means dawn, implies that her dream of a hybridized world of diversity is only temporarily defeated, deferred until the next dawn as it were. The Moor is also referred to in the text as “the son of the blooming morning” (5), and at the end of the novel, when the Moor takes leave of his father who scornfully tells him “Go find your precious Palimpsest, Go see Mooristan” (371), he notices that “it was almost dawn” and that there was “a red rim edging the planet dividing us from the sky. It looked as if someone or something had been crying” (371).

The threat of expulsion resurfaces when several of Aurora’s Moor paintings are stolen, including The Moor’s Last Sigh, and they are described by a Hindu fundamentalist as “alien artefacts” whose “disappearance from India need not be mourned since “there is much invader-history that may have to be erased” (364).17 “So we were invaders now, were we? After two thousand years, we still did not belong” (364), reflects her son. In

16 The 1975-77 Emergency in India was declared by Indira Gandhi in a bid to hold on to power. The powers under the Emergency Act were sweeping, and included forced sterilizations and slum clearings. Rushdie fictionalizes the Emergency extensively in Midnight’s Children.
17 The expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 is also evoked in the text (80; 396).
contrast, the magic place called Mooristan, which Aurora conjures up for her young son, is a vision of worlds energizing and transforming each other.

‘Call it Mooristan,’ Aurora told me. ‘This seaside, this hill, with the fort on top. Water-gardens and hanging gardens, watch towers and towers of silence too. Place where worlds collide, flow in and out of each other, and wash ofy away. Place where an air-man can drown in water, or else grow gills; where a water-creature can get drunk, but also choke ofy on air. One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo’ing into another, or being under, on top of it. Call it Palimpsestine. And above all, in the palace, you’. (226)

In Aurora’s vision of diversity worlds collide, but not violently, nor do they reveal chasms or cause vertigo. Rather, they behave like sluggish tectonic plates pushing up against each other as they transform the contours of the known world. The blurring edge between land and water remains a central theme in her art, and she pushes her palimpsests to reveal other points of contact between her two worlds: “she paints the waterline in such a way as to suggest an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another” (226). As images of ebb and flood transform and defamiliarize the edges of the familiar, the diversity of Bombay soon becomes as enticing as the fabled Mooristan, and her palimpsest can accommodate both. On her canvas they merge as Palimpsestine:

Once the red fort of Granada arrived in Bombay, things moved swiftly. The Alhambra quickly became a not-quite Alhambra; elements of India’s own red forts, the Mughal palace fortresses in Delhi and Agra, blended Mughal splendors with the Spanish building’s Moorish grace. The hill became not-Malabar looking down upon a not-quite Chowpatty, and the creatures of Aurora’s imagination began to populate it—monsters, elephants, deities, ghosts ... and other figures from history and fantasy or current affairs or nowhere, crowded towards the water like real-life Bombayites on the beach, taking their evening strolls. (226)

The line between land and sea ceases to be permeable, however, as her vision comes under Oedipal and political pressure, and her paintings now become diptychs, or separate panels side by side. When the Moor falls in love, and abandons her vision of diversity, he is banished from her canvas. Soon he loses his bearings. “A door—a whole life, a whole way of understanding life—closed behind me. I stood in darkness, lost”
Although the Moor continues to construct himself as “black and white” as “a living proof of the possibility of the union of opposites” (259), his narrative reveals his difficulties in realizing the creative potential of his doubleness in the “newly segregated universe” of contemporary India (42). The new political reality is reflected in Aurora’s art as well, and when the Moor returns to Aurora’s canvas, the romantic overlay has vanished, and she makes visible a previously unseen Bombay, in which her hybridizing glance discovers that among the poor, *bricolage*—which stands for ingenuity, transformation and improvisation—is the very condition of survival, and that the technique of creative recycling is hybrid to the core. The social realism of these canvases is also a metafictional corrective and grotesque parody of Aurora’s utopian vision:

[It] was in a highly fabulated milieu, a kind of human rag-and-bone yard that took its inspiration from the jopadpatti shacks and lean-to’s of the pavement dwellers and the patched-together edifices of the great slums and chawls of Bombay. Here everything was *collage*, the huts made of the city’s unwanted detritus, rusted corrugated iron, bits of cardboard boxes, gnarled lengths of driftwood, the doors of crashed motor cars, the windshield of a forgotten tempo; and the tenements built of poisonous smoke ... and the people’s lives, under the pressure that is only felt at the bottom of the heap had also become composite, as patched-up as their homes, made of pieces of petty thievery, shards of prostitution, and fragments of beggary.... (302)

Unlike her earlier palimpsests, in which one surface covers the other, a collage is an assemblage, which juxtaposes fragments to create a new composite image. Here, Aurora has penetrated deep into the brutal reality of contemporary Bombay, and the decay and broken lives of the shantytown dwellers mirror the collapse of her fabled Mooristan. Like the poor of Bombay, she has reached an impasse, and like them she is now reduced to collecting shards and scraps. She joins them in picking over discarded detritus in order to patch together and renew her vision of mutability and multiplicity, and in the process it becomes more inclusive but also darker. As her vision of a hybrid universe darkens, the Moor turns into a black and sinister figure of decay:
He appeared to lose, in these last pictures, his previous metaphorical role as a unifier of opposites, a standard bearer of pluralism, ceasing to stand as a symbol ... of the new nation, and being transformed, instead, into a semi-allegorical figure of decay. Aurora had apparently decided that the ideas of impurity, cultural admixture and mélange which had been, for most of her creative life, the closest things she had found to a notion of the Good, were in fact capable of distortion, and contained a potential for darkness as well as for light. This ‘black Moor’ was a new imagining of the idea of the hybrid—a Baudelairean flower, it would not be far-fetched to suggest, of evil. (303)

Similarly, in the imagination of the Moor, Aurora is both a fecund and devouring Oedipal Mother, as is Mother India, who “could turn monstrous ... be a worm rising from the sea ... murderous, dancing cross-eyed and Kali-tongued while thousands died” (61), and the two now slip and merge in his mind. The Moor recalls that in one of her early paintings, Aurora portrayed herself as the murdered Desdemona, “flung across her bed, while I was stabbed, Othello, falling towards her in suicidal remorse as I breathed my last” (225), thus revealing incestuous dreams. But his love interest, Uma, turns out to be an evil shape-shifter as well, and in another Shakespearian gender and role reversal the Moor only narrowly escapes the shared fates of Desdemona and Juliet. The Moor reluctantly realizes that love can be a deadly potion, as Uma “wild-haired, white-eyed, fork-tongued ... metamorphosed into an angel of revenge, playing a hellbat Dis-demon to my Moor” (309). Cast out from his mother’s transformative love into the communal violence on the streets of Bombay, and bitterly deceived in love, the Moor falls into what he construes as his “manhood” (290), which is, in fact, a raw Nietzschean will to power. “With what relief I abandoned my lifelong quest for an unattainable normality, with what joy I revealed my super-nature to the world!” (304). But his willing embrace of evil is not only an Oedipal rejection of his mother and her vision of unity in diversity, paradoxically, he also construes it as a homecoming. Ironically, his feeling of being “nothing special ... of being among kindred spirits among people-like-me,” now becomes his “defining quality of home” (305). Here “home” stands for authenticity. Defiantly, he addresses Aurora from the ramparts as a raging anti-Hamlet in order to exorcise her ghost: “So, mother: in that dreadful company doing those dreadful deeds, without the need of magic slippers, I found my own way home” (305). His notion of home here becomes a sliding
signifier, as the Moor rejects a home in diversity and finds a home in conformity and uniformity.

Despite the bombast and drama, this is a revolting Moor, who has embraced evil under the cover of inhabiting a “neat, tidy, obedient, moderate, unexceptional persona” (189). Although the Moor blames his mother, accusing her of infanticide, and wallows in pity, he has caused his own fall, and turned into a grotesque monster. But he clearly feels both rejected and abject, and his transformation proceeds in stages. In recurring dreams of excoriation, his sees his skin coming away from his body, and “with it all elements of [his] personality. I was becoming nobody nothing, or rather, I was becoming what had been made of me” (288). Full of self-pity he rages: “Why, a monster!—O, an age of monsters is come upon us” (288). When Mainduck, the Battering Ram, and leader of the Hindu fundamentalists, recognizes him as his new friend, and calls him the Hammer, he decides that he has finally found his “true self” whose “secret was contained in that deformed limb, which I had thrust for too long in the depths of my clothing. No more! Now I would brandish it with pride” (294-5); “Unhesitating I embraced my fate ... even joyfully I leapt” (295). Before he joins the communal street gangs and Mainduck’s thugs, he delivers a mock-Shakespearean soliloquy which is sanctimonious, pompous and reeking of self-pity:

Where you have sent me---into the darkness, out of sight--there I elect to go. The names you have given me--outcast, outlaw, untouchable, disgusting, vile, I clasp to my bosom and make my own.... Disregarded I will wear my shame and call it pride.... My tumble is not Lucifer’s but Adam’s. I fall into my manhood. I’m happy so to fall. (296)

Before Aurora falls to her death while dancing her annual defiant dance against the gods, she paints her last image, The Moor’s Last Sigh, in which she tries to rescue and redeem her wayward son, by reinserting him into the legend of Bobadil. But it is to no avail..18

---

18 Aurora dances against Ganesa (Ganesha), the elephant-headed god, who according to Richard Davis was used for “explicitly political purposes” at the beginning of the twentieth century in pre-
This was not an abstract harlequin, no junkyard collage. It was a portrait of her son, in limbo, like a wandering shade: a portrait of a soul in Hell. And behind him, his mother no longer in a separate panel, but reunited with the tormented sultan. Not berating him: well may you weep like a woman—but looking frightened and stretching out her hand. (315)

The gesture of reconciliation comes too late. Aurora’s son has already been claimed by the forces of darkness, and the reference in her painting to Dante’s vision of limbo is apt. The Moor has become an automaton and his descent deep into the underworld of Bombay, “to the great city Hell of Pandemonium, that dark-side, through-the-looking-glass evil twin of my own and golden city; not proper, but improper Bombay” (126), now speeds up the narrative, which veers into farce and slapstick, or as the text suggests, a fast moving Bollywood talkie remake of The Godfather (360). As scenes of brutal violence rapidly flick across the screen: Pow! Zap! Splat! (270); Dhaamm! Dhoomm! (306), the Moor turns into a psychopath who uses his deformed hand as a hammer, bashing heads and causing mayhem as he joins in with Hindu fundamentalist thugs and street gangs “to tame the country’s minorities” (309). The Moor’s recollection of the leaders, Mainduck and Fielding, is a chilling one, and his conversion narrative reads like an act of willed amnesia in which the future speaks with one voice, learned by rote:

Listen: I do not deny that there was much about Mainduck that elicited in me profound reactions of nausea and disgust, but I schooled myself to overcome these. I had hitched my fortunes to his star. I had rejected the old, for it had rejected me, and there was no point in bringing its attitudes into my new life. I too, would be like this, I resolved; I would become this man. I studied Fielding closely. I must say as he said, do as he did. He was the new way, the future. I would learn him like a road. (300)

Again, following Benjamin, it is the rejection of the past as ‘old’, and the construction of the ‘new’ as the future that leads to the disaster. The Moor’s mimesis is not a probing and revealing mimicry or doubling, but an imitation, and his identification with the negative

__________________________

Other is akin to love’s blind idealization of the positively marked Other. In casting himself as a tragic hero tossed about by fate, he closes down his own agency and fails to actualize the transformative potential of his duality and legacy. Moreover, in Rushdie, the future can neither be willed nor imagined as a homecoming; it remains an open, unknowable, and unfinalizable possible world unfolding in an extended present which continuously loops back into the past.

The Moor has clearly found powerful father figures in the underworld, but he has done so by betraying his past, or as he sardonically describes his rejected legacy: “my old life, that “amputated limb” (309). When his father, Abraham Zogoiby, emerges from the shadows to reclaim his outcast son and installs him in his Cashondelivery Tower, the narrative mode shifts again, this time into a detective story, in which the scales finally begin to fall from the eyes of the Moor. As the Moor turns into an informer and sleuth, he realizes that his godlike father and taskmaster in the glass tower is a ruthless overlord, who controls an underground empire of international drug trafficking and arms deals. Abraham suddenly grows “monstrous, omnipotent [and] diabolical” before his son’s eyes as the Moor becomes terrorized by his father’s ruthless and corrupt world (418). But he has more to learn about the power of illusion from this figure of duplicity, who, as a business tycoon, prides himself on his power to make “something out of nothing” (186), thus claiming godlike powers. To cover up his invisible underworld, he boasts that he, unlike artists like Aurora, who make the invisible visible, can perform miracles: “I, I, I ... brought a whole new city out of nowhere! Now you judge: which is the harder magic trick? (185). Abraham is here setting his son up for another fall. As his iconic name implies, he will, if not sacrifice, abandon his son to his fate in the ensuing battle.

Abraham’s magic trick is to wear a mask of respectability as a disguise, and in a world in which appearance becomes reality, the illusion works, but as he admits, the “magic stops working when people start seeing the strings” (187). Thus Abraham is another palimpsestic figure: the Over Lord of the Under World; God and Devil; Creator and Destroyer in an unpredictable series of fluid and shifting masks. As the power struggle between the warlords escalates, and his father qua vengeful god unleashes the
apocalypse, the Moor paints a final, tragic palimpsest of Bombay’s impending destruction. In this palimpsest, the versus that separates the two worlds prevents the layers from subverting and transforming each other, antagonistically keeping “everything in its place” (87). In this assemblage, worlds do not collide and flow into each other, but fight to destroy the other: “Under versus Over, sacred versus profane, god versus mammon, past versus future, gutter versus sky; that struggle between two layers of power in which I ... and even India itself would find ourselves trapped, like dust between coats of paint” (318).

As the Moor reflects on his role as an avenger, he recognizes in his own brutality a drive for immortality which manifests itself in the destruction of the other:

As for the beater: he, too, is changed. To beat a man is a kind of exaltation, a revelatory act, opening strange gates in the universe. Time and space come away from their moorings, their hinges. Chasms yawn. There are glimpses of amazing things. I saw, at times, the past and the future too. It was hard to cling to these memories. At the end of the work, they faded. But I remember that something had happened. That there were visions. This was enriching news. (308)

Again, following Benjamin, one can argue that it is the Moor’s rejection of the past as “old,” and his embrace of the future as “new” which brutalizes him: “I had rejected the old for it had rejected me” (300). Estranged from his parents, and betrayed in love, he lost his bearings, fell, and became a monstrous hybrid, an incarnation of Aurora’s Black Moor, “a creature of shadows, degraded in tableaux of debauchery and crime” (303). By way of an explanation, Derrida’s observation in Monolingualism of the Other is to the point: the repressed past returns in “the unleashing of a surging wave,” as the “jealous, vindictive, and hidden physis, of the generative fury of this repression—and that is why this amnesia remains, in a way, active, dynamic, powerful, something other than mere forgetfulness” (31). Similarly in Rushdie, to lock up the past as abject, rather than setting the ghosts free, creates a prison house in which captor and captive alike are caught in “a shrieking feedback loop of remembrances, a screaming of memories, whose note rose higher and higher, until it began to shatter things. Eardrums; glass; lives” (430). Once again Aurora’s vision of Bombay’s multiplicity comes to the fore as a lost, possible
world, and the Moor realizes that the city which has been destroyed, “was no longer my Bombay, no longer special, no longer the city of mixed-up, mongrel joy. Something had ended (the world?) and what remained I didn’t know ... the end of a world is not the end of the world” (376). Thus, Aurora’s legacy has taught him “to look inwards to the reality of dreams” (179), and demonstrated that the hope for a different world can be kept alive in the imagination when a particular world is destroyed.

According to Ruth Ronen, fictional possible worlds are based on the assumption that “things might have been different and that [they] can describe alternative courses things might have taken” (Possible Worlds 48), since “literary worlds actualize a world which is analogous with, derivative of, or contradictory to the world we live in” (50). As the Moor finds himself trapped between two possible worlds--one a frightening dystopia under the sign of hate, the other an idealized, utopian world of love, Rushdie reintroduces Zeeny Vakil, Chamcha’s Indian advocate of hybridity from The Satanic Verses, to guide the errant Moor out of this impasse. “I blame fiction,” she asserts. “The followers of one fiction knock down another popular piece of make-believe, and bingo! It’s war.... OK. I’d rather die fighting over great poets, than over gods” (351). Her flippant remark comes close to capturing Rushdie’s own vision and predicament since, in the novel, she becomes a victim of the fundamentalism that her voice deplores. Thus, the only synthesis this novel attempts, is a tentative and open-ended, yet hopeful one, located in “the reality of dreams” as they scuttle across the past and the present. But wherein lies the reality of dreams? And can lost or submerged worlds be construed as possible worlds?

In his classic essay on mechanical reproduction, Walter Benjamin has stressed the need to break through the epic veneer he calls aura, which constructs the past as a “unique manifestation of a distance ... [insofar] as art aims at the beautiful, and on however a modest scale ‘reproduces’ it, it conjures it up ... out of the womb of time” (Illuminations 187). Thus the aura covers the past with a veil of authenticity and frames it as beauty, and this epic quality has to be shattered by an optics of defamiliarization in order to effect “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (194). In Rushdie’s novel, the experience of shock is apocalyptic, and it does tear away the auratic
veil used to shroud an authentic past. But does it destroy the vision of a better world as well? The novel juxtaposes Maunduck’s vision of a theocracy in which “one particular version of hybridity would rule, while all India’s other peoples bowed their beaten heads” (332), with Aurora’s utopian vision grounded in the past, but oriented towards the future. Both are clearly versions of the past. Maunduck’s vision of the past is grounded in authenticity, or the politics of reactionary nostalgia for the purity of authentic origins. In contrast, Aurora’s vision of the past is a glorious utopian image of hybridity and impurity, grounded in the politics of utopian remembrance of a pluralist, tolerant past dislocated in Moorish Spain. Each version of the past as future is one person’s dystopia and the other’s utopia, and like the Moor we are asked to choose between them as they clash. One of Benjamin’s fragments suggests that in dreams, “the things I see, see me just as much as I see them, yet eyes that do not look cannot see” (189). In this curious formulation, dreams make worlds visible only if the dreamer is prepared to actualize them. In Rushdie, then, it is the veil of illusion that has to be pierced for the real to emerge from dreams thus actualizing them. Parabolically, Rushdie conjures up Mooristan to stress that risk taking is required to actualize visions as he deploys the Moor catachrestically to illustrate the tragedy of choosing authenticity rather than risking inauthenticity and uncertainty.

But upon arrival in Spain, the quixotic Moor, who participated in “the tragedy of multiplicity destroyed by singularity” (408), is still mystified, blind and confused: “The world was a mystery, unknowable. The present was a riddle to be resolved” (413). Predictably, the fabled Mooristan of Aurora’s paintings fails to materialize in Spain. Spain turns out to be a strange place, a dystopia populated by spectral, empty-eyed human automata. But since he refuses to see through the veil, preferring instead to cling to his illusion, he fails to realize that he is in limbo, and is about to enter hell on his transworld pilgrimage. As his world implodes, he again retreats into his own fiction as “a bit-player in a story in which [he] does not belong” (430). Although warned by a Virgilian guide—(with the palimpsestic name Gottfried Helsing or God’s-peace and helising; a name which places him squarely in limbo)—that Vasco Miranda is an evil spirit and devil, he remains determined to gain entrance to Vasco Miranda’s tower, convinced
that the palimpsestic painting *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in the tower will yield a different and better fiction. Once inside “Little Alhambra,” he has a fleeting feeling of *déjà vu*, a brief sensation of finally having found Mooristan. Ironically, Vasco Miranda’s red tower is and is not Mooristan. Miranda has recreated Aurora’s hybridized vision of Alhambra as an Indian Mughal folly. But it is Miranda’s vision of Mooristan, and the red tower is a trap which Rushdie deploys to parody the fantasy of a return to origins. Rushdie here places a Chinese box of interlocking fictions in front of the Moor, and walking through the rooms, he is briefly able to rekindle Aurora’s lost vision as “the settings of [her] paintings [are] brought to life” (408). But there is no sign of “Bobadil’s fancy dress ball” (227). Soon he realizes that the folly is not a “new Moorusalem, but an ugly pretentious house”(409). Unwilling to learn from and redeem his past, he cannot distinguish between Heaven and Hell. As a result, he has ended up in Hell, a prisoner of a dystopian fiction. As the story comes full circle, he reflects,

How, when the past is gone, when all’s exploded and in rags, may one apportion blame? How to find meanings in life?—One thing was certain; I was fortune’s, and my parents’ fool.—This floor is a cold floor. I should get off this floor. There’s still a fat fellow over there, and he’s pointing a gun at my heart. (418)

The novel, however, does not leave the Moor “lost in fictions” (418) or at the end of time, literally sitting on the cold floor waiting for his death. Although defeated, “flattened [and] reduced” by his life (430), and at the end of his time and line, the Moor still hopes to awaken “renewed and joyful, into a better time” (434), into a better fiction, as it were. In a last attempt to enter history and transcend time, he escapes from his prison in the red tower into Rushdie’s fiction, and nails his tragic story across the Spanish landscape. This is also the moment of his rebirth, staged as a shedding of his old skin and a last sigh for a lost world: “A Moor’s tale” (4).

In Rushdie, then, it takes the shock of an apocalypse to jostle us into seeing things “as they are,” not in time, but across time, as he continues to conjure up and make visible alternative and imaginary worlds of multiplicity. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács suggests that however fragmented the inner action, the novel is a “struggle against the
power of time” to reduce lives to a mere “meaningless becoming and dissolving” (122; 125). Thus, to find meaning, the Moor has to tell his story: “So in writing this I must peel off history, the prison of the past” (136). The novel, suggests Lukács, creates meaning in its dynamic “expanse of time,” as it loops back through the generations and integrates “their actions in a historico-social context ... as a thing existing in itself and for itself, a concrete and organic continuum” (125). In telling his story, the Moor realizes that history is not fate, but oriented towards the future, dynamic and unfolding. In contrast to Lukács’s theory of the novel, Bakhtin stresses the transformations that occur intersubjectively as worlds meet and clash and the protagonist passes through time. Bakhtin places the novelistic hero on the cusp between worlds, on the threshold to the future, and in the contact zone, as the individual emerges along with the world and ... reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. This transition is accomplished in and through him, he is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being. (Speech Genres 23)

In Bakhtin, then, as in Rushdie, the protagonist has to be willing to take risks, and change in response to the contingencies of life in order to find meaning and agency. Rushdie’s eponymous hero is unable to do so and turns into a monstrous incarnation of hybridity: a villain rather than a prince. Given the choice between the certainties of a timeless epic world, and the uncertainties of a novelistic world in the process of unfolding, the Moor defers a hybridized vision of the future, but only temporarily. In narrativizing his tragic life, albeit under the threat of death, he breaks out of his epic frame, to provide us with a cautionary tale about the apocalyptic nature of dystopian dreams of purity and authenticity. As the novel loops back and starts circulating his story again, it tells us a more hopeful story about the power of the imagination and memory, as it opens windows on other, possible worlds of diversity. As Vijay Mishra observes, “time is turned back again in order that alternative readings, alternative histories, may be released” (Ariel 9).

Rushdie wrote The Moor’s Last Sigh while in hiding and fearing for his life. As a result, it should come as no surprise that the ethical dilemmas discussed in the novel
resonate with Rushdie’s own predicament. The palimpsestic structure of the novel, in which possible worlds struggle for ascendancy as they overwrite each other, reflects Rushdie’s concerns about the impact of fundamentalism as he watches the world unfold from his own tower. In a pre-fatwa essay, Rushdie notes that time and migration has placed “a double filter between him and his subject” (India and Indianness). He writes that he turned to the imagination hoping to transcend time and space “as if the years had not passed, as if I had never left India for the West.” While writing, Rushdie became interested in “the filtration process itself ... the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool” (Imaginary Homelands 24).

According to Ruth Ronen, fictional worlds actualize a world that resembles our own, but can also evoke possible worlds that begin to interrogate and intersect with our world. In this novel, metafictional disruptions between worlds signal such points of intersection and mark divergences. In Shame, Rushdie foregrounds the mediated nature of his world constructions: “As for me: I too, like all migrants, am a fantastist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. I too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change” (87-8). In evoking the legend of Bobadil, Rushdie tacitly recognizes that history can imprison, just as in the novel the utopian home of the majority becomes the dystopian prison of the minority. In Rushdie, however, fiction, dreams, and the power of imagination allow people to visualize and actualize other, possible worlds of multiplicity. As a writer Rushdie wants to contribute to a more tolerant world, and in this novel, he remains committed to his own ideal of a borderless world in which plurality rather than singularity will ultimately emerge as the norm.
Chapter 4: Seeing Double and Double Exposures in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

In *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), Rushdie fictionalizes the turbulence of transnational migration and transculturation as his protagonists are thrown out into the world by life altering contingencies. Forced to reinvent themselves, they begin to pursue previously unimagined lives that bring them fame and fortune, but also alienation and destruction. In the novel, Rushdie explores cultural hybridity both as a creative and destructive engine of global turbulence, as his deterritorialized and radically alienated protagonists try to find meaning in a chaotic universe. To survive the pandemonium, his protagonists have to harness the turmoil of a world in the throes of globalization, or face marginalization as dispossessed and spectralized outcasts. “If we’re talking about blurring the frontiers ... then we’ve got to erase the line between us and them” (551), argues one of Rushdie’s global souls. In this novel, in which global turbulence and upheaval unhose everybody, leaving no solid foundations anywhere, the boundary between us and them runs between the rehoused and the unhoused. In the novel, Rushdie makes the boundaries between worlds and otherworlds permeable, and reaffirms the power of art to globalize and immortalize lives beyond the ultimate boundary of death. But Rushdie’s metonymical use of photographs as windows to the past also turns memory into a site of instability and uncertainty, as intercultural double-exposures scramble reality effects. These double-exposures bridge and scramble presence and absence, proximity and distance, past and present, myth and reality as they fuse, blur, mix, and superimpose images from the past and the present. The novel hybridizes these images into intercultural “time-images” and “motion-images” (Deleuze’s terms). In this novel, it is turbulence that produces cultural hybridity, while permeable boundaries permit Rushdie’s hybridizing double vision to create doubleness, doublings and double exposures.

Through the double-vision of the displaced and fragmented outsider, Rushdie continues to think multiplicity in a novel which ultimately chronicles a value crisis in
which “the world is irreconcilable” and no longer adds up (357). Moreover, suggests the narrator, the stories are “impossible stories, stories with No Entry signs on them,” stories which nonetheless “change our lives and our minds” (199). In a chaotic world transformed by massive migrations, concepts and categories deployed to describe the world rapidly lose their claims to truth, and begin to slide. As Arjun Appadurai argues from his cosmopolitan perspective in Modernity at Large, even “the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality” (48), suggesting that the cultural dynamics of global deteritorializations need to come to the fore. Appadurai argues that new narratives that “transcend specific boundaries and identities” are required in order to think multiplicity on a global scale, and he resolutely puts “culture” in quotation marks as well (49). In Modernity at Large Appadurai takes note of the effects of globalization:

In general, imagination and fantasy were antidotes to the finitude of social experience. In the past two decades, as the deteritorialization of persons, images and ideas has taken on a new force, this weight has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered in the media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies. (54)

According to Appadurai’s logic, Rushdie’s novel enters the new social practice of fantasy. It should therefore come as no surprise that Rushdie in this novel appoints a border guard to police the permeable boundary between fact and fiction in the figure of his narrator, Rai Merchant. Yet as his name implies, he is also a trader, a figure of doubling who can move between worlds. Although Rushdie’s world construction makes boundaries permeable, evokes the chaos and turbulence of global change, and pushes the tale into the realm of the fantastic and mythical, his narrative still has to be checked against “the real” world (or other imaginary ones) in order to yield hybridity as previously unimagined ways of being and becoming in the world. In order to produce new meanings, the narrative of hybridity has to reinscribe the very boundaries Rushdie crosses, erases and transcends. Thus, the novel confirms Rushdie’s endless paradox that cultural hybridity is a doubling and a practice of “looking forward by always looking back” (Satanic Verses 205). As a migrant, Rushdie straddles the boundary between the
“here and now” and “there and then” and in a pre-fatwa interview, Rushdie refers to his transworld consciousness as his “stereoscopic vision,” which allows him to “look at two societies from both the inside and the outside” (Conversations 5). For the narrator, however, India has begun to recede into memory: “It is no longer permissible to speak of places like Bombay, as people spoke of them in those days” (100); "Forget Mumbai. I remember Bombay” (158).

Although the novel spans three continents, Rushdie’s point of departure is still India. In the novel, disorientation is caused by the loss of the East as a fixed point of orientation. “Ask any navigator: the east is what you sail by. Disorientation is the loss of the East.... Lose the East and you lose your bearings, your certainties, your knowledge of what is and may be, and perhaps even your life” (176). The exiled narrator fears that India is about to slip away from him, and his own disorientation may well reflect Rushdie’s post-fatwa ontological dilemma.

In this novel the loss of the East creates a series of scrambled double-exposures as East meets West, and “the world learns to rock and roll” (472). Rushdie’s novel suggests that the monocultural model of global culture may no longer accurately describe the effects of globalization. Through the optics of hybridity, Rushdie begins to subvert and interrogate the theory of cultural dissemination as homogenization, and he argues that there is no authentic, original or pure music. Thus, music becomes a concept metaphor, which Rushdie uses to explore the effects of globalization in the face of American cultural domination, as he reverses the centre-periphery model of cultural dissemination by mounting an unlikely (but successful) conquest of the American music industry from his own icon of hybridity and cultural diversity, Bombay. In his essay “World Music and the Global Cultural Economy,” Martin Roberts adds some support for Rushdie’s intervention by arguing that the old monocultural model of globalization provides only a partial view of global culture. Roberts suggests that global culture is not simply
the Coca-Colaization of the world, but ... a tension between homogeneity and heterogeneity, uniformity and diversity, sameness and difference. The encounter between western and nonwestern cultures ... is not simply a one-way process ... but a more complex process of indigenization, whereby the interaction of global mass culture with local cultures produces hybrid cultural forms which render simple oppositions between core and periphery problematic. (Diaspora 230)

At the end of the novel, Rushdie’s narrator recalls the old, vanished world, through the novel’s concept metaphor of memory. In telling the story, he comes to realize that the past has become a distorting hall of mirrors in which memory and recollection only provide “an error-strewn, partial ... ownership of the past.... We change what we remember, then it changes us ... until we both fade together, our memories and ourselves” (504-5). The world does not come to an end, however, as Rai Merchant lets go of the ghosts and demons of the past, and learns to live with the white noise and simulacra of a new world created and mediated by the mass media. Instead, it is the otherworld that violently disintegrates. The ground quakes and towers crash, as the alternative reality fades from view and the turbulent ocean rises to swallow this spectral world. Before the permeable boundary solidifies again, one of the regular visitors from the other realm passes on words of caution from this alien, yet familiar-sounding elsewhere: “How mad to think that our time of free exploration, of blissful travel between universes, would not end!” (508). Before she vanishes from view, the otherworldly visitor tells Rai Merchant that the purpose of these visits has been to create an interconnected world: “to explore the idea of otherness, of a radical alienness with which we can have no true contact, let alone rapport” (506). What is left, she reports, is a bewildering, noisy nothingness: “Can you conceive of such damage to the real? What was true yesterday ... is no longer true today.... Yesterday is safe, today is dangerous. There is nothing to hold on to. Nothing is any longer with any certainty, so” (508). A brand new dystopian/utopian hybridized world of flux and unpredictability has replaced the certainties of the old through contact with the other. In the otherworldly mise en abîme, Rushdie ironically reiterates that the new (the fluid) cannot be born as long as the old (the solid) refuses to die, and that alterity (“the idea of otherness”) is an agent of change which produces newness. The alarm and astonishment of the otherworldly woman is palpable, as she reports that
cultural contacts transform the world in utterly unpredictable, even “dangerous” ways, leaving no solid ground.

Rushdie’s wideranging novel evokes the heroic age ushered in by the youth culture of the nineteen sixties, and the plot is based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. As Rushdie’s argonauts fan out from Bombay across the world they descend into chaotic underworlds where monsters and demons lurk. The descent into mythical realms allows Rushdie to compare the celebrity culture that surrounds rock and roll music in which ordinary human beings are suddenly “enlarged to divine proportions” with “the old pantheon of gods” (Conversations 226). Immortalization through art is a major theme in the novel, but the narrative also probes the frightening chasms of uncertainty which open in the wake of cultural displacement, as life’s contingencies radically transform the lives of his protagonists. As the world metamorphoses and becomes unpredictable and chaotic, impossible dreams can be turned into unimagined lives. As the forces of globalization begin to make themselves felt, a series of earthquakes signal that the world is in turmoil, and ruptures, rifts, and chasms appear everywhere:

These frontier earthquakes are the wonder of the age, aren’t they? Did you see that fault that just ripped the whole out of the iron curtain? “Unforgettable” doesn’t even come close. And after the Chinese opened fire in Tiananmen, did you see the rift that opened up along the entire length of the Great Wall of China.... Oh man, the things these quakes are throwing up. Poets for presidents, the end of apartheid, the Nazi gold buried for fifty years deep in Swiss bank accounts, Arnold Schwarzenegger, the Titanic, and we guess communism got buried somewhere. And those Ceausescus? So not missed. (501)

As the American music industry begins its conquest of the world, the “ground shivers, and we shake,” notes the narrator (62). The shifter “we” should here be taken to include the reader. In this novel, the world is chaotic and alterity is a riddle, which

---

19 Orpheus, the minstrel of Greek mythology, is also one of the Argonauts, and the golden fleece is clearly rock ‘n’ roll. Orpheus is so marvellous a musician that he drowns out the Sirens’ song with his lyre. He marries Eurydice, who soon afterwards dies from a snakebite. Overwhelmed by sorrow, Orpheus ceases to sing and play, until he decides to fetch Eurydice from the underworld, and he beguiles the gatekeepers with his music. They let him in to recover Eurydice on condition that he not look back. Michael Grant & John Hazel, eds., Who’s Who in Classical Mythology (London: Routledge, 1996) 250.
Rushdie’s language reflects. As the narrative partakes in the transformation of the world, it scrambles reality effects, distorts proper names, fragments chronological time, misrepresents actual historical incidents, and creates alternative realities, leaving the reader confused and disoriented. J. Hillis Miller’s observation in *Others* about Derrida’s mode of writing which, he argues, reflects “the wholly other otherness of the other as it enters the work not only as a theme but also as a perturbation in his language” aptly describes Rushdie’s world construction (269). As the world both shrinks and expands, the earth begins to obey mythological and geological rather than geographical and historical time, making the world a treacherous place to navigate:

The maps are wrong. Frontiers snake across disputed territory, bending and cracking. A road no longer goes where it went yesterday. A lake vanishes. Mountains rise and fall. Well-known books acquire different endings. Colour bursts out of black-and-white movies. Art is a hoax. Style is substance. The dead are embarrassing. There are no dead. (352)

Rushdie adds complexity by creating a double-exposure as he pushes the youth culture of dissent and vagrancy into the fabulous and grotesque, and in doing so a counter-story emerges that challenges the rhetoric of the youth culture and points to a different version of reality:

There are disappearances. Young people fail to return home and are eventually marked down as runaways. There is loose talk of bestial metamorphoses: snakes in the urban gutters, wild pigs in city parks, strange birds with fabulous plumages perching on skyscrapers like gargoyles, or angels. (391)

Although the world of the novel has a mythical overlay, Rushdie’s protagonists are all historically constructed and connected. Thus it is in the interstitial spaces between the mythical and “the real” that many of the novel’s hybridized transformations occur, as Rushdie uses the mythical and fantastic to think a world of multiplicity into being. In *Genesis*, Michel Serres unsettles scientific thought in a similar way, as he pushes it beyond old classifications into the realms of “what [the sciences] do not want and cannot think, what they sometimes forbid, what they keep one from thinking” (104). Serres’s project also tries to articulate the contingent and chaotic aspects of transformation,
mutability and change. In Serres, a crisis marks a return or shift from order to multiplicities, and the attendant flux is produced by the "omnitude of novelties" which emerges in in the "metamorphosis of things" (120). In Rushdie, it is through the upheaval of migration that "newness enters the world" ([Imaginary Homelands] 394). In constructing an alternative "motley model" of the world as a turbulent "mix of mixtures" beyond the reach of our current classifications, Serres's and Rushdie's projects intersect and begin to inform each other (114). In Serres's chaotic universe of multiplicity as in Rushdie's, there is a "mix of order and disorder," "unity and disunity, and the earth is quaking as well" (107). Serres's project, then, is similar to Rushdie's, and both try to articulate the contingent and chaotic aspects of a world in transformation.

Rushdie's novel evokes the chaos of change by staging a series of seismic eruptions, and his narrator wonders "What could one trust? How to find moorings, foundations, fixed points in a broken, altered time?" (184). In this intercultural novel full of figures of doubling such as twins, look-alikes, and simulacra, boundaries between worlds and otherworlds also become passable. Permeable boundaries allow Rushdie to turn absence into presence, play with visibility and invisibility, fuse original and copy, and bridge proximity and distance. In Rushdie's chaotic universe, the turbulence pushes his characters out into the world, but also into otherworlds and netherworlds, creating double-exposures which compress and confuse space and time. Since the boundaries between these worlds are permeable, ghostly incarnations continue to exist and interfere with the living, turning "the real" into a radically unstable point of reference and "What-if becomes the truth" (420). As a consequence, the world is out of focus and "there are no dead" (352), no firm boundaries, only flux and uncertainty.

Rai Merchant, the first-person narrator, is a New Yorker and photographer who fashions himself as a camera, as does Christopher Isherwood's narrator in [Goodbye to Berlin] "with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking" (Isherwood 11). Rushdie's narrator suggests that the mechanical eye of his camera has replaced the mind's eye, and transformed human memory into "what the camera ... [snatches] out of time. No longer a memoirist but a voyeur, I remember photographs" (158). Yet the
retrospective narration is refracted through memory, and in the novel the mechanical memory of the camera is ultimately transformed by the creative memory of the mind with its access to a multiplicity of images. Rushdie’s narrator then constructs memory as slices of time, or snapshots, rather than a fusion of space and time, and as the imagination sets time in motion, transition, change and becoming takes place in the interval between them. But his narration is also a form of recall, and recall is a point of view and angle of perception, and thus a way of gathering the chaos of multiplicity into a story unfolding in time. Despite his protestations and claims to be a mere ventriloquist’s dummy and mechanical eye, the narrator is far from reliable, and his grasp of history is far from reassuring. President John Kennedy has, for example, a narrow escape in Dallas since the assassin’s gun jammed, and Britain is actively involved in the Vietnam war (185).

Although Rai Merchant identifies himself as “an anomalous oxymoron, an un-Indian Indian” (337), he is also the invisible and silent partner—a spectral presence/absence—in a love triangle with his fellow Bombayites Vina Apsara and Ormus Cama. As a photographer, Rai Merchant prides himself on having mastered the art of making himself invisible. In the text he becomes a focalizing, spectral presence, which his consistent use of the possessive and inclusive shifter “us” throughout the text reveals. The novel starts with Vina’s disappearance in an earthquake, and Merchant’s retrospective narration, in the elegiac mode, allows him to tell the story of Vina and Ormus as if he were there, present, taking snapshots in the present tense rather than in the subjunctive mode or through the lens of the past. To paraphrase Gilles Deleuze’s description of Bergsonism, his story does not simply become a linear “succession [of snapshots], but a very special coexistence, a simultaneity of fluxes” in a radically fragmented narrative continuum in which “image-time” becomes “movement-time” (81). But Merchant’s episodic and fractured narration is also driven by his own desire to reinsert himself into the story, to become present and visible again. Although the narrative permits him to superimpose his own angle of perception on the story, he can still be present only metonymically in the text as a disembodied voice. In Michel Serres’s sense, he is a parasite who feeds off his hosts in a creative symbiosis, since in evoking the past and by transforming it into his story, he also hybridizes the recalled world as he
makes it present again. But Rai Merchant is also a hypocrite and an opportunist. He earns his professional reputation from photographs taken by a murdered colleague in India. When the controversial photographs are published under his name, Rai Merchant is forced into political exile. Ironically, the images are of invisible, absent goats.\textsuperscript{20} As an exile, Rai Merchant continues to think of himself as absent from the familiar landscape of India, hence as invisible. But his spectrality is also an effect of inhabiting the impossible middle ground of the quintessential third: a third point of intersection in a triangle; the third angle of vision; the erased third, and in the novel as the invisible intermediary between Ormus, his rival, and Vina, his beloved.

Searching for a fixed point in a disrupted and unsettled life, the exiled photographer sifts through images from the past to set the story in motion and, inevitably, "[c]ertain patterns recur, seem inescapable. Fire, death, uncertainty. The carpet whipped out from under us to reveal a chasm where the floor should have been. Disorientation. Loss of the East" (313). As does Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida, Merchant argues that the past is not less valuable because it is no longer the present. In fact, it is more important because forever unseen. Although photographs attempt to fix and freeze the past, they actually render the past invisible by pointing to something hidden beneath or beyond the image. According to Barthes, "a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see" (6). We look beyond the image to enter the realm of memory.

In this novel, Rushdie also uses the figure of the double-exposure to explore the hybridized imagination as it illuminates and transforms the chaos and flux of both the past and the present. A double-exposure is different from a photograph in that it fixes two images onto one surface, and the two superimposed images, which blur and distort each other, create a new and unpredictable composite image that has mutated and fused. But in the novel nostalgia and regret can also erupt as images frozen in time: "The day doesn’t pass when I don’t think of India, when I don’t remember childhood scenes.... It’s the past, my past" (416), observes the exiled narrator in the cadences of Jack Kerouac’s first

\textsuperscript{20} The goat is an interesting image here in that goats are associated with sin, lust and lechery. The goat is also an incarnation of the devil, and evokes the notion of the scapegoat.
person narrator, Sal Paradise, who at the end of On the Road still feels the call of the open road.

In The Ground Beneath her Feet, it is from the interval between East and West, and here and there, that intercultural hybridity emerges as a series of disorienting double-exposures. The tension between past and present is in evidence, as the exiled narrator attempts to come to terms with his own displacement, and he frames his condition in terms of mutually cancelling oppositions: "[the] fantasy of Home and the fantasy of Away, the dream of roots and the mirage of the journey" (54). The narrator’s double-voiced discourse also calls into question the Indian perspective of migration as a betrayal of roots, a forbidden dream and a form of disobedience: "In India, that place obsessed by place, belonging-to-your-place, knowing-your-place, we are mostly given that territory, and that’s that, no arguments, get on with it" (55). But India can also be found everywhere, argues the narrator, as he superimposes the India he carries with him onto the panorama of New York, where he lives, creating a transcultural double-exposure. In doing so, he pushes the layered image beyond nostalgia and exoticism, as he looks at the scene in front of him and sets it in motion:

A kind of India happens everywhere, that’s the truth too; everywhere is terrible and wonder-filled and overwhelming if you open your senses to the actual’s pulsating beat. There are beggars now on London streets. If Bombay is full of amputees, then what, here in New York, of the many mutilations of the soul to be seen on every street corner, in the subway, in City Hall? There are war-wounded here too, but I speak now of the losers in the war of the city itself, the metropolis’s casualties, with bomb craters in their eyes. So lead us not into exotica and deliver us from nostalgia. (417)

Once the exiled narrator has been transformed into an un-Indian Indian and an un-American American, he is able to observe his land of birth from a more critical distance. India can also be a closed and airless space. Again, Rushdie creates a hybridized double-exposure in the interface between presence and absence:
There are conversations going on every day in India, conversations we’d be dragged into, that we no longer wish to have ... tired arguments about authenticity, religion, sensitivities, cultural purity, and the corrupting effects of foreign travel. (416)

In Rushdie, migration is a passage through turbulence and upheaval to a new ontological state of homelessness, in a process he calls “unhousing” in his essay on The Wizard of Oz (33). Homelessness is a melancholy space marked by uncertainty. In the essay, Rushdie suggests that only protean characters who are willing to metamorphose and grow wings are able to soar in a world in which there is “no solid ground on which to stand” (33). It is worth noting that in this novel, the narrator omits the qualifier “solid” from his observation that the three argonauts “Ormus, Vina and I, we came loose” before we found “ground on which to make our stand” (55). The novel suggests that the only ground these radically alienated characters find is in perpetual motion. At the auction of the magic slippers from the land of Oz, the bidders include wizards, witches, lions and scarecrows as well as exiles, displaced persons, homeless tramps, political refugees, orphans, untouchables and outcasts, for whom the notion of home “has become a scattered, damaged, hydra-Various concept” in an “already damaged reality” (60). At the surreal auction there is a mood of quiet despair expressed as a yearning for belonging and certainty: “There are so few rainbows anymore. How hard can [they] expect even a pair of magic shoes to work?” (The Wizard of Oz 60-61). Yet Rai Merchant suggests that there is something to be gained from the turbulence of migration and the attendant loss of stability, certainty and moorings, as he stages the Rushdean fall into chaos:

Suppose it’s only when you dare let go that your real life begins?... Suppose it’s then, and only then, that you are actually free to act! To lead the life nobody tells you how to live, or when or why.... Suppose you’ve got to go through the feeling of being lost, into the chaos and beyond; you’ve got to accept the loneliness; the wild panic of losing your moorings, the vertiginous terror of the horizon spinning around like the edge of a coin tossed in the air.... You won’t do it. Most of us won’t do it.... But just imagine you did it. Great music everywhere. You breathe the music in and out. It feels better than ‘belonging’ in your lungs. (177)

---

21 The etymology of “radical” is the Latin word radix which means “root.” Radical, meaning “rootless” or “deracinated” is however derived from radicle, “a rootless subdivision of a nerve or vein.” R. W. Burchfield, ed., Fowler’s Modern English Usage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).
There is hubris as well as irony and pain in Rai Merchant’s double-voiced celebration of non-belonging and homelessness. The narrator, who constructs himself as a mortal, in contrast to the other two argonauts who come to think of themselves as immortals, is acutely aware that loss of moorings can also cause disorientation, destruction and death. As a narrator, he also doubles as a chorus and, ominously, he suggests that Ormus Cama and Vina Apsara are “deaf to the warnings of the chorus” (296).

If you are Ormus Cama, if you are Vina Apsara, whose songs could cross frontiers ... perhaps you believed that all ground could be skipped over, all frontiers would crumble before the sorcery of the tune. Off you’d go, off your turf, beyond family and clan and nation and race, flying untouchably over the minefields of taboo, until you stood at last at the last gateway, the most forbidden of all doors ... and you have finally gone too far, and are destroyed. (55)

But the world the argonauts have left behind is also shaking, and in the East the earth has begun to crack and shake. In this novel, the historical faults run deep. In Bombay of the nineteen thirties, Anglophilia suddenly became “the mark of Cain” leaving the Parsi grandees of Bombay, “who had gambled on the empire and lost” (201), disoriented and confused as their universe began to change so that “what was true yesterday is no longer true today” (508). History seems to be going “the wrong way” (38), and in order to stem the tide of historical change they turn to archaeology or mythology, “seeking fixity in knowledge, seeking solid ground beneath the shifting sands of the age” (62). On the eve of the Second World War, Sir Darius Cama, a Parsi grandee, and William Methwold, an English “property-wallah,” have sealed themselves off in a library in Bombay from a world in turmoil, seeking refuge from the strife in India and abroad in the eternal verities of Indo-European myths. But unbeknownst to the two amateur scholars, German fascists have already mythologized the Aryan connection and appropriated the swastika for their own ideological purposes. As the two freemasons attempt to build bridges between East and West, their comparative mythology neatly

22 William Methwold has transmigrated from Midnight’s Children to this novel. In the earlier novel he is revealed to be the father of Saleem. This novel also includes a brief appearance of Aurora Zogoiby from The Moor’s Last Sigh.
organizes and compartmentalizes the world. But as that world comes apart, they suddenly find themselves on the wrong side of history, and when Darius Cama steps out of the frame to take stock of those who cannot be reconciled in the grand scheme of things, the project collapses:

But what about outsideness? What about all that which is beyond the pale, above the fray, beneath notice? What about outcasts, lepers, pariahs, exiles, enemies, spooks, paradoxes? What about those who are remote?... What about people who just don’t belong?... Anywhere. To anything, to anyone. The physically unattached. Comets travelling through space, staying free of all gravitational fields. (43)

Methwold’s reply echoes the Nazi’s genocidal ideology of the thirties, and shows that crossing cultural boundaries can lead to grotesque forms of hybridized pseudo science: “Aren’t they, well, just like waste paper, and all the stuff one puts in the bin? Aren’t they simply surplus to requirements? Not wanted on the voyage? Don’t we just cross them off the list?” But Sir Darius, “the age’s unholy fool” (89), refuses to go along with Methwold’s strategy of elimination and expulsion, and his reply underwrites the thesis of the novel: “The only people who see the whole picture ... are the ones who step out of the frame” (43). This is a Bakhtinian gesture, which valorizes outsideness for its multivalent perspectives on the world, but it also incorporates Kristeva’s notion of la vérité folle, or truth in madness, for in this text the boundaries between the rational and irrational, the strange and the familiar, are transgressed as the debate about the role of outsideness is extended throughout the novel. In this novel those who step out of the frame also come to grief, and thus “the whole picture” includes crossing boundaries that most people would want to keep in place. For Darius’s son, Ormus Cama, for example, outsideness holds the key to mysterious other realities as well as multiple selves and dead twins, and his explanation reads like a pop culture version of Bakhtin’s theories:
There is a Russian word ... *Vrenakhodimost*. Outsideness. It could be I found the outsideness of what we are inside. The way out from the carnival grounds, the secret turnstile. The route through the looking glass. The technique for jumping the points, from one track to another. Universes like parallel bars, or tv channels. Maybe there are people who can swing from bar to bar, people who can ... channel-hop. Zappers. Maybe I’m a zapper myself.... Exercising a kind of remote control. (350)

In this novel, Ormus Cama, unlike his mythical alter ego, Orpheus, never looks back. Thus, the past will come back to claim him. Unmoored from the past, he lives in the future, and he argues that in order to enter this brave new world one has to “shed one’s old skin without a second thought, cross that frontier as if it didn’t exist, like a shape-shifter, like a snake” (250), and without a backward glance, step outside the picture “break the rules, deny the frame story, smash the frame” (350). Unlike, his father, Darius Cama, whose more inclusive vision includes an ethical responsibility for the other, Ormus has no concern about the fate of lost souls and outcasts. He is a romantic who argues that amnesia, or cutting oneself loose from the ties of the past, is a form of liberation for those who have the courage of their convictions, and as the concerned narrator notes, “[t]he idea of family, of community is almost dead in him ... he has come loose like an astronaut floating away from a space capsule” (147). The narrator, Rai Merchant, a political exile who did not leave India voluntarily, occupies a middle ground of uncertainty, and suggests that the stakes are high for those who like himself find themselves cast out, cut off and banished: “If [Darius Cama] was right this is the subject also. If he was wrong, then the lost are merely lost. Stepping out of the frame they simply cease to exist” and like him they become invisible and spectral (203). But it is above all the future-oriented Vina Apsara, the America-returned Eurydice of the novel, who refuses to occupy the marginalized role of the exile and outcast. Orphaned, dispossessed and cut loose from the past, she thinks of “the world as her possession” and of America as her future (124); and she constructs America as a place of non-belonging. The “vehemence of Vina’s propaganda” astonishes even Ormus, whom she is trying to recruit: ”You get to be an American just by wanting, and by becoming an American you add to the kinds of Americans it’s possible to be.... You’ll say things all wrong but they’ll at once become American ways of saying things.... Not belonging that’s the American
tradition, see? That’s the American way” (331). As an afterthought she adds: “Of course there are Americans you’ll never be,” and her list includes: “Boston Brahmins, slave owners’ sons from Yoknapatawpha, or those sad sacks on daytime confession shows ... wearing their naked subtitles and baring their clumsy souls” (331).

But in this novel, nothing ceases to exist, and those who do not belong in this world continue to exist in parallel underworlds, “tunnels of pipe and cable, the sunken graveyards, the layered uncertainty of the past. The gaps in the earth through which our history seeps and is at once lost, and retained in metamorphosed form. The underworlds at which we dare not guess” (55). Underground, ghosts, shadow selves, alter egos, doubles and dead twins continue to exist in alternative realities, and the narrator suggests that those who are cast out and dispossessed because they do not belong resurface as spectral doubles among the living.

[In] our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks.... Our libraries, our places of entertainment tell the truth. The tramp, the assassin, the rebel, the thief, the mutant, the outcast, the delinquent, the devil, the sinner, the traveller, the gangster, the runner, the mask; if we did not recognize in them our least-fulfilled needs, we would not invent them over and over again, in every place, in every language, in every time. (73)

Rushdie here pushes Darius Cama’s fourth function of otherness beyond the worlds of the novel, to challenge all systems of thought which exclude the other and create outcasts in the name of homogeneity. But Rushdie’s narrator goes one step further to suggest that those who are visibly different or do not belong--although logically they occupy an excluded middle ground between “us” and “them” in all systems of identitarian thought--have tacitly made themselves invisible in order to conform to the prevailing cultural norms of authenticity. These spectral non-belongers wear masks of authenticity to camouflage their inauthenticity in order to resist inscription in the logic of exclusion. The world, he suggests, is a schizophrenic structure, and those who do not belong are compliant hostages in what amounts to a “life-time detention centre” (223). Inauthentic and incapable of actualizing their alterity, those of the fourth dimension pass as authentic to resist ideological forces that would otherwise marginalize them as outcasts. Unlike
Ormus, who can zap between worlds, or Vina who is a confirmed non-belonger, they are outsiders trapped inside as impostors. There are, suggests Rushdie,

in every generation ... a few souls, call them lucky or cursed, who are simply born not belonging, who come into the world semi-detached, without strong affiliation to location or nation or race ... as many non-belongers as belongers, perhaps ... the phenomenon may be as “natural” a manifestation of human nature as its opposite, but one that has been mostly frustrated, throughout human history, by lack of opportunity. And not only that: for those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive, anti-social force, so that we mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers’ seal of approval. (73)

What Rushdie ironizes here is the fundamentalism of the majority. But he also illustrates Samira Kawash’s contention that identity follows from passing: “Identity is not what we are, but what we are passing for” (Kawash 147). Masks, however, can slip, and values abruptly change, and since “[t]he world is not cyclical, not eternal, or immutable, but endlessly transforms itself, and never goes back, we can assist in the transformation” (145). Rushdie here suggests that art can blaze a trail through the turbulence of disorientation by evoking a possible world under the sign of multiplicity. Ultimately, it is a globalized or borderless world that Rushdie’s diasporic imagination conjures up in the novel and explores in an asceptival fashion both as a dystopia and utopia. In her recent essay, “Losing North,” the Canadian expatriate writer Nancy Huston observes that the diasporic imagination which straddles the boundary between inside and outside and upends notions of home and away, inhabits a disenchanted world: “Expatriates are consciously (and often painfully) aware of a number of truths which, unbeknownst to others, shape the human condition in general” (9). Huston deploys Serres’s metaphor of turbulence to describe the traumatic passage from the secure bondage of singularity to the dangerous freedom of multiplicity, and with Rushdie she suggests that "were we to open ourselves utterly to the flux, the multiplicity, we should go mad. In order to preserve our sanity, we make ourselves short-sighted and amnesic” (89). But, like Rushdie, she prefers the creative madness and flux of the multiple to the sanity and amnesia of the singular. Thus, deracination stands for both pain and gain. Ultimately, argues Huston, if given a
choice between singularity or multiplicity: “Who can accept the idea of only one life?” (96). Thus, the diasporic imagination inhabits an unsettled world as it gathers scattered fragments on both sides of the boundary and navigates the chaos and turbulence of multiplicity.

Rushdie’s characters, then, have to constitute themselves between the poles of loss and gain, and the novel probes the psychic wounds that send the protagonists out into the world, and drive them to actualize their creative as well as destructive potential. All three, Ormus, Vina and Rai, leave India for the West, as their worlds collapse due to political corruption, parental rejection, deaths, murder and suicide, and the narrator notes that “their ability to become what they have it in themselves to be,” depends on “the engendering and perpetuation of special forms of pain: The noisy pain of the compulsive wanderer and the dumb pain of the one who’s left” (360). All three metamorphose into new selves to deflect pain and avoid dealing with their “families of damage and loss” (398). Only Vina, the most radically alienated of the three, with her “rag-bag of selves” (122), and her “horribly injured childhood” (429), chases her phantoms away by confronting them: “by looking them in the face” (367). Ormus is most unstable of the three and also the most self-destructive. On stage, he performs in a glass box and keeps his back to the audience since he “can’t show them his pain” (386). The narrator suggests that Ormus is “screaming” inside, and that it is his “agony” that emerges as music (387). Ormus is obsessive and driven to extremes, alternatively “oracle”, “monk” and “recluse” (418), and he prefers to withdraw into his otherworlds rather than confront his demons. The narrator wonders: “Can it be this visionary madness, the thing he fears most within himself, that’s most in tune with his world?” (288). Unable to reconcile his warring worlds, Ormus Cama turns into a monstrous hybrid and descends into an underground of his own making, while Vina Apsara is swallowed by the earthquake set in motion by their music. Thus, the ultimate fate of the protagonists comments on Rushdie’s world construction, and reminds his readers that although they dare dream big dreams and take on the world, they are also agents of their own destruction. Thus, there is a cost attached to smashing the frame.
While the world is distorted in the first part of the novel, in the second half Rushdie’s text begins to explore “the glaring contradictions in the real” by juxtaposing, destabilizing and recombining dispersed narrative segments (352). Akin to Benjamin’s constellations, each fragment carries traces of stories which have preceded it, and points to others yet to come, giving the segments multivalent new meanings as the context shifts. In this text, which often teeters on the edge of indeterminacy, the notion of outsideness as a source of dissent and newness is, however, one idea that refuses to slide into ambiguity. For, suggests the narrator, in a “polyphonic reality” (238), ultimately “[t]he unthinkable becomes thinkable” (230). Yet, in this text, which skirts madness in thinking the unthinkable as it attempts to evoke a borderless world, it is still death that is the ultimate destination.

In a final irony, the disillusioned Darius Cama, who never loses his faith in “the miracle of reason” (221), is killed by his son, the charismatic psychopath and mass murderer Cyrus Cama, whom he, as pater familias, has cast out from the family. Thus, Ormus Cama was not willing to step out of the frame. Before he dies, however, the eccentric Darius Cama writes a final essay, which as a corrective incorporates into his fourth dimension the wrath of the gods, or the destructive potential of outsideness: conflict, strife, chaos and mayhem.

His subject was the hypothetical “fourth concept” of “outsideness,” the condition of the leper, pariah, outcast or exile, whose necessity he had intuited long ago, and his evidence in support of his argument ranged from the casteless Untouchables of India (Gandhi’s Harijans, Ambedkar’s Dalits) to the Judgment of Paris; for did not Paris himself embody the outsider in this vitally significant myth? Alternatively, the outsider was Strife, the goddess who produces the golden apple. Either way, the example stood. (150)\(^\text{23}\)

As the world begins to shake, and the three main protagonists are cast out into the world, they face the challenge of translating themselves into global souls to become, in

\(^{23}\) B. R. Ambedkar was a member of a Maharashtrian untouchable community and a spokesman for the untouchables nationwide, who in 1956 along with his followers converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. Richard Davis, ed., Religions of India in Practice (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995) 20.
the words of the narrator, "worthy of the world" (74), rather than dispensable and invisible others and outcasts. As predicted by Darius Cama, they will cause strife and experience turmoil in their relentless pursuit of fame. Damaged, dispossessed and orphaned, they are now living far from everything they have ever "thought or been or known" (124). As outcasts they will never inhabit a world of certainties. Instead, they have to reinvent themselves from the turbulent space of multiplicity. As the exiled narrator suggests, "at my worst I have been a cacophony, a mass of human noises that did not add up to the symphony of an integrated self. At my best, however, the world sang out to me and through me, like a ringing crystal" (75). In the novel, the narrator speaks up for the creative potential inherent in the chaos of multiplicity. As he observes Ormus Cama from the sidelines, he notes that Ormus will not be able to sing until he understands "how to make of multiplicity an accumulating strength, rather than a frittery weakness. How the many selves can be in song, a single multitude. Not a cacophony but an orchestra, a choir, a dazzling plural voice" (299). But Ormus is both a reluctant Icarus and derivative Orpheus, and he literally has to be pushed over the edge in order to realize his potential to create a new life in music. Rushdie here frames the prosaic "push" in the discourse of popular psychology, delivered in the jingoistic language of mass marketing and advertising: "What's the most dangerous thing you can do? Do it. Where is the nearest edge? Jump off it!" (302).

Ormus's blocked creativity can be traced back to the strange tale of "Ormus Cama who claims that he found the music first" (142). This embedded tale is one of Rushdie's many allegories on fiction and creativity as a hybridizing ruse, and it comments on Rushdie's own polyphonic and open-ended text, which is full of garbled allusions and playful distortions, and thus leaves it up to the reader to find meaning in the chaos. In S/Z, however, Barthes offers both guidance and reassurance by suggesting that "multivalence is [always] a transgression" (45). Barthes argues that a polyphonic text contradicted by irony, "can carry out its basic duplicity only if it subverts the opposition between true and false, if it fails to attribute quotations (even when seeking to discredit them) to explicit authorities, if it flouts all respect for origin, paternity, propriety ... if it coldly and fraudulently abolishes quotation marks" (44). Multivalence here names the
linguistic mimicry and translation process which leads to cultural hybridity, through which notions of original and copy and true and false begin to slide, producing hybridized distortions and playful allusions. As Ormus begins to sing, for example, he mimics songs that he has heard from his dead twin, Gayomart, in his dreams. The songs are made up of “strange vowel sequences” or “non-sensical words” and they are garbled and make no sense, but they mimic the way listeners pick up and transform lyrics aurally from the air waves producing distortions (141). These lyrics are nonsensical hybrids. For example, the lyrics to Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” come out as: “The ganja my friend, is growing in the tin; the ganja is growing in the tin” (141). When the “authentic” versions of the songs later rise to the top of the hit parade, Ormus claims to have performed them first, and says that his songs are “prophetic” and thus originals not copies: “How could I say I have a dead twin, I follow him in my dreams, he sings, I listen, and these days I’m getting better at hearing the words? Getting better all the time” (187). Yul Singh, who as his name (You’ll Sing) suggests, will eventually become instrumental in Ormus’s rise to stardom, calls his bluff: “What you don’t have is material, except what you stole” (187). To which Ormus replies: “I only listen” (187). Only when he takes Vina Apsara’s advice to listen to and fuse his many inner voices instead, does he find his art and source of creativity which is a hybridizing one that blends and mixes the incongruous. “Starting as oddities, they grow quickly into giants. At once conqueror and celebrant, Ormus storms the citadels of rock and Vina’s voice ... is his weapon. Her voice is the servant of his melodies; his singing the servant of her voice” (378); “If he’s the rock she can be the roll” (359). Here Rushdie constructs a plural and multivalent voice or hybridized ‘sound’ as Orpheus and Eurydice begin to sing not only together, but this time to the world.

In Rushdie, the world is never far away, and in evoking the war in Vietnam, he constructs textual spaces that do seem to make unlikelihoods possible and strange correspondences plausible. For Ormus, who thinks of the West as “exotic, fabulous, and unreal” (260), not only arrives in America as an unlikely conqueror, but as a transformer introducing eastern, “un-American” sounds into America’s rock and roll music (379). As
a hybridizer he is thus able to claim ownership of his music while acknowledging its dual roots:

The U.S. Army (and its rock songs) went into one East and came out with a bloody nose. Now Ormus’s music has arrived like an affirmation from another East to enter the musical heart of Americanness ... driven by the democratic conviction retained by Ormus from the days when Gayomart sang the future into his ears, that the music is his as well, born not just in the U.S.A. but in his own heart, long ago and far away. Just as England can no longer lay claim to the English language, so America is no longer the sole owner of rock ‘n’ roll: that is Ormus’s unstated subtext. (378)

The narrator, who depicts himself as a realist, deconstructs Ormus’s claim that he can hear “the future’s music playing in his head” in a slightly different vein, and suggests that “Ormus’s gift of precognition gave my anti-fantastic instincts their first severe test” (503). In this layered text, a dead twin represents the dark and destructive side of the self, and Ormus’s “dead twin was in there, fleeing endlessly down some descending labyrinth of the mind, at the end of which not only music waited, but also danger, monsters, death” (183). This is the Orphic underworld into which Ormus/Orpheus ultimately descends before he is torn apart by his inner demons. But in the novel, some of the submerged otherworlds are also counter narratives, “variations moving like shadows behind the stories we know,” interpenetrating, distorting and challenging Ormus Cama’s world construction” (350). Rushdie continues: “Between the self and the other, between the visionary and the psychopath, between the lover and his love, between the overworld and the underworld, falls the shadow” of the double (145), who seeks “the revenge of the underworld” as “the fabric of the surface is being unwoven from below” (323). Ormus Cama, the surviving twin, is both empowered and frightened by these hallucinations or “slashes in the real” (436), as is the narrator, who is never able to convince himself (or the bewildered reader) that the oracular Ormus with his glaucous second eye, telltale migraines, double vision, ringing ears, near death experiences, obsessions and prolonged lapses into coma and celibacy is entirely sane. But as Ormus’s rival and fellow argonaut, he has his own score to settle and his own story to tell. Although Rai Merchant is clearly in awe of Ormus Cama’s talents as a musician, his narrative strategy is both to
demythologize and dethrone him, and he oscillates between portraying the charismatic Ormus as a genius and a madman.

Although Ormus and Vina achieve fame in America, there is soon a different edge to Ormus Cama’s American lyrics, which have a destructive undertone and become doomsday “rants in praise of the approach of chaos” (390). These songs are still “about the collapse of walls, boundaries, restraints ... and describe worlds in collision,” but now the “two universes [are] tearing into each other, striving to become one, destroying each other in the effort” (390). As Ormus’s mind begins to disintegrate, his doctrine of the two parallel realities, world and otherworld, metamorphoses from a vision of harmony into a war of the worlds. He is no longer “the boy who sings about frontiers—about going to the edge and crossing over” (377). Ormus’s lyrics are as clear an indication as any that he has crossed over into another, darker realm, inhabited by millenarian voices as well as doomsday prophets. He appears to “have vanished down a fork in reality” (368), to an underworld from which there is no return, and his lyrics reflect his transformation:

*It’s not up to you no more, you can’t choose if it’s peace or war, just can’t make choices anymore, your nightmare has come true; and when the day becomes the night, and when you don’t know wrong from right, or blind from sight or who to fight, don’t tell me you feel blue*

*The earth begins to rock and roll, its music dooms your mortal soul, and there’s nothing baby nothing you can do. ‘Cause it’s not up to you, it’s not up to you.*

(389-90)

In the novel, in which boundaries have become permeable, the narrator still attempts to draw a demarcation between fact and fiction, following an either/or logic, and his role is clearly to represent “the real” and provide a ground from which to call the fantastic realms of the novel into question. He suggests that what he sees of the real when he is on the front-line as a photographer of the world’s many conflicts is “the human race’s worst-case scenarios” (342). These pictures of an evil and cruel world continue to haunt him, for “[if] we could cut ourselves loose, then so could everything else, so could event and space and time and description and fact, so could reality itself” (343). For Rai Merchant “the real” is getting up close to “the actually existing world, the big picture of
the world as it is when somebody peels the skin off. Flayed. Red in tooth and claw. Earthrise re-shot as a bleeding broken skull hanging in exploding space” and, with a nod to Conrad “that casual pile of heads by the side of a dusty African road” (341-2). He contrasts his own engagement with the world with Ormus’s shamanistic double-vision and self-destructive behaviour. Rai notes that Ormus was “genuinely ahead of his time” when he had access to his otherworld (357), but that in New York he has lost touch with his dreams, succumbed to a bunker mentality and become a pathetic recluse and prophet of doom:

If the forking paths are coming together, if a point of confluence is ahead, what does this mean for life on the earth he knows? If such a decompartmentalization were to occur, and all verities suddenly failed, could we survive the force of the event? Ought we not to be building bunkers, arming ourselves, donning badges that identify us as fellow members of this reality and not the feared (perhaps soon the hated) other? If each of us has alternative existences in the other continuum, which of our possibilities will live on, which will disappear. If we are all twins, which twin must die? (389)

Many of Rushdie’s explorations of the hybrid condition occur in the traffic between different worlds and in the fabulous mode. The contact zone between cultures, or the interval between identity and difference, is typically displaced into the magical realm, and the airplane becomes a transition zone. In the air space, which Rushdie also explores in The Satanic Verses as a locus where anything is possible, the migrant’s hope for a better future is transmogrified into a fairy tale wish, and in Rushdie’s fantastic universe, these wishes are always ambiguous. In this novel, Rushdie deftly deploys the cadences and rhythms of rock lyrics to foreshadow Ormus Cama’s rise and fall. Once airborne, Ormus’s lyrics take on spiritual overtones: “Quake me ... [he] asks of Fate. Rock me like a baby in the bosom of music. Shake me till I rattle, shake me but don’t break me, and roll me, roll, me, roll me, like thunder, like a stone” (253). As he drifts into sleep on the airplane, and feels the past magically fall away from him, he already chases “the dragon down the Las Vegas corridors of his mind” casting himself as the boy from Bombay (253), “who will complete the American story, who will take the music and throw it up in the air and the way it falls will inspire a generation, two generations, three. Yay, America. Play it as it lays” (252). Ormus, the “provincial with stars in his eyes” is
ready to take on the world, convinced that he has a place in history, and that America is
the magic land where dreams come true (387). He is convinced that just like the
"metamorphic riddle" which amuses a boy across the aisle, he will be transformed.
"Dazzlingly, startling the brain, [as] it unfolds, deconstructs itself, then clicks together in
new, unforeseeable configurations" (346). Not surprisingly, the future king of rock and
roll soon has a revelation and experiences a rebirth as his "self takes wing ... and
overflows its bounds" (9). Rushdie parodies Ormus’s exalted state of mind in a
hallucinatory meditation which also reveals submerged anxieties:

drugged by flight, detached from the indifferent earth, he feels a certain resistance
in the air. Something fighting back against the aircraft’s forward movement. As if
there’s a stretchy translucent membrane across the sky, an ectoplasmic barrier, a
Wall. And are there ghostly border guards armed with thunderbolts watching from
high pillars of cloud, and might they open fire.... But it’s so springy, this invisible
restriction, it keeps pushing the airplane back, boeing!, boeing! until at last the
Mayflower breaks through, it’s through! Sunlight bounces off the wing into his
bleary eye ... Eleusinian, unspeakable, bright.... The person who arrives won’t be
the one who left, or not quite. (253)

The passage through the membrane in the sky into a heavenly realm, with its dual images
of fiery death and luminous rebirth, indicates that a metamorphosis can be experienced by
a borderline figure, such as Ormus Cama, as a divine calling. But the narrator is careful to
draw a line between gods and mortals, divine and human powers:

Metamorphosis ... is what supplants our need for the divine. This is where we can
perform our human magic. I’m not talking now about ... the adaptive chameleon
natures which have become so common during our migrant century; but about a
deeper more shocking capacity, which kicks in only under extreme pressure.
When we are faced with the Immense. At such a hinge moment we can
ocasionally mutate into another, final form, a form beyond metamorphosis. A
new fixed thing. (461)

In a time of constant transformation, “a new fixed thing” is clearly a trap and a delusion.
In a reversionary reading of Dante, the narrator suggests that the turbulence of hell may
be preferrable to heaven since,
beatitude is the joy that comes with belief, with certainty.... Safe in their cocoons from the storms of metamorphosis, the blessed give thanks for their unchangingness and ignore the leg irons biting into their ankles.... Beatitude is the prisoner’s surrender to his chains. (353)

In an attempt to distance himself from the notion of the “unreliable narrator,” Rai Merchant adds his own credo: “I think of faith as irony, which is perhaps why the only leaps of faith I am capable of are those required by the creative imagination, by fictions that don’t pretend to be fact, and so end up telling the truth” (123). Irony is here piled upon irony, since the narrator clearly fits the literary convention of the unreliable narrator, and as a narrator he valiantly tries to separate fact from fiction in a narrative that often slips away from him and becomes fractured and unhinged. In the novel, there are several embedded parables which indicate that the narrator, who prides himself on being a realist, finds the power of illusion hard to break.

Rushdie turns to mythology in order to explore whether the chains of destiny and cultural beliefs can be broken, and no doubt to explore what kind of ‘truth’ fictions which push the real into the realm of the fantastic, can yield. Myths are a repository of cultural beliefs, and Rushdie’s transcultural and transgressive use of myth becomes particularly interesting as a hybridizing mode in light of J. Hillis Miller’s observation in Others that the word “myth” is a true aporia, which logically cannot be two contradictory things at once, but nonetheless is, since “[on] the one hand, ‘myth’ names a story that is human, all too human, a beguiling fiction that may be dangerously untrue. On the other hand, a ‘myth’ is a story about the gods in their relations to human beings” (5). But more significant with regard to Rushdie, is Miller’s observation that the common feature of all mythology is “constant transformation” (24). Miller also suggests that a myth can be deployed as “an allegory of the inexpressible,” since it actually stages “a perpetual process of performative metamorphosis” thus allowing for a productive tension between fact and fiction (24).

Thus, mythology is a protean mode which suits Rushdie’s fertile transcultural imagination and ludic style, and he deploys a variety of myths and fairy tales from around
the globe to stage hybridity as transformations and parodic reversals, but they also give rise to fateful as well as playful foreshadowings. According to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody*, parodic forms, true to the etymology of the word *parodia*, provide "a counter-song" (23). Hutcheon suggests that the mode is "a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (20). She argues that unlike satire, comic effects are not necessary for parody, but irony is, and that pragmatic parodies are a form of reinscription with a difference, since they require repetition and provide critical difference and distance (20). Thus, in deploying myths as intertexts and by ironizing them as parodies, Rushdie can challenge cultural assumptions and certainties on several levels as he searches for new meanings in a complex universe. Rushdie suggests that popular music has in fact become the "mythology of our time" and that it has provided him with a "language of cultural reference that ... people around the world could easily get ... in the same way that people once might have [shared] a range of classical or mythological references" (223). But in contrasting the two, he also discovers that "[the] older mythology ... now requires more explanation than it used to" (Conversations, 223).

In Rushdie’s novel, then, myths both connect and transform worlds. But they also produce a palimpsest, which structures the narrative, and raises as well as thwarts the expectations of the reader. The myths, then, fuse and blur the narrative, creating hybridized distortions. The icons of rock ‘n’ roll are often scrambled as double exposures: "Ormus Cama, quiffed, side-burned and pelvis-swivelling Ormus, had never previously heard of the reigning king of rock ‘n’ roll.... In 1956 even the Pope had heard of Jesse Parker. Even the Man in the Moon." In the novel, Jesse Parker’s manager is "Colonel" Tom Presley (91).

Rushdie also uses mythology to create what Julia Kristeva calls "an Orphic world of artifice" (Black Sun 166), as he attempts to sing a new world into existence by fusing the real and the imaginary. Ormus Cama’s unhousing, for example, opens up a space of uncertainty and unreality between fact and fiction, being and becoming, which reveals that "nothing is solid ... [that] his footprints are the only fixed points in his universe" (268). In the text, this space is both a melancholy site of desolation and a staging ground for hybrid transformations in which *it is the world that is unreal and must be made real.*
From Ormus’s perspective “[e]verything must be made real, step by step... This is a mirage, a ghost world, which becomes real only beneath our magic touch, our loving footfall, our kiss. We have to imagine it into being, from the ground up” (268). Ormus’s vision is one of megalomania. Yet it is “behind the masks of his multiple identities” that his dissociated “I” asserts itself “in the field of artifice and in play,” as Julia Kristeva argues is the case with creativity infused with melancholia (Black Sun 145).

One parodic reworking which fails to smash the frame of the central myth, and suggests that the narrator is caught up in the illusion of Rushdie’s fantastic tale, occurs when the narrator, and Ormus/Orpheus’s rival in love, tries to convince Vina/Eurydice to leave her mythical partner, convinced that she feels trapped by Fate: “She couldn’t bear to leave him. She couldn’t stay” (450). Here Rushdie blurs the boundaries and creates a hybridizing tension between myth and “the real,” fact and fantasy, as Rai lays a trap for himself by suggesting that myths “require their protagonists to be stupid. To walk blithely into mortal danger, blind to the most obvious traps” (458). Vina/Eurydice picks up on his cue by noting that in the myth “Orpheus lives, Eurydice dies, right?” (460), signalling that either she does not know that Orpheus will be torn to pieces and die, or that she understands and accepts that staying with Ormus/Orpheus will mean her death.24

Ironically, Eurydice’s suitor is hoisted on his own petard when he adds the dangerous supplement “Orpheus dies too,” in which the word “too” reveals that he, who wants Vina to depart from the Orphic myth and leave Ormus, is also trapped inside the myth, and unless the frame is broken, the role reversal he suggests will not have the desired effect of rescuing her. In the ironic metafictional intervention, the narrator correctly instructs Vina about how to read the myth, but as a vehicle to invert or hybridize the myth it backfires, since Vina clearly thinks both of herself and Ormus as immortals.

24 In Greek mythology, Eurydice is a Dryad or Nymph (a tree nymph). When Orpheus returns from the underground empty handed, he becomes a lost soul, and ultimately he is torn to pieces by the Dionysian Maenads. His head falls into the river Hebrus, and cries “Eurydice” as it floats downstream. Michael Grant and John Hazel, eds., Who’s Who in Classical Mythology? (London: Routledge,1996) 251.
Yeah, but you are Orpheus too ... and meanwhile he’s the one sinking into his otherworld-underworld, and who’s going to rescue him, I bite my tongue because this is the opposite of the line I [want] to pursue: *Who if not you.* Instead, I say, It’s time men like him started rescuing themselves. And I go on, Anyway, Orpheus dies too. And having said it, I want to rip out my tongue. Wrong, wrong! But what’s said is said. (460)

Although the exchange stays within the structure of the Greek myth, in Rushdie’s transcultural universe “nomenclatural interlopers” from India also invade the Greek pantheon and stage role reversals which hybridize both cosmologies, just as “Greek gods, like everybody else, have invaded India from time to time” (61). For example, in Hindu mythology the goddess Rati rescues Kama, the god of love, from the underworld, and in this novel Vina rescues her Cama from a prolonged coma, as she attempts to escape the predictability of the myth: “So let’s never forget, I was the one who fetched him out of the underworld ... like that Hindu goddess” (323). In a further parodic inversion, Ormus does not attempt to fetch her from the underworld as Orpheus is fated to do. Instead, Ormus launches a world-wide search for impersonators of Vina, and a Vina look-alike apparently kills Ormus. The novel erases the distinction between copy and original by remaining ambiguous about whether it is Vina who returns from the underworld to claim Ormus, or one of the Vina look-alikes who kills him. However, Vina is also alluded to in the text as a petrifying Medusa in her incarnation as the orphaned girl Nissa Doodhvala: “Glistening serpents of hair lay across the wooden verandah floor. Medusa. It crossed my mind that we should look at her face only in a burnished shield lest we be turned to stone” (84). Thus, both myths clearly predestine her to die and place her beyond human intervention. It can also be argued that the narrator, who takes the last photograph of Vina as she vanishes underground, fails to rescue her once again. As Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*, in photographing her he immortalizes her as a copy of a copy, since her image paradoxically “produces Death while trying to preserve life” (92), or as the narrator ironically frames it: “Smile, honey. Smile for the reaper. Say *Die*” (439).

In a narrative which attempts to transform losses into gains through ironic reversals and parody, the photograph *cum* death mask, which becomes the defining image of Vina Apsara, and elevates Rai Merchant to fame and fortune, is surely the real irony
here. “One minute she is goddess, and the next she is property”(486). In Poetry of
Mourning, Jahan Ramazani draws attention to what he calls the economic problem of
mourning, or “the guilty thought that it is immoral to reap aesthetic profit from loss” (6).
If, as Barthes suggests, photographs are superimpositions of reality and the past (71), then
photographs are also a mode of resurrection in a hybridized elegiac mode. Rushdie
suggests that a photograph changes what we remember; it “changes us ... until we both
fade together, our memories and ourselves” (504). Memory then fuses the past and the
present in a hybridizing mode. Not surprisingly, Roland Barthes, who is searching for his
dead mother, and Rai Merchant, whose narrative attempts to resurrect Vina Apsara, both
admit that they could not capture their likenesses. However, they are not looking for a
copy but want to resurrect the original. Caught in a binary logic of authentic versus
inauthentic, original versus copy, the image will always be false: a fiction and illusion. “I
was struggling among the images partially true, and therefore totally false” (65), laments
Barthes, while the narrator admits that he has failed to immortalize Vina in her infinite
variety. Since Vina is the ultimate shape-shifter of this novel there can be neither original
nor copy, only a series of metamorphoses which put her out of reach of the camera. Thus,
Rushdie continues to push his argonauts back into the realm of illusion.

Predictably, the death of Vina Apsara reverberates across the globe, and fans
gather in stadiums and parks to worship, mourn and immortalize their dead idol, turning
her into an icon. In an interview, Rushdie suggests that he rewrote sections of the novel to
incorporate the Princess Diana-phenomenon since the novel is about the “durability of
art” (Conversations 224). In the novel, Vina’s death illustrates that with global fame
comes global mass mourning, a phenomenon which immortalizes and transforms the lost
object, not by freezing it into a death mask, nor by reincarnating it, but by turning it into a
cult object: “Vina Divina” (557). In an age of mechanical reproduction, Vina’s voice
continues to sing, just as the mythical Orpheus’s head, torn from his body and thrown
into a river, goes on singing. Metonymically, Vina’s own voice immortalizes her, as her
music continues to girdle the globe. Thus, modern technology has made the boundary
between life and death permeable. The narrator notes that Vina’s voice is left on the tape
of the answering machine at Ormus’s residence as well (557). In Rushdie, however, it is
love, not death, that is the real transformer. Predictably, the mourning quickly turns into a world-wide love-in. In death, Vina,

has momentarily re-invented [the] sense of a larger kin-ship ... amid the noxious fumes of ancient hatreds, men and women embrace. It was always Ormus Cama’s hope that it might be possible for human beings--for himself--to transcend the frontier of the skin, not to cross the colour line, but to rub it out. (480)

The narrator becomes unabashedly lyrical as he eulogizes his two companions. Vina’s voice, “surges round the world,” and her voice crosses “all frontiers,” belongs “everywhere and nowhere,” and its rhythm is “the rhythm of life” (482). Vina is both present and absent, immortalized and reincarnated, disembodied and “embodied in song” (482). Rai Merchant notes (perhaps with relief, since now he can emerge from their shadow) that in death Vina and Ormus are finally reunited, and “their love hangs in the air, its story no longer limited by corporeal or temporal constraints. This love is music now” (482). In the novel, however, Ormus/Orpheus and Vina/Eurydice leave two distinct legacies and approaches to multiplicity and hybridity which resemble Michel Serres’s two competing states of gathering and distribution. The flamboyant Vina stages a tumultuous and distributive form of multiplicity, and the narrator suggests that people remember her “for making herself the exaggerated avatar of their own jumbled selves, but pushed to the edge, or better, driven to the heights” (339). In contrast, Ormus seeks healing in music, since it allows him to gather his scattered and disruptive multiple selves. Paradoxically, he constructs a decentred, generic self that is nobody and everybody at the same time. Ormus wants to be “this guy or that guy, the fellow from over there, the person within me that I call my twin, or whoever’s out there in front of you right now. I’ll be all of them, I can do that. Here comes everybody, right?” (303). One courts danger by moving to the edge, the other seeks unity in diversity, and in the interval between them music is born.

Although Ormus and Vina have been claimed by the underground, the “Western youthquake” has already changed the globe (225), and when Rai Merchant returns to India following Vina’s death he makes contact with Anita Dharkar, a serious Bombay
journalist, who sent him on the dangerous assignment which changed both of their lives, and fearing for his life, Rai chose exile. Although brutally attacked and violated, Anita Dharkar, however, declined to leave India. “She belonged, and optimism and hope were still not dead in her.... She could not define herself, could not give herself any meaning, except here, where her roots had gone too deep and spread too wide” (246). Upon his return, Rai is disappointed to report that she now hosts a weekly “Lite News hour and music show.” Reborn as Neata Darker, she has become “an icon of the Westernized—and the rapidly Westernizing—urban Indian young. She sent me promo shots of herself got up à la rock chick and I found myself mourning the serious, patriotic journalist I used to know” (440). Restless and disappointed, he returns to Indochina, and writes a book of photojournalism, The Trojan Horse, which argues that “American International” (441), or the big corporations, have become the real winners:

Almost every young Indochinese person wanted to eat, dress, bop and profit in the good old American way. MTV, Nike, McWorld. Where soldiers had failed, U.S. values—that is, greenbacks set to music—had triumphed.... The irony was however lost on many who praised [the pictures]. What’s irony when you can celebrate this new Cultural Revolution? Let the music play. Let freedom ring. Hail, hail rock ‘n’ roll. (441)

The rock and roll revolution may not have eaten its children, only its avatars, but as the narrator discovers, popular culture certainly has hybridized and globalized the world, producing strange and inauthentic effects, which appear to be homogenizing the world. This is the view of Cyrus Cama, Ormus’s brother, now classified as dangerously insane, who from his prison cell in India condemns his famous brother, now one of the “sacred monsters of rock” (538), in a nationalist discourse which suggests that Ormus Cama’s “self-hating, deracinated music has long been at the service ... of the arrogance of the West, where the world’s tragedy is repackaged as youth entertainment and given an infectious, foot-tapping beat” (556). Cultural hybridity is here construed as a threat to India, “an attack on intercultural as well as intracultural stability,” and Cyrus suggests that his brother, the “seismopropagandist,” should be barred from “Indian soil” (536). Reluctantly, Rai realizes that the world will never be the same, and that he and India have also changed with it. “Ormus, Vina and I: three of us came West and passed through the
transforming membrane in the sky... I must say at last that I passed through the membrane too. I became a foreigner... I was turned by the fact of leaving my place of origin into an honorary member of the rank of the earth's dispossessed" (418). As an "honorary member" or exile, he can step out of the frame and claim visibility for himself in the country in which he now happens to live, ambivalent though he is about America as a superpower. In telling the tale he has come through the chaos and turbulence of the interval, and in Ormus Cama's alienation and rootlessness he has come to recognize his double, the monstrous hybrid:

Our lives tear us in half. Ormus Cama the reluctant mystic, the surviving twin, lost the double in his head and discovered instead a doubling in the whole of existence. His two eyes, seeing different whatnesses, made his head and heart ache. Something of the same sort was my fate regarding this thing, America... the America in which I led my well-off, green-carded life... But ask the rest of the world what America meant and with one voice the rest of the world answered back: Might, it means Might. A power so great that it shapes our lives even though it barely knows we exist, it couldn't point to us on a map. America is no finger-snapping bopster. It's a fist. This too was like seeing double. This was where my heartaches began. (419-20)

As the memories of his fellow argonauts fade, Rai Merchant rebuilds his life and in a final doubling he finds happiness with one of the Vina surrogates, who is busy launching her career as a singer. Thus the music continues, as does the story, yet the narrator reflects, "I myself am a discontinuous being, not what I was meant to be, no longer what I was. So I must believe--and in this I have truly become an American, inventing myself anew to make a new world in the company of other altered lives--that there is thrilling gain in this metaphoric destiny, as well as aching loss" (441). In the end, the narrative becomes an American story, as Rai, the Indian exile is tentatively rehoused, and with some relief he observes: "So this is what they feel like, I thought: roots. Not the ones we are born with, can't help having, but the ones we put down in our own chosen soil, the you could say radical selections we make for ourselves" (414). Thus, Rushdie here affirms the need to belong, not a territorialized form of belonging, nor a return to origins, but belonging based on affinity and alterity. In demythologizing and remythologizing the lives of his fellow argonauts, Rai Merchant no longer thinks of
himself as an exile, but as existing in a continuum of time, both here and there. Vina’s refusal of exile now seems “heroic”, and he reflects: “It takes time to come to terms with the truth: that what’s over is over” (203). Although he left India a quarter century ago, Rai Merchant realizes that he never really did leave, but spent his life saying goodbye as if he would one day return. In escaping the “fourth dimension” of the eternal exile and outsider, however, he has also entered a story of “music, love and life-death,” ultimately bequeathed to him by mortals who became immortals (22). As the only survivor of the three argonauts that went west from Bombay, Rai Merchant knows that to come unmoored and lose one’s bearings is both a traumatic and disorienting experience. Ultimately, the novel explores the cost of not belonging or homelessness:

Later, entering that world of ruined selves, music’s world, they will already have learned that such damage is the normal condition of life, as is the closeness of the crumbling edge, as is the fissured ground. In that Inferno, they will feel at home. (148)

In The Ground Beneath Her Feet, Rushdie’s protagonists take a leap into the unknown as they navigate a chaotic world in the throes of globalization. In an interview, Salman Rushdie claims that in this novel he was able to write about the West in “a new way and in a new language,” and he adds that this is his “first American novel” (Conversations 227). The polyphonic novel does reflect the language of a world mediated by American mass media, marketing, and the film and music industries. Although Rushdie’s novel spans three continents, his point of departure is still India. In the traffic between worlds, however, the compass points of East and West are no longer fixed, causing disorientation. In this novel, the loss of the East creates a series of scrambled double-exposures as East meets West, and “the world learns to rock and roll” (472), throwing the world into a turbulent state. According to Rushdie, rock and roll music and the youth culture it gave birth to “became the first globalized cultural phenomenon” (Conversations 219), and the novel explores the effects of globalization from the perspective of cultural hybridity. The Ground Beneath Her Feet is written from “the migrant’s eye-view” of the world, which Rushdie established as his ground in the essay “In Good Faith” (1990), in which he states that “from the very experience of uprooting,
disjuncture and metamorphosis ... can be derived a metaphor for all humanity” (Imaginary Homelands 394). In this novel, Rushdie explores the possibilities as well as the limits of human mutability in a time of historical transition.

The monocultural model of global culture may not accurately describe the effects of globalization, as Martin Roberts has argued, and Rushdie’s novel subverts the theory of monocultural dissemination as the inevitable homogenization of the globe by sending two young Indian performers to America, where they hybridize rock and roll music. Paul Gilroy’s model of diasporic, transcultural hybridity in The Black Atlantic, similarly suggests that there is always two-way traffic, and that “an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble ... cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding” (198). He adds that the “chronotope of the road” should be replaced by the “chronotope of the crossroads” (199). Thus, Gilroy’s diasporic model also recognizes the counterforce of cultural indigenization. But music is also a commodity and the American music industry appears to be a monolith. The narrator, Rai Merchant also refers to America in the novel as “no finger-snapping bopster” but “a fist” (419). In Modernity at Large, however, Arjun Appadurai argues that an analysis of the global hegemony of the American cultural industries requires a different model of “disorganized” capitalism. Appadurai suggests that there is in fact a “disjuncture” between the global economy and global culture, and his analytical model landscapes, which he calls “imaginary” or “multiple worlds,” take into account “the historically situated imaginations of ... groups spread around the globe” (33). Appadurai, then, uses diasporic cultures as analytical models of hybridization. Appadurai’s mediascapes are particularly relevant in the context of Rushdie’s novel. Appadurai places agency in the consumer, and he argues that people are able “to contest and sometimes even subvert” the images that mass media and the cultural industries disseminate around the world. In effect, Appadurai does not theorize resistance, but arms the receptor with subversive irony, ingenuity and creativity. Moreover, argues Appadurai, “the lines between the realistic and fictional landscapes they see are blurred [by distance],” and people are “more likely to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic ... particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined
world" (33). In other words, in the process of global dissemination, cultures hybridize each other, creating hybridized ensembles as a new social and global "practice of fantasy" is born.

The novel appears to be influenced by chaos theory and several concepts deployed by Michel Serres are relevant to a discussion of the novel. While Serres searches for models that will produce hybridity as "freedom tempered by rigour" (Genesis 105), Rushdie turns to the imagination to think multiplicity as creativity. Both construct worlds in which multiplicity produces chaos, turbulence and ruptures. In a hybridizing logic of not one without the other, a multiplicity is also a unity of local unities and scattered multiplicities (Genesis 108). Ultimately, Rai Merchant, the exiled narrator, who in telling the story comes through the intermediary turbulent state, learns to negotiate his difference as hybridity, as he gathers his scattered multiplicities into a story, and thus begins the process of rehousing. He has found ground on which to stand, although it will never feel solid, since it is suspended between "here" and "there" in time. In Genesis, Serres takes on Bergson’s notion that it is time to go back from the solid (space) to the liquid (time), and Serres argues that this is too hastily put: "space is dense with flux as well" (108). Thus, the diasporic imagination of the split and dislocated intercultural subject, which negotiates the "here" as past and the "here" as present can ultimately only settle in a space of homelessness in a continuum of time. Only in time, the realm of memory and the imagination, can the imaginary past be hybridized and integrated into a composite life and a motley story grounded in alterity rather than a crippling nostalgia for origins.

As the novel closes, and boundaries between worlds solidify again, a representative of the otherworld reaches out to the narrator for the last time, before her world is destroyed, and the spectral figure (who appears to be Indian) vanishes from view: "Can you conceive of such damage to the real... There is nothing to hold on to. Nothing is any longer with any certainty, so" (508). Uncertainty, not oblivion, is clearly the most frightening aspect of her predicament. In contrast, in an interview Rushdie reveals that for him the most disturbing aspect of the border is its nonexistence. "Yes.
Emptiness is frightening. You get to the frontier, and there is nothingness” (Conversations 71). Chaos and turbulence are not nothingness, but a state of creative and destructive flux through which multiplicity comes into being and hybridizes the world. Rushdie, the world builder, uses this turbulence “to say, to express, to reflect, what’s there,” but cannot yet be seen or expressed otherwise (Conversations 24). In the novel, Rushdie explores homelessness primarily through the romantic imagination of the free-floating Ormus Cama, and the exilic and unsettled mindset of the narrator, Rai Merchant. In the novel, it is the narrator, Rai Merchant, who by integrating and hybridizing his worlds becomes a global soul. Thus, art not only immortalizes but transforms, which is the function of Rai Merchant in the novel. As the novel closes, Rai Merchant is left to navigate a hybridized world without certainties, without closure, and therefore open to the future.
Chapter 5: Hybridity, History and Loss of Language in *In the Skin of a Lion*

Michael Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of a Lion* is set in an unbridged space between two different worlds. One is the bustling but homogeneous world of Toronto in the early nineteen hundreds as the city expands and undertakes a number of major public work projects. The other is the world of the stranger, an invisible city inhabited by migrants from non-English speaking countries who arrive in the city to build its waterworks, tunnels, viaducts and bridges. Although the immigrant labourers are the ones who build Toronto’s monuments to modernity, in the official history of Toronto they have remained an invisible presence. They are the silent, spectral others who have left no written record of their own immigration experience in English, and it is their untold stories that Ondaatje sets out to reclaim and make present in this novel. He does so by following the traces the migrants have left in the landscape, the archives, and the gaps of official historiography. But he also turns to the imagination and oral forms of story telling to reconstruct a community that, although invisible, transformed a city and helped usher in a new world. Ondaatje places a young Canadian inside this historical void, who “was always comfortable in someone else’s landscape, enjoyed being taught the customs of a place” (138). Patrick Lewis is therefore prepared to cross over into the unknown world of the stranger. As he gradually sheds light on the silent world that coexists with his own, he begins to recognize the plight of the other in himself. Thus, he translates himself as much as the other translates him. His exploration of the world of the other also reveals that cultural boundaries can both separate and connect. Yet this narrative of cultural hybridity told from many perspectives and in many voices remains an unfinalizable story which Ondaatje ultimately invites the reader to fashion into a new narrative of possibility for our own time and place.

In *In The Skin of a Lion*, the present is open and unfolding and the world is unfinished. In the novel, the narrative frequently comments on its own slow and “meandering” approach, as it juxtaposes fact and fiction in order to tease out a different
story from the one official history has overwritten and erased (146). Art is privileged as a
truth teller, albeit a belated one: “Trust me, this will take time, but there is order here,
very faint, very human” (146). In this novel, the search for a different truth involves
challenging official historiography, and searching the archives for traces of those who
have left no written record in order to “betray official history and put together another
family” (145). Fiction, however, can only reinterpret the “chaotic tumble of events” and
“suggest both the chaos and order it will become” retrospectively (146). Ondaatje tacitly
recognizes the time-lag by noting that his protagonist would, for example, “never have
read the great letters of Joseph Conrad,” although he is contemporary (145). Thus
Ondaatje accepts the task that Homi Bhabha assigns to postcolonial historiography: to
reverse the betrayal of history by treating the written record as a double-voiced discourse
in which the silenced other speaks in the gaps and omissions of the official discourse.

“Official histories, news stories surround us daily, but the events of art reach us
too late, travel languorously, like messages in a bottle” (146). Ondaatje here argues that,
unlike contemporary historiography and journalism, which “were always soft as rhetoric,
like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built” (145), art cuts through the
official rhetoric, and realigns the chaotic events of the past into a new, hybridized
narrative: a narrative that deciphers and gathers the silenced voices from the past, and by
making those voices heard again art transforms the way we inhabit the world.
Postmodern historiographic metafictions, implies Ondaatje, create a form of haunting
which reanimates the silenced voices of the past, and makes them speak. To break the
official silence that surrounds the contribution made by immigrant labour, Ondaatje
pushes the narrative into oral history and story telling, beyond the formation of
individuals to the building of a diverse community, and from one story into many
interwoven and intersecting narratives. Essentially, the migrants arrive in an already
named world, and their desire to belong and be accepted by the mainstream is a process
of cultural and linguistic translation and naming. The power to name is tied to our
conception of reality, notes Dale Spender in Man Made Language, since by naming, “we
attempt to order and structure the chaos and flux of existence which would otherwise be
an undifferentiated mass. By assigning names we impose a pattern and meaning which
allows us to manipulate the world” (163). Thus, the power to name and influence reality belongs to those who can speak English, and to Ondaatje’s main protagonist falls the task of creating meaning out of a fragmented world. The need to name is “a methodological necessity” according to Gayatri Spivak, who in Outside the Teaching Machine states that “the name is something one lends to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (26). Thus, in Spivak, nominalism (naming) can be both strategic and exploratory, and quoting, Foucault, she argues: “One needs a name for this ‘thing whose mechanism [can be used] as a grid of intelligibility of the social order.’ It is called ‘power’ because that is the closest one can get to it. This sort of proximate naming can be called catachrestic” (26). She adds that master words such as “woman” and “worker”--and presumably “migrant” and “foreigner”--or in the case of Foucault “power,” are concept metaphors, “because they are the closest one can get to it [the thing]” (29).

Ondaatje then, signals powerlessness by withholding names from his characters, and marks their agency by assigning them names. In a double gesture, by naming them, and by fictionalizing their stories, Ondaatje turns them from figures of absence into figures of presence.

In Ondaatje’s novel, it is a young Canadian from rural Ontario, Patrick Lewis, who, working and living among the migrants of Toronto in the nineteen twenties and thirties, gradually deciphers their buried stories and makes them visible again. Although a Canadian, he is also “an immigrant to the city” (53), and in the tradition of the Bildungsroman, he sets out to gather fragments of the world around him in order to construct a portrait of himself and find his place in the world. But he is also “a searcher,” and at times his quest veers into the genre of detective fiction. The name and identity of the young man gradually in the narrative, as does the hidden world of the migrants in a diurnal movement between, day and night, darkness and light, sight and insight. The narrative strategies of observation from a distance, delayed naming and information gradually revealed, give the impression of a continuous movement from invisibility to visibility, as the novel gathers and juxtaposes images of familiar landscapes through which strangers move like shadowy figures under the cover of darkness. But throughout the narrative the strangers are also associated with alluring lights that are
observed from a distance in the night. When the focus suddenly shifts, from distance to proximity, hybridized effects occur, as the closely observed strangers suddenly turn familiar landscapes into exotic and magical ones, even transform night into day. The foreign loggers whom Patrick encounters as a young boy in the witching hour of the early morning are indistinguishable when observed from a distance as “a collection of strangers” belonging to “a strange community” (7), and to his father they appear to be lost and errant souls who “don’t know where they are” (133). But Patrick is drawn to the lights they emit, and as new and unknown worlds open up before his searching eye, he realizes that although “he had lived in this country all his life,” he had been oblivious to their plight, “a searcher gazing out into the darkness of his own country” (157). In this novel, hybridity erupts as perspectives shift and darkness is illuminated, creating an area of convergence, and according to de Certeau, the mode of the sudden shift “adds a supplement; something extra (an excess) or added (a passage)” (Heterologies 110).

When Patrick moves to Toronto from rural Ontario, his own life story begins to intersect with the hidden world of the strangers. As they toil together in the tunnels and the stockyards, Patrick begins to see both his own and their world in a different light. Gradually, the life stories of the strangers emerge out of the darkness, and when observed from a distance, they appear like lights switched on in the night:

A rectangle of light went on below them. Then another. The nightshift workers were starting to get up. They could be seen in grey trousers and undershirts, washing at their kitchen sinks. The neighbourhood was soon speckled with light while the rest of the city lay in sleep. Soon they could hear doors closing on the street below them. Figures filed out, Macedonians and Greeks, heading for the killing floors and railway yards and bakeries. (127)

In the novel, Patrick Lewis’s story is narrated through a series of dialogues, interior monologues, and dreamlike sequences. The complex and fragmented narrative is mediated throughout by an invasive omniscient narrator, and it is the free indirect discourse that allows different narrative voices to flow seamlessly in and out of worlds, as they are alternatively juxtaposed or superimposed on each other. Patrick Lewis, at one point, refers to himself as “a prism” that refracts the lives of the other characters (157).
Throughout the narrative, there is also metafictional commentary by an authorial third voice, and the narrative is frequently pushed into episodes that resemble surreal dreams. The subjunctive mode, with its as-if clauses of doubt and uncertainty, creates tension between the real and the surreal and breaks down the fragile boundary between fact and fiction, and dream and reality in the novel. When Patrick Lewis arrives in Toronto full of expectations he feels “as if it were land after years at sea” (53). This uncanny zone of uncertainty and possibility is also a staging ground for cultural transformations as ambiguity gives way to other ways of comprehending the world. Thus Ondaatje’s novel pushes the narrative beyond mere self-discovery, through a series of narrative frames, into the unknown and uncharted territory of the other, and as the dispersed narrative strands of self and other meet and begin to inform each other, something new and unexpected is always produced. The moment of cultural hybridity usually occurs in a chiasmic mediation as one world intersects with, or passes through another, and the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange in a movement from invisibility to visibility, silence to speech, and isolation to community. The points of intersection are knots of incomprehension resolved through acts of naming and translation. These passages produce fleeting moments of illumination and transformation which Patrick Lewis gathers into a composite, heterological narrative.

In Heterologies, Michel de Certeau suggests that some forms of autobiography are acts of self-naming and individuation that occur in a demarcated and “experimental” space which takes “the form of the lack and desire of the other” (92) and that this is an empty place between self and other where “one dwells without dwelling there” (95)—a third space which Bakhtin also postulates. This, then, is the space from which the other speaks, and where the autobiographical I learns to speak the language of the other. Thus it is a space of potentially life altering transformations and multiple, hybridized perspectives where “a plurality of ‘dwellings’ permit an itinerary to be drawn up” and the shifter I can inhabit a temporary “unity of opposites” or a “heterology” (95). Similarly, in Michael Ondaatje’s novel, the autobiographical searching I attempts to build bridges to other worlds across this empty space as it gathers new knowledge of itself and learns both
to see and hear the other. But the empty space proves difficult to bridge, and Patrick Lewis frequently feels like an outsider on either side of the divide facing a void:

He was an abashed man, an inheritance from his father. Born in Abashed, Ontario. What did the word mean? Something that suggested there was a terrible horizon in him beyond which he couldn’t leap. Something hollow, so when alone, when not aligned with another ... he could hear the rattle within that suggested a space between him and community. A gap of love. (157)

In a brief framing vignette, which in effect is an analepsis which folds the end of the novel into the beginning, Ondaatje sets the story in motion as the yet unnamed driver of a car begins to tell his fragmented story to a young girl who attentively “listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms” (1). The story he tells is no longer a journey of self-discovery, a mirror held up to the other, but a heterology that the driver wants to pass on following John Berger’s dictum, quoted in an epigraph: “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.”

This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels though darkness. Outside the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, “in that field is a castle,” and it would be possible for her to believe him. (1)

During their journey through the darkness, the driver turns to the girl and asks: “Do you see?” (1). The anxious question implies that the story is meant to be a revelation, and that this story will require a new way of seeing and negotiating the world. But it also invokes the customary suspension of disbelief as the new way of seeing is pushed into the realms of the fantastic and miraculous. Thus the question is also directed to the reader, and just as the girl drives the story forward by asking questions, so must the reader in order to see beyond the narrative of formation to the web of multiplicity that underwrites it. The question is left hanging until the last page of the novel, when the reader learns that the young passenger, now individuated as Hana, has in fact moved to the driver’s seat for at least part of the journey. As Hana “adapts the rear-view mirror to her height,” or to her own way of seeing, the storyteller issues a final instruction: “Lights, he said” (244).
Ondaatje here signals that his narrative plots a trajectory from one story to many, and just as the story teller makes his story ‘visible’ and passes it on to Hana as one story embedded in many, as one voice among others, so will she pass these stories on to the reader to gather together, and the storyteller clearly has confidence in the young girl. “He was at ease with the precise Hana and the way she seriously articulated herself among strangers. That voice knew what it wanted and what it was allowed” (137). But which voice then narrates the novel? Since the frame constructs the narrative as a palimpsest or a set of interlocking boxes, the narrative voice is clearly mediated. In an interview with Catherine Bush in *Essays on Canadian Writing*, Ondaatje clarifies his narrative strategy, which seems to approximate the stance of the poet filtering and recording a number of voices.

The question becomes whether it’s Patrick’s story or Hana’s story, and in a way it’s much more Hana’s story, because she’s gathering it.... There are scenes that Patrick does not witness, so it doesn’t make sense that he is the narrator. It’s just as much Hana imagining certain scenes as it is her being told certain scenes. (ECW 247)

Thus Hana is one more link to the hidden history of the migrants whose hard labour built and transformed Toronto. Ultimately, the narrative is structured like a relay: Hana will pass on the stories Patrick tells her, and in the telling she will add more voices and contribute new perspectives to the story. “Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own map, otherwise they were just men from nowhere” (143). Ondaatje here seems to suggest, that fictions set these stories free and allow them to circulate and work their magic beyond the compass of the story telling and recorded history. Thus, before the invisible world of alterity can be made visible and reveal its unrealized possibilities, it has to be reimagined and documented, literally made as real “as rooms one can step into” (145), and “Patrick’s gift” lies in his openness to the other and in his willingness to enter and inhabit other worlds, both imaginary and real ones. Thus Patrick’s journey of self-discovery turns into the discovery of the other both in himself and in the world, and as de Certeau suggests, in telling his own story he
reveals the unrealized potential of a composite self, which in this novel always is a self connected to others:

He saw himself gazing at so many stories.... He saw the interactions, saw how each of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves... A man on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night--the detritus and chaos of the age was realigned. (145)

The boy watching a fire is an analepsis to Patrick’s own lost world, for like the migrants in Toronto from other countries, his childhood is located elsewhere. Like them he has arrived to Toronto from nowhere, a nameless and unmapped place. The Anglicized name of the waterway, which eventually appears on official maps in the slipstream of the logging industry, overwrites the hybridized compound name in common use (“Deep Eau”), thus obscuring the last trace of the French speaking loggers who were presumably once involved in the transformation of the land.

He was born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked there for twenty years and the land has been homesteaded since 1816. In the school atlas the place is pale green and nameless. The river runs out of an unnamed lake and is a simple blue line until it becomes Napanee twenty-five miles to the south, and only because of logging, will eventually be called Depot Creek. “Deep Eau.” (10-11)

There are other unsettling similarities. Patrick’s arrival in Toronto, for example, echoes the experience of dislocation and loss of bearings of all newly arrived migrants as they step into “the quicksand of the new world” (54). As the young man arrives in the city, full of expectations, dreams and reality immediately begin to collide. “Now, in the city, he was new even to himself, the past locked away” (54). But instead of shedding his past and experiencing a sudden and miraculous transformation, as he had anticipated, he immediately slips into invisibility and solitude. At the train station, he marvels at the soaring marble pillars that seem to reach to the sky. The great rotunda looks like “a palace, its niches and caverns an intimate city” (54), but the palatial hall quickly turns into a dark and claustrophobic cave, and although surrounded by “the tides of movement,” he realizes that he is invisible to all around him. Patrick has entered a
monochrome world, and as the city emerges from the night, it greets him in silence. Even his first act of self-naming produces only ghostly reflections and faint echoes: “He saw his image in telephone booths. He spoke out his name and it struggled up in a hollow echo and was lost in the high air of Union Station. No one turned” (54). He is alone, anonymous and invisible, and he wonders if “there was a wall in him that no one reached” (71).

Similarly, the migrants among whom Patrick lives and works in Toronto remain spectral figures beyond the reach of his imagination, and although fascinated by them, he is unable to enter their world in a meaningful way. Faceless, they work side by side in silence and communicate through gestures. Thus, he is left to define himself against an unknown and silent other, and he realizes that like other Canadians he knows “nothing about the men around him except how they moved and laughed—on this side of language” (136). Standing on the other side of their language and looking in on their world, he is reduced to becoming a silent and distant observer, since on average they only had “three or four sentences in English” (130). At the tannery and the waterworks the workers know “little more than each other’s false names or true countries” (135). The foreigners refer to Patrick as “Hey Canada!” by his nationality, and at the Macedonian market he is greeted as “Peaches on Friday?” by his buying habits (135). But in a spectral reversal, Patrick soon realizes that as an English-speaking Canadian, he is also “their alien” in a world he once assumed to be his own (113). This ironic reversal corresponds to a scene from his childhood, when a group of foreign loggers revealed that his own world was just as strange. Skating on the river, the loggers magically turned the darkness of a cold winter night, and “his shore, his river” into play, brightness and joy (22). From that moment of illumination, he begins to associate light with new ways of being in the world. This scene is one of many epiphanies, or shifts of perspective, from which Patrick emerges transformed from his encounter with the alterity of the other.
The ice shone with light. It seemed for a moment that he had stumbled on a coven, or one of those druidic rituals.... But even to a boy of eleven, deep in the woods after midnight, this was obviously benign. Something joyous. A gift. There were about ten men skating, part of a game. One chased the others and as soon as someone was touched he became the chaser. Each man held in one hand a sheaf of cattails and the tops of these were on fire. This is what lit the ice and had blinkered through the trees. (21)

The young boy longs to join them on their improvised skates made of knives and to “hold their hands” as they skate back to “those dark cabins by the mill” (21). “But on this night he did not trust either himself or these strangers of another language enough to be able to step forward and join them” (22). To the young farm boy, watching the strangers upend his own world, in which “day is work” and “night is rest,” is a revelation which borders on magic, and from now on “nothing would be the same” (22). Only later in life will he learn more about the identity of these skaters who suddenly defamiliarized and transformed his world and shed light in the darkness. But he also takes note of their boldness, skill and self-assurance on the ice:

Patrick was transfixed. Skating the river at night, each of them moved like a wedge into the blackness magically revealing the grey bushes of the shore, his shore, his river.... It was not just the pleasure of skating. They could have done that during the day. This was against the night. The hard ice was so certain, they could leap into the air and crash down and it would hold them. (22)

The foreign loggers also transmit a protocol on how to negotiate a common space based on mutual respect for alterity, and he recalls meeting these “barely discernible” figures of the night on the road “in the last of the night’s darkness” when the cows were being brought in from pasture, and with “a hushed politeness” the foreigners would step aside into the snow to let the cows pass. Amongst themselves, they had behaved as if they owned the river, but when they encounter Canadians the strangers behave like guests. Occasionally, however, the strangers would lay their “thin-gloved” hands on the flanks of the cows to warm themselves, and “they must do this gently, without any sense of attack or right. They do not own this land, as the owner of the cows does” (7). Although undistinguished as a group, the hands of the foreigners here symbolically reach out to the Canadians, and identify them as labourers. Patrick observes that the farmer nods and feels
comforted by the presence of the loggers. In the novel, these are “the little seeds” which teach Patrick the value of building bridges between cultures based on respect for the other.

Although the faceless and silent migrant labourers are depicted throughout the novel as travelling in groups or working side by side, several of Ondaatje’s protagonists are named, and these characters are deployed to explore and name the lost and erased stories of the immigrant experience. In a sequence of dreamlike episodes, the stories of Alice Gull, a young Canadian woman, and Nicholas Temelcoff, a Macedonian immigrant, intersect during the construction of the Prince Edward Viaduct. The bridge, which was finished in 1918, “goes up in a dream” (26), and both characters undergo sudden transformations when their lives briefly connect during the construction of the bridge. Nicholas Temelcoff is a silenced other who has to conquer a new language and culture in order to break through his silence into speech. In contrast, Alice Gull, who is Canadian, has to break out from her self-imposed silence and voluntary seclusion to find her voice. Both have shed their past and entered “landscapes they did not know existed” (30) from which they will both emerge transformed as speaking subjects. Both are bridge builders, and they are ultimately able to span the void between silence and speech, self and other, by articulating multiple selves inhabited by the voices and languages of the other.

Alice Gull is a shape shifter who enters the novel nameless, having shed her past. She is later revealed to be the flying nun who accidentally fell off the unfinished bridge and vanished over the edge without a trace. And a young woman was, indeed, miraculously saved one night by the airborne spinner, Nicholas Temelcoff, who sees “the shape” fall towards him, and “by grace of habit” he reaches out to catch “the figure” (31). “Scream, please, Lady” (32), pleads the spinner as they twist precariously in the air under the bridge, desperately clinging to each other, but the “black-garbed bird” he holds against his body remains mute and petrified. In the morning, the black figure quietly slips away from her rescuer who, exhausted and in pain, falls asleep at a table in the Macedonian bar where they have sought refuge together. When he wakes up to find her
gone, he realizes that she “still hadn’t said a word. He remembered she had not even screamed when she fell. That had been him” (34). She is not a ghost, however, because she leaves strips of her cut off “habit” lying on the floor before she vanishes into her new life as if she were a bird magically released from her cage (31-32). The missing nun is never found or heard from again, and presumed dead by the authorities. When Nicholas returns to work a week later, his injured arm healed, he ignores the stories he hears about the nun who disappeared off the bridge, for what “holds them together now is not the act which saved her life but those moments since” (49). Paradoxically, it is her shocked silence that finally breaks Nicholas Temelcoff’s long silence, as he gently tries to reach out to her in order to reassure her and to provoke a response, and in doing so he becomes a story teller. As he tells her about his life, he stops being self-conscious about his English and speaks to her “unaware that his voice split now into two languages” (38). In a dark corner of the bar, there is also a caged parrot named Alicia, and as they enter the bar in the darkness, Nicholas greets the bird by its name, and in doing so, he also names the young woman. As the silent parrot watches her departure the next morning, the caged bird symbolically releases the young nun from her vows, and eventually she reappears in the novel as the actress Alice Gull. The nun’s reincarnation as Alice is staged in language: she is both named and given a voice, and “[w]hat she will become she becomes in that minute before she is outside, before she steps into the six-A.M. morning” (41). But Nicholas is transformed as well by this encounter, and in his case it is a shift of perspective: “on the morning after the incident on the bridge, he sees the landscape as something altered, no longer so familiar that it is invisible to him” (48). Walking down Parliament Street the morning after the accident on the bridge, he now sees the city “from the point of view of the woman” (48). He looks for her everywhere, and “the panorama revolves with him and he hangs in this long silent courtship, her absence making him look everywhere” (49). Both walk away from their encounter having found new ways of being in the world and seeing the world around them in a different light. A new vista has opened before Nicholas’s eyes and there is a new sense of freedom and mastery. Transformed, he floats in the air as he “lies supine on the end of his tether looking up towards the struts of the bridge, pivoting slowly. He knows the panorama of the valley better than any engineer. Like a bird” (48). Within a year Temelcoff opens a bakery,
“releases the catch of the pulley, and slides free of the bridge” (49). Nicholas Temelcoff has come to stay, and his cultural transformation is now in progress.

Thus the embedded story of the flying nun extends beyond a tale of metamorphosis. Symbolically, Alice Gull’s metamorphosis is captured in her last name; she now soars like a sea gull. It is clearly possible to draw connections between caged birds, actors parroting lines, and spiders who spin webs and yarns as well. But what the story of the flying nun clearly enacts is the process whereby entire lives are erased from recorded history as they vanish from view beyond an impenetrable cultural and linguistic barrier. The young nun was literally swept away from the historical reality of the bridge into the mythical obscurity of Nicholas Temelcoff’s invisible world, where the miraculous story of her rescue and rebirth will lie buried until new connections are made. This will happen when Patrick Lewis ten years later becomes convinced that Alice Gull is, in fact, the mythical flying nun. To prove that his suspicion is correct he has to find her rescuer, but as a Canadian he has never heard of Nicholas Temelcoff, the bridge builder, and he realizes that he has been “gazing into the darkness of his own country” (157), blind to the light to be found there:

Patrick clung like moss to strangers, to the nooks and fissures of their situations. He has always been alien, like the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of this place. The Finns of his childhood used the river, even knew it by night, the men burning rushes delirious in the darkness. This he had never done. He could no more have skated along the darkness of a river than been a hero of one of these stories. (157)

When Alice Gull emerges in Patrick’s story, she has a young daughter, Hana, and lives in a migrant neighbourhood where she moves with ease among the strangers since besides speaking English, she is now also fluent in Finnish and Macedonian. 25 Alice Gull invites Patrick to a puppet show at the purification plant, or the waterworks, a site which the migrant workers use by stealth at night for clandestine political meetings and performances. The puppet show is about a migrant, dressed in a Finnish shirt and Serbian

---

25 Hana’s nickname “pico” is presumably Ondaatje’s transcription of the Finnish word for “small”: *pikku.*
pants, who wants to advance in the world, while the other puppets form a chorus warning him of his hubris. The puppet show is clearly a parable of the circumscribed lives of the migrants in the audience.

A plot grew. Laughing like a fool he was brought before the authorities, unable to speak their language. He stood there assaulted by insults. His face was frozen. The others began to pummel him but not a word emerged—just a damaged gaze in the context of those flailing arms. He fell to the floor pleading with gestures. The scene was endless.... The caricature of a culture. (117)

Watching the show, Patrick feels ill at ease, caught between two worlds. As the silent puppet grows desperate, “it stamps the foot to try to bring out a language” (117), and kneeling it begins to bang on the wooden floor “as if pleading for help” (117). Patrick grows increasingly uncomfortable watching the puppet’s distress and humiliation, the “manic hand” and the “mask of the painted face looking up like a dog” (117). Caught up in the illusion of the performance, he steps up on stage and arrests the hand of the puppet in order to stop the frantic banging, and in doing so he realizes that the puppet is human, and a woman he knows: Alice Gull. At first there is silence, then applause. Ondaatje leaves the resolution of this episode open-ended, but the fact that the only Canadian in the audience does intervene points to Patrick’s liminal status, and indicates that his own story has begun to intersect with the lives of the migrants to the point of identification. But the puppet show at the waterworks also resembles silent movies in which the eternal outsider becomes a laughing stock. “The tramp never changes the opinion of the police man.... These comedies are nightmares. The audience emits horrified laughter as Chaplin, blindfolded, rollerskates near the edge of the unbalconied mezzanine. No one shouts to warn him. He cannot talk or listen” (43). Unlike the talkies, which Ondaatje suggests “light the way for immigration in North America,” in the stark, monochrome world of the silent movies, “North America is still without language, gestures and work and bloodlines are the only currency” (43). The narration tracks Patrick’s acculturation in reverse, away from bloodlines towards a new notion of family and community, as the young Canadian becomes sensitized to the alterity of the other, and no longer sees his life as a single story or from a single point of view. What Patrick experiences at the Bakhtiinan meeting places, the street, the waterworks, and the market place, is the “moment of cubism”
which Ondaatje in this novel uses to allow his character to see the world from multiple points of view (34). Patrick can now move beyond gestures and objectifying glances to initiate creative interactions with the world and negotiate the unpredictable, unknown and unfamiliar.

Patrick soon discovers that Alice’s rescuer is famous among the immigrants, and when he worked on the bridge he was regarded as a “daredevil” (34), who like a spider “links everyone” (34). Patrick meets Temelcoff only after Alice’s death, when Hana introduces them to each other. In official photographs of the construction of the bridge, he notices that it is hard to find the spinner who “knits the bridge together” (34). Free falling and fearless, he holds a flare when he works during the night, but in broad daylight it is hard to spot the airborne spinner. “Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance between bridge and river” (34), observes Patrick Lewis as he searches for the spinner. Temelcoff made his journey from his Macedonian village to Canada “in silence” (43), seduced by a sojourner’s fairy tale about the riches of North America, and arrived to face another long silence, and he knows that “if he did not learn the language he would be lost” (46). Floating in the air, like a spider on a thread, yet invisible to the world around him, Nicholas constructs himself as spectral. “He became a vault of secrets and memories” (47). When spoken to he never “catches anyone’s eye, as if he must hear the orders nakedly without seeing the face around the words” (42). Linguistically isolated, he becomes a caricature of himself.

He never realizes how often he is watched by others. He has no clue that his gestures are extreme. He has no portrait of himself.... As with sight, because Nicholas does not listen to most conversations around him, he assumes no one hears him. (42-43)

Patrick Lewis has a similar experience of living in a world of silence in the midst of the “noise” of languages he cannot decipher, and unable to express himself in a shared language, he resorts to pantomime in order to make himself understood in his ethically mixed neighbourhood:
He lived—in his job and during these evening walks—in a silence, with noise and conversation all around him. To be understood, his reactions had to exaggerate themselves. The family idiot. A stroke victim... He felt himself expand into an innocent. Everything he learned about character he learned at this time in his life. (138)

For Nicholas Temelcoff, learning a new language is much more of a challenge than his daring skydiving from the bridge. On the bridge he is also known as a “recluse” who timidly would “begin sentences in his new language, mutter and walk away” (47). Yet he also talks in English aloud to himself, and regards it as a challenge to overcome: “he loves his new language, the terrible barriers of it” (43). He approaches the complexities of the English language the same way he executes his dangerous acrobatics: meticulously and logically, breaking it down into its smallest grammatical components, but what he really needs is “a voice for all this language” (47).

Sometimes on the work deck they will hear him slowly begin to sing various songs, breaking down syllables and walking around them as if laying the clauses out like tackle on a pavement to be checked for worthiness, picking up one he fancies for the moment then replacing it with another. (42-3)

Acquiring a new language is a daunting task, and most of the migrants learn their English by rote. Since they have few contacts with Canadians, they are reduced to mimicking phrases from songs they hear on the radio. They also go to the theatre just to hear English spoken. The narrator wryly observes that when a popular matinee idol “drops dead” during a performance, “a Sicilian butcher took over, knowing his lines and his blocking meticulously, and money did not have to be refunded” (47). During performances the lines of the actors reverberate back to the stage “as Macedonians, Finns, and Greeks repeated the phrases after a half-second pause, trying to get the pronunciation right “(47), and in the process of mimicking the actors on stage they turn live performances into communal language lessons. In contrast to the clandestine meetings at the water purification plant, at live theatre performances there is a script to follow, so there is no danger of running afoul of Police Chief Draper, who imposes laws against public meetings by foreigners and enforces “English only” rules. “So if they speak in public, “in any language other than English, they will be jailed” (133). But
mimicry can also produce strange distortions for, as the narrator observes, "Nicholas would unfortunately later choose Fats Waller as his model and so his emphasis on usually unnoticed syllables and the throwaway lines made him seem high-strung or dangerously antisocial or too loving" (47). Although the narrator notes that many migrants were able to "walk out of their accents into regional American voices" (47), language acquisition does not automatically grant a passage from invisibility to visibility within the host culture as this novel makes abundantly clear. As Patrick observes their plight, working alongside the migrants in the tunnels, he begins to fear that like them he is destined to become an underground man, "abashed" (157), disconnected and spectral. "He sees his visage never emerging out of the shadows. Unhistorical" (172). Thus, the intersection between self and other is not only marked by interest in the alterity of the other, but also by anxiety about invisibility and exclusion.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha describes a similar moment of anxiety and "unhomeliness" as an intervention of the beyond and the foreign that is the "condition of cross-cultural initiations" (9). According to Bhabha, "the boundary [ultimately] becomes the place from which something begins its presencing" and the boundary also becomes "a bridge" (5; 9). In Bhabha the terms of this "cultural engagement, whether agonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively," and in Bhabha typically as a form of double-voiced mimicry: Temelcoff literally speaks through the cadences of Fats Waller. Thus this intercultural engagement with alterity is a translation that produces neither copy nor original. Bhabha adds, that the social articulation of difference "is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2). From the boundary, which is a site of doubling and splitting, the relation between self and other emerges:

The performance of the doubleness or splitting of the subject is enacted in the writing ... it is evident in the metonymic figures of 'missing' and 'invisibleness' ... which simultaneously mark the possibility and impossibility of identity [and] presence, through absence. (52)
As Patrick begins to narrate his own life from the gap between languages and cultures, he discovers “a wondrous night web—all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day” (145), and he realizes that he is also multiple: “the sum of all he had been in his life since he was a boy in the snow woods” (152). Thus, in Ondaatje’s text, Patrick Lewis is “both figurative and a figure, a symbolic representation” of the voice of the other which marks “the empty place ... where the other speaks” in the text. According to de Certeau, this is a space where “we find speech” and are constituted by a proper name (Heterologies 94). “His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices” (145). As Patrick walks down his neighbourhood street, a musical metaphor signals that he has finally learned to live in several worlds at once. When he encounters a street band, he instinctively falls into step, as Ondaatje orchestrates the movement away from a solitary encounter between self and other marked by silence and invisibility to the discovery of a whole community in the process of translating themselves from one culture to another:

The coronet and saxophone and drum chased each other across solos and then suddenly, as Patrick drew along them, fell together and rose within a chorus. He saw himself inside so many stories.... He walked on beyond the sound of the street musicians, aware once again of the silence between his individual steps, knowing now he could add music by simply providing the thread of a hum. He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves. (144)

Ondaatje’s novel, which is written from within the migrant experience, thus stages a reversal of the postcolonial revision of history, described by Homi Bhabha, in which the other becomes a monstrous distortion in the narration of the split self. In Ondaatje’s novel, the foreign other is powerless and therefore invisible to the host culture and, from the perspective of the migrant workers, the monstrous other is embodied in the visionary public works dreamer Commissioner Rowland Harris. While working on the bridge, Nicholas Temeloff observes a different Harris than history records, and he meticulously measures and observes Harris: “He knows Harris by the time it takes him to walk the
sixty-four feet six inches from sidewalk to sidewalk on the bridge and by his expensive tweed coat that cost more than the combined weeks' salaries of five bridge workers” (43).

Following Alice's death, Patrick, the searcher, becomes a researcher, as he attempts to resolve whether Alice was indeed the flying nun, perhaps in an effort to reincarnate her, and to do so he has to establish who might have witnessed the incident. Throughout their relationship, Alice has steadfastly refused to speak of her past, but one day Hana unlocks the trunk that contains her mother's mementoes, and a photograph of three unidentified men working on the Bloor Street Viaduct catches Patrick's attention. Predictably, the press clippings and photographs he finds in the archives and the official records “depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (145). Throughout the novel, Ondaatje contrasts the damp and nightmarish, underground world of the migrant labourers who dig the tunnels in darkness with the bright “ideal city” that Commissioner Rowland Harris conjures up in his dreams in the middle of the Depression and convinces the politicians of the day to fund as public works projects (109). Upon completion of the viaduct, Harris soon dreams of water and “he imagined a palace for it” with marble walls, “copper-banded roofs” and the entrance “modelled on a Byzantine city gate” (109-10). Harris clearly regards his monuments to modernity as a civilizing mission since he borrows architectural details and styles from other civilizations.

Leafing through the photographs in the public archives, Patrick's anger grows, and in a dreamlike sequence he swims with sticks of dynamite tied to his body through the tunnels he helped build into the inner sanctum of Commissioner Harris's monument to water purification. Commissioner Harris immediately recognizes Patrick as the return of the repressed, and realizes that Patrick has come looking for “a villain” (237). In the neo-byzantine building where the commissioner now spends his nights on the mezzanine gallery, surrounded by guards and with a pistol at his bedside, ready to defend his monument, Patrick confronts him with the human cost of his dreams. But Harris has already ventured down the tunnels which “he had not entered himself” (110), from which the ghostlike faces of the workers in the photographs peer out, and cling to Rowland
Harris "in a nightmare" (110). In the photographs, the "moisture in the tunnel appears white. There is a foreman's white shirt, there is white lye daubed into rock to be dynamited. And all else is labour and darkness. Ash-grey faces. An unfinished world. The men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle" (111). During the night, the two visions of the city collide, but the class divisions separating those who have the power to realize dreams at the expense of those who toil in inhuman conditions to materialize them remain in force. Commissioner Harris and Patrick Lewis are worlds apart. In Commissioner Harris's world of dwarfs and giants, winners and losers, those who toil underground will remain nameless, invisible and powerless until they begin to tell their own powerful stories. The visionary Harris, who is the master of all he surveys, cannot see the plight of the worker. History belongs to the powerful, and Harris disinherits Patrick and figuratively pushes him back into "the small world of Rowland Harris's dream" (111), down the tunnels, underground to the invisible world of the excluded and powerless workers that Patrick has been trying to make him see:

You must realize that you are like these places, Patrick. You're as much of the fabric as the aldermen and the millionaires. But you are among the dwarfs of enterprise who will never get accepted or acknowledged. Mongrel Company. You're a lost heir. So you stay in the woods. You reject power. And this is how the bland fools, the politicians and the press and mayors and their advisers--become the spokesmen for the age. You must realize that the trick is to be as serious when you are old as when you are young. (238)

Unlike Patrick, who dreams of changing his world, Harris has the power to dream even bigger dreams which alter landscapes and cities, and he knows that "[b]efore the city could be seen it had to be imagined" (29). Patrick has learned to "see," but perhaps not yet "imagine," how to make his invisible city visible. Although Harris shows no humility, in recognizing Patrick as Gilgamesh, he clearly sees an epic dimension to Patrick's struggle, and stresses his responsibility to turn from a wild youth into a responsible adult. Before Patrick can blow up Harris's water palace, which the Commissioner "had dreamed and desired and built" (221), Patrick falls asleep, and while he sleeps the blasting-box is defused. Quoting lines from the Epic of Gilgamesh, Harris suggests that Patrick "will stoop with sorrow" until he wakes up from his dream and learns to "wander
through the wilderness in the skin of a lion,” rather than with his sword and battle axe
drawn. In Ondaatje the real battle is fought in language, as it was for Alice Gull, who in
the novel describes a play in which a powerful matriarch passes on her cloak from which
animal pelts dangle. In putting on the cloak even a silent character could break through
into language, and “each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild
animals, when they took responsibility for the story” (157). Patrick’s dream is a mise en
abime of Alice’s plot summary of the play, but instead of empowering animal pelts, he
has tied sticks of dynamite next to his skin. Ondaatje pulls away from a violent
confrontation, and leaves the waterworks standing, but forever altered by the stories he
has folded into the public monument Harris “built for himself.” Still, the meeting has
produced a small shift, because Rowland Harris “understood why the man [Patrick] had
chosen him” (241-42), and Patrick Lewis realizes he must himself follow the advice he
once gave to Alice Gull: “ideology ... hates the private. You must make it human” (135).
If, metaphorically, Patrick has ventured down another dark tunnel, he clearly also has
seen the light at the end of it.

As Patrick wakes from his dream, he realizes that he has a vision of his own to
pass on, and stories about an invisible city to conjure up. The narrator here frames Patrick
as a fellow visionary: “Patrick wanted the city Hana had constructed for herself—the
places she brought together and held as if on a delicate thread of her curiosity” (138). In a
novel that constantly comments on its own production, Ondaatje, however, questions the
writer’s right to build fictional monuments to represent the other, and he does so through
the character of Caravaggio, a thief, con artist and rebel. Caravaggio follows a different
trajectory from Patrick. He breaks out of prisons and breaks into the houses of the rich
and powerful, and invisibility is the mark of his trade. Yet Caravaggio resents his own
historical invisibility, for although transgressive, he still remains an outsider looking in.
A man of silent action and motion, he is, however, fascinated by the creative solitude of
the writer:
He was anonymous, with never a stillness in his life like this woman’s. He stood on the roof outside, an outline of a bear in her unconscious, and she quarried past to another secret, one of her own, articulated wet and black on the page. The houses in Toronto he had helped build or paint or break into were unmarked. He would never leave his name where his skill had been. He was one of those who have a fury or sadness of only being described by someone else. A tatter of roads, a house builder, a painter, a thief—yet he was invisible to all around him. (199)

Caravaggio’s fury at “only being described by someone else” points to the need to acknowledge the working class contribution in the construction of the city, but his comment also interrogates the problematics of who ultimately has the right to give voice to those who have been erased by history. Gayatri Spivak’s famous question, “Can the subaltern speak?” reverberates through these lines. “Betrayed” by history, Patrick and Caravaggio, ultimately have to find their own voices as subjects in history.

Unlike Caravaggio, the solitary intruder, Patrick has found a community and discovered a wealth of stories waiting to be told. In the circular epilogue-prologue, Patrick passes these stories on to Alice’s daughter, Hana, and in doing so makes the stories communal, presumably to be recovered following a time-lag. How the stories will be told is not resolved in the novel, but Patrick, who inhabits the potentially powerful skin of a lion, has gathered the haunting stories of the migrants, all spectral figures of absence, made them present and visible, and now he hands them on, in a generous act of rememoration, thus rejecting the notion of taking revenge on the betrayals of history. Fiction, suggests Ondaatje, occasionally allows the reader to “turn the page backwards” to those fragments of memory and “moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over” in order to relive and share our memories and experiences (148).

Images, have a similar function in the novel, and when Patrick shows Nicholas Temelcoff the old photograph of the three workers from the bridge, he begins to reminisce about his days as a spinner, and “pleasure and wonder fill him” (148). Temelcoff is soon transported “somewhere else” (148), and as he throws the dough balls into the air at the Geranium Bakery he relives the incident on the bridge, “the ball of dough falling surely back into the hand, the arm that caught her in the air and pulled her
back into life. *Talk, you must talk,* and so mockingly she took a parrot’s name. *Alicia*” (148). Although Temelcoff lives in the present and “never looks back,” he now stands “within the pleasure of recall” thinking about the life altering event (149), and it leads to a second metamorphosis. Nicholas Temelcoff suddenly finds his voice, and he no longer lacks words or images, as he walks out of invisibility into history:

This is what history means. He came to this country as a torch on fire and he had swallowed air as he walked forward and gave out light. Energy poured through him. That was all he had time for in those years. Language, customs, family, salaries. Patrick’s gift, the arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories. He is a tentative man, even with his family. That night in bed shyly he tells his wife the story of the nun. (149)

There is a new sense of belonging here. In an interview, Ondaatje tells Eleanor Wachtel that he now “feels” Canadian because he “became a writer here” (*ECW* 260). In other words, like his deracinated character Temelcoff, Ondaatje found his voice in Canada, and in the process of finding his voice Temelcoff also found a way to belong. Thus Ondaatje turns the notion of displacement from people who are “tentative about where they belong” into a problematics of the need to belong otherwise, which in Ondaatje involves putting “together another family” (145). As he interrogates belonging, he notes that “[t]hese migrants don’t belong here, but want to find a new home” (260). Ondaatje suggests that in *In The Skin of a Lion,* “everyone is trying to get home,” while his subsequent novel, *The English Patient,* “is about displaced people who don’t want to go home, [in fact] everyone is fearful of going home. They don’t want to go back to where they came from” (260). In Ondaatje’s hybridized world, the notion of family is uprooted from biology, and “family” becomes a floating signifier. In this novel, he deploys “family” as a concept metaphor for social relations based on new affiliations.26 Thus, the term is used catharchestically to incorporate the stranger’s need to belong otherwise, beyond blood lines. Families, reconceived as contingent rhizomes, webs and networks, are thus extended metaphors in Ondaatje which stand for new ways of belonging to the world, and these improvised extended families in turn signify the need to belong to a community.
In *In the Skin of a Lion*, two Canadian solitudes, one visible, the other invisible, meet but do not merge as Ondaatje’s characters move from darkness to light, from silent others to speaking subjects, and towards becoming subjects in history. Gradually, the story of Patrick Lewis hybridizes into a heterology, which transforms the protagonist and makes him realize that there is no single history, and no subjectivity or agency outside a community. Structured as an oral narrative to be passed on, the polycentric novel sheds light on the invisible world of the first wave of non-English speaking migrants who arrived as labourers at the turn of the last century. They came to stay, built a city, transformed the landscape, and translated themselves. Yet the migrant labourers at the core of the novel have remained invisible in history. Perhaps, as the historian Jacques Rancière observes, because until “twenty years ago the immigrant had another name: they were workers and proletarians” (*Identity in Question* 70), and their alterity was subsumed under the concept metaphor of “worker.” In Ondaatje’s novel the invisibility of the migrants is also caused by their lack of language, as well as the inability on the part of the host culture to recognize—or the purposeful suppression of—the experiences and stories of the migrant workers. Their hybrid discourses and cultures are regarded as invisible rather than seen as new and innovative forms of expression. To quote Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, Ondaatje opens “a space of translation” and “a place of hybridity” where “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’” (25). The encounter with a previously erased history becomes a story that “renews the past” and “innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (7). Ondaatje explores the experiences of the migrant labourers as a lost world, and by reclaiming their stories, he holds out the possibility of imagining and negotiating a different more inclusive world. Ondaatje’s novel deploys multiple perspectives and points of view, and transformations occur when perspectives and points of view abruptly shift, leaving both his characters and readers to negotiate the hybrid effects and epiphanies of these shifts. Ondaatje’s world is a hybridized world, but fragmented and polyvalent, and ultimately his protagonists have to negotiate their way out of silence and invisibility by learning to tell their stories, so that with Hana, we can see “the castle in the field” (1).
Chapter 6: Hybridity and Spatiotemporal Propinquities in *The English Patient*

In Michael Ondaatje’s 1992 novel, *The English Patient*, which is framed as a spy story, categories used to discriminate between human beings are first carefully mapped, then broken down into their smallest components, before being realigned as fragments, typically through cinematic techniques of intercutting. Ondaatje’s characters are also stripped down to generic shapes—men, women, boys, girls—and turned into vagrants or nomads, able both to transgress and set identities in motion across time and space. The eponymous character of the novel is, for example, variously figured as a mummy, an embalmed corpse, a hawk, a bog man, a jackal, and a feudal knight in armour. The English identity assigned to him is a convincing *trompe l’oeil*, which fools both his captors and those who care for him. In the novel the identity of the “man without a face” remains a mystery to be resolved (48). But should it be resolved? Does he even have an identity? Is his Englishness “a camouflage of deceit?” (253). Or is the notion of claiming an identity the real enigma posed by the novel? There are indications of divided loyalties in the burnt pilot’s cryptic statement that “for all he knew, he could have been the enemy he had been fighting from the air” (7), suggesting that he is neither friend nor foe, yet both and neither. The captured pilot, who lacks identification papers, taunts his captors to decipher him by sending them down several forking paths: “make me speak German, which I can, by the way. Ask me about Don Bradman. Ask me about Marmite, the great Gertrude Jekyll” (95). By enumerating a knighted Australian cricket player, an English gardener, a yeast spread, and claiming proficiency in a foreign, enemy language, he signals that his burnt body is a labyrinth, an “ebony pool” and a “communal history” that cannot be reduced to one identity, and that for him all identities are lodged in the eye of the beholder. But to his wartime interrogators, identities matter in drawing lines between friend and foe, and “[a]ll that is missing is his own name ... rank or battalion or squadron” (96).
He was interrogated again. Everything about him was very English, except for the fact that his skin was tarred black, a bog man from history among the interrogating officers…. He rambled on, driving them mad, traitor and ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was. (96)

Although mapping is the central metaphor of the novel, even the captured English patient, who is a mapmaker and desert explorer, ultimately wants to walk upon “an earth that has no maps” (261). His desire for a borderless world informs this novel full of paradoxes and juxtapositions in which all borders and identities come under intense pressure. Set against the backdrop of war, Ondaatje’s novel brings together a group of strangers who negotiate an unlikely truce in a ruined Tuscan villa. At the end of the novel, as their temporary alliance is torn apart, Hana, the young nurse, is forced to conclude that “from now on I believe the personal will always be at war with the public” [italics in original] (293). Her statement reveals that “the love of the idea” of the stranger survives intact in her; an idea which implies that to love a stranger is a process of mapping and exploration, but also a translation and transformation through the discovery of many points of view in which “a whole civilization, a whole country lies ahead” (225). The “idea” of the stranger is not framed as a conquest or appropriation of the other, but as an inter-subjective encounter in a transformative in-between space, which leaves the alterity of the stranger intact. In my reading of Ondaatje's novel, I will deploy terms charged by the discourse of Orientalism, such as “mapping,” “exploring” and “discovery,” catachrestically to explore the building of bridges across cultures and differences, rather than as negatively marked terms of exploitation and conquest. I will also argue, that in this novel, alterity is a call to responsibility and respect for the other.

In terms of identity mapping, it is interesting to note that in an interview in Other Solitudes, an anthology of Canadian multicultural fictions published in 1990, one of the editors, Linda Hutcheon, valiantly attempts to pin down Michael Ondaatje on the contemporary Canadian identity map by probing whether a hybridized designation such as “Sri Lankan Canadian” would accurately describe him as a writer. Predictably, Ondaatje offers an evasive response and suggests that he feels “that more than anything else,” but adds that as a writer “I do feel I have been allowed the migrant’s double
perspective, in the way, say, someone like Gertrude Stein was ‘refocused’ by Paris” (197). Further on in the interview he suggests that as a writer he feels little responsibility to write as either Canadian or Sri Lankan (202), but prefers the hybridized perspective and creative freedom of the ironic designations “planetary stranger” or “international bastard” that the English patient claims for himself in the novel (251). Although the novel is not narrated from any particular point of view, and the writing strategy blends both documentation and fictionalization, it is clearly Ondaatje’s “double perspective” which gives him the scope to explore how strangers in close relation to each other forge connections across worlds and construct bridges across turbulent cultural divides (70). In The Conversations, Ondaatje suggests that, in writing, he is always trying to forge alliances between unlikely things, striking juxtapositions, finding the right shorthand for ideas, metaphors ... those sometimes surreal, sometimes subliminal connections that reveal a surprising path or link between strangers. The way a pun or even a misprint can work on a simpler level. (34)

Ultimately, then, it is the “refocused” perspective of the stranger that gives him the creative freedom to leap grasshopper-like into other worlds and forge unexpected links between them. In The English Patient, which affirms “the sacredness of bridges” (70), Ondaatje juxtaposes two such “unlikely” and random “alliances” of nomadic strangers, who are thrown together beyond the confines of national loyalties to experience moments of closeness and distance, affinity and difference, before they are torn apart and dispersed by the horrors of war. One transnational alliance is a closely knit “oasis society” of European cartographers re-exploring the Egyptian/Libyan desert in the late 1930’s before the desert becomes a full-fledged theatre of war. The other is an alliance of “intimate strangers,” stitched together from a group of traumatized participants in the war, holed up in a ruined Italian renaissance villa where, briefly, “in 1945 their continents meet in a hill town” (222). In the novel, the richest zone of hybridizing interactions is the uncharted area between their worlds. Although the narrative present is situated in the war ravaged landscape of Italy, where every river “was bridgeless, as if its name had been erased, as if the sky were starless, houses doorless” (129, the group in the villa still manages to bridge their differences and stake out common ground, perhaps since there is “hardly a world
around them” anymore, and they are as a result “forced back upon themselves” (44). Thus they are all cast as explorers of alterity, and even though the bridges they construct turn out to be retractable drawbridges, in erecting and crossing them, they are all transformed.

There are also a number of intertexts in The English Patient that create interstitial spaces where worlds begin to intersect and expand across time and space. The most important intertext is a commonplace book, which the English patient rarely lets out of his sight in the villa, where Hana, who sits by his bed and reads to him daily, “travels like a squire beside him during these journeys” (135). The identity of the nameless and badly burnt patient who “reposes like the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna” remains a mystery to her, and when the novel opens there is no clue to his nationality. In the harbour room of the Tuscan villa, he “speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling…. All that is missing is his own name” (96). While Hana’s mental image of a “dead knight” places her patient within the legacy of the Crusades and squarely within the discourse of Orientalism, his commonplace book points to a different allegiance and philosophy, that of Herodotus, the Hellenistic historian, a fact which Hana accidentally discovers when she picks up his notebook while searching for clues to the patient’s identity, and begins to decipher his “small gnarled handwriting” (16):

It is the book he brought with him through the fire--a copy of The Histories by Herodotus that he has added to, cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations--so they all are cradled within the text of Herodotus. (16)

Herodotus’s The Histories, which maps a creolized and polyglot Hellenistic world, is quoted extensively in the novel. The commonplace book in which Hana’s sage has recorded information and anecdotes about the desert seems to be structured as a paratactic text in the style of Herodotus in which every piece of information is potentially important and interconnected. As a constellation of juxtaposed quotations and fragments it also resembles Walter Benjamin’s ambitious Arcades Project. In fact, the manuscript for Benjamin’s unfinished project, a vast collection of quotations, notes and reflections,
posthumously discovered in 1981, could well be the model for the English patient's well thumbed copy of Herodotus's work, "splayed open, almost twice its original thickness" (94), containing an array of "fragments, maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books," annotated in "his own small handwriting" and glued onto the pages of Herodotus's history (97). But in its palimpsestic construction, Ondaatje's novel is also a commonplace book, in which text and intertext, fragments and disjointed events gradually begin to congeal into a complex superimposition as a story told from many vantage points. In The Conversations, Ondaatje suggests that as a writer he is fascinated by the possibilities inherent in narrative palimpsests in which fact and fiction meet and blur distinctions. "I am continually being fed and diverted by the possibilities from the world around me--chance anecdotes overheard, the texture within a rumour--as much as what my research reveals" (38). Ondaatje's observation is clearly inspired by Herodotus's method of historiography.

I will argue that in the spirit and style of Herodotus, Ondaatje sets out to challenge our habits of seeing and acting in the world through a polycentric narrative that continuously folds in on itself in the same way that Benjamin in the Arcades Project attempts to make "history with the very detritus of history" (Arcades Project 545), since even "in that which is newest, the face of the world never alters" (Arcades Project 544), and it is in the interstices, or "in the minutiae of the 'intervening,' [that] the eternally selfsame is manifest" (Arcades Project 545). In other words, in thinking about the world, newness does not mark radical breaks or new beginnings in the sweep of human history any more than cultural differences erect impenetrable walls between people. The notion of newness is simply another way of seeing the world through the defamiliarizing eyes of a stranger. Thus, the methodologies of Herodotus, Benjamin and Ondaatje are strikingly similar in their fascination with local knowledge and historical contingencies as well as the ordinary and everyday that, when observed by a stranger, push the limits of the known into a new matrix of an interconnected world in which different customs and variant versions of history fit together and begin to flow into each other. All three writers set out to map the world as a dwelling in which what connects rather than separates nations and cultures across space and time is foregrounded. Paradoxically, this is also a
world in which barriers and divisions can open up new paths, routes and bridges across time and space. All of them regard history as a layered palimpsest, and all three are fascinated by legends, myths, local traditions and place names which they use not only to map lost worlds, but to open up alternative routes as they construct a hybridized counter narrative of a world that is linked rather than divided. For Herodotus, the mediating tradition is the pluralistic Hellenistic world view, which Ondaatje explores and makes present as a possible route across seemingly unbridgeable cultural differences.

It is interesting to note that like Ondaatje, Herodotus of Helikarnassos, who travelled extensively across the Hellenistic world, is a cultural hybrid, nomad and migrant, who is unique among historians in that his world is an egalitarian one; a world which, as John Gould observes, “is not a closed system,” but one made up of many cultures, peoples and perspectives—Greeks and non-Greeks—and as a result “there is no reason why spatial and social reciprocities cannot be indefinitely extended, which is why Herodotus’s world is both so open and expansive and so rich” (The Histories, Introduction xvii). Herodotus is curious and clearly enjoys making cross-cultural comparisons, and in his narrative the unknown is a potential source of enlightenment, not a threat: “it is likely that the outermost reaches of the world, which encompass and enclose all the rest, contain things which strike us as particularly attractive and unusual” (Herodotus 216). In Herodotus’s narrative, people come to grief if they fail to pay attention to the diversity of the world, and he searches for empirical and accurate information to challenge all systems of thought in which “objects are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter” (Orientalism 70), which is how Edward Said characterizes the discourse of Orientalism. But Herodotus has come down in history as a mere protohistorian, and he has repeatedly been dismissed as a philobarbarus—or lover of barbarians—since he offers many variant and equally plausible versions of the same event, not just the Greek one.

27 The brutal Persian ruler Oroetes who commits the cardinal sin of killing messengers that bring news that displease him is in the end killed by his own guard who open letters urging them to get rid of the despot, and they kill him on the spot. Herodotus, The Histories. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 221-2.
Thus, Herodotus qualifies as “a cubist” *avant la lettre*, since he creates moments of cubism by presenting many possible points of view at once.

In the novel, the English patient, who, like Herodotus, travels through the desert to map a vanishing world in order to “prevent the traces of human events from being erased by time” (*The Histories* 3), ironically evokes the charges levelled at Herodotus by referring to his “ancient and modern” guide book as one of “supposed lies” (246). The English patient sees him as “one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage” (119). Yet like Herodotus, the English patient was able to validate his map of the world and reorient himself time and time again based on accurate oral evidence obtained from the nomads of the desert: “When I was lost among them, unsure of where I was, all I needed was the name of a small ridge, a local custom, a cell of this historical animal, and the map of the world would fall into place” (19). But does Ondaatje’s narrative escape the Orientalist attitude that Edward Said identifies in all Western representations of the Orient in which the Orient/Oriental remains an outsider who has “a special role to play inside Europe?” (71). I will argue, that in this novel Ondaatje explores this problematic through the characters and trajectories of the English patient, the Orientalist, and Kip, the Oriental, and the choices they make are ultimately framed by Said’s discourse on Orientalism. In contrast, the two Canadian characters of the novel, Hana and Caravaggio, come to espouse a view of the world which is informed by the legacy of Herodotus.

According to Said, “Orientalism is form of radical realism,” which is “absolutely anatomical” and “to use its vocabulary is to engage in particularizing and dividing things Oriental into manageable parts” (72). As a discipline it approaches the Orient “systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice” (73), and according to Said most forms of Orientalist exploration, description and mapping are dangerous knowledges that carry the potential for exploitation. Thus, from a hybridized perspective, Herodotus’ notion that Oriental civilizations disseminated important cultural and political influences that ultimately gave rise to a hybridized Greek civilization is foreclosed by the
Orientalist paradigm. There is, however, a counter-narrative, which takes off from Herodotus and moves beyond the cultural chauvinism of European nationalism to focus on these Oriental influences that shaped Greece. In *Black Athena*, Martín Bernal attempts to revise the European idea of Greek civilization as a unique and isolated national achievement and a victory over barbarism, which was developed by German Classicists in the wake of nineteenth century romanticism and rising nationalism. He does so by returning to Herodotus’s narrative of Greek culture as an ongoing negotiation of cultural similarities and differences, contacts and conflicts; that is, as a cultural amalgam resulting from a series of successive migrations, invasions and conquests, mainly by neighbouring Egyptians, Phoenicians and Persians, which left indelible imprints on what was to become Greek culture. This is the lost Ancient model of cultural diffusion, a paradigm of hybridized heterogeneity that the later European Aryan model of homogeneity replaced by purging the narrative of Greek civilization of all Oriental influences and traces of cultural indebtedness to neighbouring civilizations. Bernal argues that the historical evidence shows that Hellenic culture is deeply indebted to “civilizing foreigners” (or ‘contaminating barbarians’ in the Aryan idiom) (102). Along with Herodotus, he suggests that nearly all of the Greek gods arrived as migrants from Egypt, and that Athens was likely founded by an Egyptian. Although Bernal does not use the term “hybridity” to describe Greek civilization, the process of cultural dissemination that he tracks across the millennia is tantamount to a massive creolization. In Bernal as well as Herodotus, Egypt is the dominant civilization that gives birth to Greece. Bernal also questions the “absolute priority” of archeology over other sources of evidence about prehistory such as “myth, legend, language and names” (37), just as Ondaatje draws attention to the importance of oral history as an alternative narrative to recorded history in his novels.

Since Herodotus does not impose his view of the world on the reader, but allows the reader to draw conclusions, it is easy to miss the cross-cultural connections, and dismiss his history as that of a gifted storyteller and itinerant traveller, as does Caravaggio when he casually examines the commonplace book of the English patient. In characterizing his universe as a “world of nomads” and “an apocryphal story” (248), Caravaggio echoes the criticism of Herodotus by generations of historians who view
history as a chronicle of one territorialized nation, one that, in contrast to Herodotus’s narrative, distinguishes hierarchically between West and East, us and them, Greeks and Barbarians. Without the guiding influence of the English patient, Caravaggio’s eye is as yet unable to forge transcultural connections between the scattered fragments on the pages of the commonplace book.

He turns the pages, comes over a dune to discover the Gilf Kebir, Uweinat, Gebel Kissu. When Almasy speaks he stays alongside him reordering the events. Only desire makes the story errant, flickering like a compass needle. And this is the world of nomads in any case, an apocryphal story. A mind travelling east and west in the disguise of a sandstorm. (248)

Eventually, the commentary of the English patient will make Caravaggio realize that the desert nomads not only have “a thousand paths and roads”(140), but a long history and inhabit “a fully named world” (21), which like his own world “has been civilized for centuries” (140). Like Herodotus before him, the English patient travels through a landscape that people have travelled through for millennia, a place of “[s]poradic appearances and disappearances, like legends and rumours through history” (141). But Caravaggio’s skepticism may also be traced back to his own war experience as an intelligence officer in Cairo “when everything offered up to those around him was a lie” (170), and no story or point of view could be trusted. Like the English patient, Caravaggio is “an evasive man” whose world has exploded around him, and who during friendly interrogations in a military hospital in Rome reveals nothing about himself, “not even his name” (27). His serial number identifies him as a hero and patriot, but “the war has unbalanced him, and he can return to no other world as it is” (116). He seeks silence, not glory, feeling “safer” that way (28).

It is interesting to note that in brushing Herodotus aside as doubtful and unreliable, Caravaggio differs sharply from Edward Said, who sees nothing “apocryphal” in the Greek historian. In Orientalism he takes him very seriously and regards Herodotus, “the historian, traveler, [and] inexhaustibly curious chronicler” as a proto-orientalist, since he added to the “fund of taxonomic lore separating races, regions, nations and minds from each other” (57), which paved the way for subsequent conquests, starting
with the imperium of Alexander the Great. According to Said, Herodotus’s *Histories* allowed the Orient to be “subdivided into realms previously known, visited, conquered” by Herodotus and Alexander, as well as their epigones, and “those realms not previously known, visited and conquered” (58). But then Said’s thesis requires a reading in which any knowledge, description or mapping of the Orient constitutes a potential means of exploitation, and for Said Orientalism always stands for “a kind of Western projection onto and [a] will to govern the Orient” (95). In contrast, Ondaatje’s English patient argues that Herodotus always seeks the “supplementary to the main argument” and that what can be recovered from Herodotus are “the cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history--how people betray each other for the sake of nations” (119), and these betrayals occur throughout history both in the Orient and Occident. Yet the English patient cites with approval the creed of the Senussi, whose “foremost doctrine” is “not to reveal the secrets of the desert to strangers” (141), and like Said, he is also cognizant of the role of exploration in the imperialist agenda of conquest and exploitation. The English patient argues:

>The ends of the earth are never the points on a map that colonists push against, enlarging their sphere of influence. On one side servants and slaves and tides of power and correspondence with the Geographical Society. On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there for ever. (141)

Thus the English patient rejects exploration as a means to inscribe and glorify the achievements of one civilization or nation over another, and he dismisses the practice of European explorers to name their ‘discoveries’ as a form of cultural arrogance, since the desert is “a fully named world” (70), and he deploys the prefix “re” in front of both “exploration” and “discovery” to underscore his position as he argues that the desert is a leveller of distinctions, a place where all identities begin to dissolve and humans come to recognize themselves not only as mortals but as fellow nomads.
The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East. Its caravans, those strange rambling feasts and cultures, left nothing behind, not an ember. All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. (138-39)

But the English patient has several blind spots. As a member of the Royal Geographical Society, his discourse on exploration is governed by conventions by which “all human and financial behaviour lies on the far side of the issue being discussed—which is the earth’s surface and ‘interesting geographical problems’”(134). But in times of war the specialist’s knowledge of the “earth’s surface” takes on a different meaning and importance. After ten years in the desert, it had become easy for him “to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (139), and this detailed knowledge of the topography of the desert will test his own loyalty to the desert when the war breaks out. As an Orientalist cartographer he also erects what Said ironically calls “monuments of knowledge” (171), or narratives which “make the desert speak again” (173), with “suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets and hidden correspondences and an almost virtuosic style of being” (170). Said also suggests that for many European travellers and explorers the Orient beckons as “a locale sympathetic to their private myths and obsessions” (170), which holds out the possibility of self-completion. The Orient is Europe’s exotic other, and the English patient is certainly caught up in a romance with the desert and the camaraderie and close friendships forged among the explorers: “We were a small clutch of a nation between the wars, mapping and re-exploring. We gathered at Dakhla and Kufa as if they were bars or cafés. An oasis society. We knew each other’s intimacies, each other’s skills and weaknesses” (136). His use of the word “nation” to describe the closely knit community of desert Europeans does, however, reveal a hidden yearning for the cultural cohesion of nationhood, even when he argues most vigorously against nationalism. He also describes the tribe of Bedouins that rescued him from the burning airplane as “a great nation” (6), and it is certainly plausible to argue that what he may yearn for is a world of nations without nationalism—a world beyond blood lines and ethnicities to which strangers can belong—and he constructs a prototype for this world in
the nationless desert community. Thus the desert transforms the European cartographers into fellow nomads.

Not seeing each other for months. Just the Bedouins and us, crisscrossing the Forty Days Road. There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them. We became nationless. I came to hate nations. We were deformed by nation-states. (138)

Like Herodotus he finds in the desert a world that is an ancient civilization, and instead of confirming his superiority as a European, the desert literally *reorients* him, and he realizes that “the place they have chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry” is also a place where “apart from the sun compass and the odometer mileage and the book, he was alone, his own invention” (246). Travelling across the desert alongside the Bedouins and Europeans and guided by Herodotus, the explorers argue seriously about “latitudes and an event that had happened seven hundred years earlier” as if the theorems of exploration actually matter to the world outside their little circle (143). But the polyglot world of the explorers alters suddenly and beyond recognition as Europe prepares to go to war, and friends abruptly turn into enemies. The English patient uses the suicide of his close friend and collaborator Madox “who wrote and interpreted the world” (243), but “died because of nations” (138), to illustrate how conflicts between nation states create divided loyalties and turn friends into enemies:

Someone’s war was slashing apart this delicate tapestry of companions. I was Odysseus, I understood the shifting and temporary vetoes of war. But [Madox] was a man who made friends with difficulty. He was a man who knew two or three people in his life, and they now turned out to be the enemy. (241)

At the end of 1939, the explorers are forced to leave the desert, and Madox returns to Marston Magna in England “where he had been born, and a month later sat in the congregation of a church, heard the sermon in honour of war, pulled out the desert revolver and shot himself” (240). Both Madox and the English patient had to choose sides and have ended up on opposite sides of the demarcation line. In the novel, Madox’s antiwar sentiment and contempt for jingoistic sermons resonate with the shell-shocked
Hana, who in administering to dying soldiers, as the German army retreats from Italy, reflects that “she could never believe in all those services they gave for the dead” with their “vulgar rhetoric,” adding that, “[e]very damn general should have had my job. Every damn general” (84). Thus the war proves that the desert can indeed be conquered, exploited, “claimed and owned” (138), and that the Orientalist knowledge of desert explorers becomes a valuable commodity in the service of warring nation states. But if war and nationalism can tear the closely knit desert community apart, and their knowledge of the desert can be used to betray the desert, what then beyond the spirit of exploration drew these Europeans so closely together in the desert?

He said later that it was propinquity. Propinquity in the desert. It does that here, he said. He loved the word.... In the desert you have time to look everywhere, to theorize the choreography of all things around you.... For him all relations fell into patterns. You fell into propinquity or distance. Just as for him, the histories of Herodotus clarified all societies. (150)

In English, “propinquity,” derived from the Latin *propinquus*, has two closely related lexical meanings according to the Oxford Reference Dictionary: “nearness in place” and “close kinship,” both of which Ondaatje explores in various ways in the novel to build bridges and make spatiotemporal connections between different cultures. In The Order of Things, Foucault suggests that used imaginatively the notion of propinquity can bridge incommensurable differences as he demonstrates in his dissection of Borges’s fictional Chinese Encyclopedia with its “enumeration of incongruous things” (xiv). Foucault identifies the Borges effect as a “phantasmagorical reordering of things” into “a fabulous taxonomy” which pushes the relations among the incongruous items listed to the limit of the imagination, and gives the catalogue “a power of enchantment all its own” (xvi). The history of the order of the same would be a history of sameness, of what is deemed to be related, and thought to be identical. In Borges, alterity is bridged through a series of surreal slippages and irrational correspondences. In terms of cultural differences, Edward Said notes in The World, the Text, and the Critic that culture is not just something “to which one belongs, but something that one possesses” (9). A culture marks “a boundary by which the concepts of what is extrinsic or intrinsic to the culture come into forceful play” (9). Said’s notion of “forceful play” clearly designates the ground where cultural
hybridity emerges as an unpredictable boundary negotiation. In a felicitous phrase, Said goes on to define culture as a “possessing possession” whose standards are invisible to the degree that they are “natural” “objective” and “real” (9). A culture implies a certain way of apprehending the world, and Borges’s fantastic realignment of things makes visible another mode of apprehension that is extrinsic, and therefore strange and incommensurable. The Borges effect is analogous to the defamiliarizing eye of the stranger which scrambles or enchants what appears to be “natural” “objective” and “real” as it estranges the familiar. Thus, Borges’s encyclopedia challenges our ability to tolerate the incommensurable, and his order of things playfully suggests that there may be other ways of seeing, imagining and ordering the world.

The same willingness to mix and match the incongruous produces effects of hybridity. According to Bruno Latour, hybrids are always produced when the boundary between culture and nature is crossed. In the history of science, the nature/culture boundary is policed by what Latour refers to as the “modern constitution” which “renders the work of mediation that assembles hybrids invisible, unthinkable, unrepresentable” (34). Hybrids exist, but the modern constitution refuses to conceptualise hybrids, preferring instead to exclude, purify or deny their existence, argues Latour in We Have Never Been Modern. Similarly, in his Conversations on Science, Culture and Time, Michel Serres regards “myths” as hybrids, and Serres argues that “the more one tries to exclude [mythology], the more it returns in force, since it is founded on the operation of exclusion” (163).

In The English Patient, enchanting ‘Borges effects’ are created in a catalogue of desert winds, which, personified and given mythical shapes, incessantly transform the desert landscape into new and fabulous configurations. The winds are clearly metaphors for complex historical forces that shape human lives, and in the taxonomy of desert winds, each description is both factual and legendary. Moreover, these desert winds are both natural and cultural, and as a result they produce fabulous temporal and spatial epistemological hybrids “in the guise of a sandstorm” (248). In the desert there are, for example, permanent winds “that live in the present tense” as well as less constant but
more capricious winds “that change direction and can knock down horse and rider and realign themselves anticlockwise” (16). Some of the less constant winds carry fragrances, others are hallucinatory and arrive like massive, bright yellow walls “a thousand metres high” before they release rain, while others are timid and “just sigh towards the sky,” or choleric, producing blasts of dry heat which “scorches with numerous tongues” (17). In contrast, the self-destructive harmattan blows until it “drowns itself in the Atlantic” (16). But there is also a secret wind marked by a dash “whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it,” and other, more private winds which seem to have iconoclastic tendencies as they “travel along the ground like a flood, [b]lasting off paint, throwing down telephone poles, transporting stones and statue heads” (17). Other legendary winds the people of the desert have learned to fight and tame:

There is the whirlwind in southern Morocco, the aajej, against which the fellahin defend themselves with knives.... The mezzar-ifoullousen—a violent and cold southwesterly wind known to the Berbers “as that which plucks the fowls.” ... The Samiel from Turkey, “poison and wind,” used often in battle. As well as other poison winds, the sinoom, of North Africa, and the solano, whose dust plucks off rare petals, causing giddiness. (16-17)

Finally there are the dust storms, which come in three shapes: “The whirl. The column. The sheet. In the first the horizon is lost. In the second you are surrounded by ‘waltzing Ginz.’ The third, the sheet, is ‘copper tinted. Nature seems to be on fire’” (16-17). The dust storms are the most destructive, and like modern warfare they appear capable of destroying entire civilizations. These descriptions can easily be dismissed as found poetry, but this fabulous taxonomy of winds in the commonplace book of the English patient is clearly instrumental and the form mnemonic. Thus this double discourse mimetically blends the social and the natural world, and produces a hybrid discourse by what Latour calls “arrangement and combination” as it inscribes, crosses and traces “the countless meanderings of situations and networks” (45). In Herodotus as well, the past is often salvaged through a boundary crossing into the realm of muthodes, or the mythic. Thus, Herodotus’s style is both paratactic and meandering--cinematic in fact--since he frequently uses back tracking, flash forwards, embedded digressions, interruptions, and interlocking fragments. As a result, Herodotus relies on the reader’s associative thinking,
and Carolyn Dewald suggests that he "constructs a huge roadmap of the known human
world, past and present, in which everything is linked through story to everything else in
a dense web of casual connections" (xvi). In fact, his method is a form of montage that
resembles Benjamin's technique in the Arcades Project:

In [his] narrative everything is potentially important and interconnected, but
Herodotus rarely tries as author to dominate the connections, or tell us which ones
he thinks relatively more important. His tendency to construct discrete episodes in
interlocking a-b-a ring patterns, with numerous pendants that are independent
from the main narrative, instead sets all of his material out for us so that we can
take what we think important from it (The Histories xxvii).

In Ondaatje there are also interlocking patterns, but his mode of writing is above all
spatial, and Ondaatje's characters are always choreographed to move through carefully
delineated landscapes in which the marvellous suddenly envelops them as the atmosphere
changes in the available light. In discussing Borges's method of cataloguing and
reordering things, Foucault suggests that "[w]hat is impossible is not the propinquity of
the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible," for
"[w]here else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?" (xvi). In
The English Patient, Ondaatje's narrative evokes several such places where spatial and
temporal transpositions realign incongruous events across worlds. Typically, Ondaatje
sets up these spatial transpositions through an emblematic story which is echoed or
mirrored in the text, either through embedded fragments, or through a series of analepses
and prolepses which allow different events to flow into and transform each other, and in
the process they reveal surprising connections and continuities in the narrative.

Many of the transworld connections between the protagonists, who meet as
strangers, are mediated by other narratives. When Hana and the English patient first meet
in the military hospital, the only way the English patient can reach out to the shell-
shocked Hana, with her "dead glances" (95), is to ask her to read aloud to him, and when
she opens a book "she enters through stilted doorways into large court yards. Parma and
Paris and India spread their carpets" (93). Like Ondaatje, Hana has scant regard for a
linear plot, and frequently she continues her reading at night, leaving huge gaps in the
plot for the English patient to negotiate as the bedside reading resumes the next day. Beside Stendhal, she reads Kipling’s *Kim* to the English patient, and one day the sapper enters their lives “out of this fiction” (94), as if “over those long nights, they had prepared themselves for the young soldier, the boy grown up, who would join them” (111). But when Hana observes the young sapper sitting beside the English patient, the scene seems to her to be a reversal of Kipling’s novel, for the “young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English. Yet it was Hana in the night who stayed with the old man, who guided him over the mountains to the sacred river” (111). Hana feels more like the young boy in the story, observing that the sapper is actually closer to Kipling’s officer Creighton, Kim’s spymaster. Like Creighton in colonial India, Kip is visibly an outsider, yet invisible:

He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by him being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences against all that by trusting only those who befriended him. (167)

The sapper’s nickname is not Kim, however, but Kip, which is a name that can be made to enter into an intertextual dialogue with Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses,* in which the proper way to eat the strange and bone-filled fish becomes a humiliating initiation rite of Englishness for another young Asian boy. In Ondaatje’s novel Kip becomes the strange fish:

“Get Kip.” “Here comes Kip.” The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper and the officer had exclaimed. “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into an English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten. (87)

Kip is the other mapmaker of the novel, but unlike the explorers and adventurers who map lost civilizations in “the half-invented world of the desert” (150), Kip is risking his life every day mapping and defusing unexploded bombs in what is essentially a
European war. Arguing with his brother in India, who thinks he is “a fool for trusting the English” (217), especially since the English are now “hanging Sikhs who are fighting for independence” (217), the main reason Kip gives for enlisting is because “the Sikhs are being brutalized by the Japanese in Malaya,” and Japan is an Asian nation (217). But Hana, perhaps taking her cue from Herodotus, has discovered a variant version, and pulling out Kim from the shelf in the library, she records a Sikh legend she has learned from Kip on the flyleaf of Kipling’s novel. The buried story of centuries of sectarian and colonial violence against the Sikhs, not recorded in Kipling’s narrative, reveals that the Zam-Zammah cannon was in fact made of metal cups and bowls taken from Hindu households in Lahore as a war tax. These were melted down and made not into one, but two guns, “which were used in many battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth century against the Sikhs” (119). Hana has begun to explore and decode the world of Kip, who speaks of “warrior saints and she now feels he is one, stern and visionary” (217). Gradually she discovers that his view of the world is shaped by being a member of a minority within India, and she realizes that as an eternal outsider he “is one of the charmed, who has grown up as an outsider and so can switch allegiances, can replace loss. There are those destroyed by unfairness and those who are not” (271-2). The English patient also recognizes a fellow nomad and wanderer in Kip, calling him fato profugus, fate’s fugitive (273), and in another tableau the omniscient narrator watches over him, like the guardian angel Kip trusts to be his sentinel for the night, as he waits for Naples either to become a city of light again or a burning inferno as the sappers prepare to turn on the electricity. In India as well as Europe, he is a stranger among strangers, and the religious significance of the giant figures in the chapel that depict “an angel and a woman in a bedroom” escapes him, as he orphan-like claims a space for the night at the feet of the Virgin Mary. Here Ondaatje evokes a human ecumene that transforms the iconographic tableau of the annunciation into a suggestive cross-cultural image of peace and belonging in the face of differences:
He is sprawled out with a smile on his face, as if relieved finally to be sleeping, the luxuriousness of such a thing. The palm of his left hand facedown on the concrete. The colour of his turban echoes that of the lace collar at the neck of Mary. At her feet the small Indian sapper, in uniform.... There seems to be no time here. Each of them has selected the most comfortable of positions to forget time. So we will be remembered by others. In such smiling comfort when we trust our surroundings. The tableau now, with Kip at the feet of the two figures, suggests a debate over his fate. The raised terra-cotta arm a stay of execution, a promise of some great future for this sleeper, childlike, foreign-born. (280-81)

To Hana the sapper seems like “some kind of loose star on the edge of their system” when he arrives at the villa (75); “a young man of the strangest profession his century had invented, a sapper, a military engineer who detected and disarmed mines” (273). The life expectancy of the sapper unit is twelve weeks, and the interactions among the sappers reflect their awareness of their own mortality, for “the sappers never became familiar with each other ... [Kip] would step into the town hall where they were billeted, and his eyes would take in the three faces and be aware of the absence of the fourth” (110). Hana is acutely aware of Kip’s dangerous work and she “knew that if he were in danger he would never turn to face her. He would create a space around himself and concentrate. That was his craft” (271). A nurse by training, she maps his body well aware that the upper reaches of his arm, “that dark brown river” she likes to lean her face against (125), also contains the pulsating vein she “would have to locate and insert a saline solution into if he were dying” (125). Neither Hana nor Kip attempts to change or appropriate the otherness of the other, yet their cultures meet and hybridize in fleeting moments of intimacy.

At first Kip does not come near the villa at all, and he pitches his tent in the garden. The tent is his world, and he enters the house only when invited, “just a tentative visitor” (75), and “the landscape around him is just a temporary thing, there’s no permanence to it “(87). This is a treacherous landscape that cannot be trusted. Each morning Hana watches Kip emerge from his tent, walk down the path, away from the villa, conscious that she might be observing “his freshness towards the world perhaps for the last time” (272). This “was the moment he left them all behind. The moment the drawbridge closed behind the knight and he was alone with just the peacefulness of his
own strict talent” (273). Kip is reluctant to let Hana into his life out of fear that she may shatter his concentration on the dangerous task at hand, afraid of her spectral presence as he dismantles mines. “He had to remove it, or she would be with him each time he approached a fuze” (115). Through binoculars, Hana watches from the villa as the sapper moves in the distance, “he scans the periphery,” moving always “in relation to things, beside walls, raised terrace hedges” (218). Gradually she begins to imagine “all of Asia through the gestures of this one man. The way he lazily moves, his quiet civilization” (217), while Kip sees Hana as someone “young and alone” (114), who has sought refuge from life in the ruined villa with her “eternally dying man” (115). But he also thinks her “remarkable” and most of all he likes the “smart look” of her face (128), as he watches her attend to her patient, and “if he could walk across the room and touch her, he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world” (113). There is, however, no timidity on the part of Hana, who approaches Kip without “a false step or any hesitation” (130). The relationship that develops between them is based on mutual respect for the alterity of the other, and Kip is a “relief to [Hana] in his self-sufficiency” (73). Kip for his part “did not want comfort but he wanted to surround the girl with it, to guide her from this room. He refused to believe in his own weakness, and with her he had not found a weakness to fit himself against” (114). Thus the relationship between Hana and Kip is clearly one that fits Levinas’s definition of a heteronomy in which the self finds the other in the self, while the other retains his or her alterity. In Otherwise Than Being, Levinas suggests that the arrival of the stranger, who announces: “here I am!” narrows “the inequality between same and other,” causing “a dispossessio of the self,” allowing the self to leave “the clandestinity of its identification.” Here the obligation to the other demands a form of substitution or “a unique response ... an unforeseeable response of the chosen one” (145). Later, Hana realizes that during their month together “he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him” (128).

In contrast, the imagery of the passionate love affair between Almásy and Katharine evokes the violence and destruction of an accidental collision: “If I gave you my life, you would drop it. Wouldn’t you?” (145), implores Katharine, correctly
diagnosing their possessive, obsessive and ultimately destructive love. When the passionate affair is over, both respond by building impenetrable walls against the other. Throughout the narrative, Almasy, remains uncertain whether she is with him or against him, but decides that she is against him. Ironically, Katharine accuses him of immutability: “You think you are an iconoclast, but you are not. You just move, or replace what you cannot have.... Nothing changes you.... I left because I knew I could never change you” (174). Although they remain worlds apart, their passion refuses to die. Almasy reflects that she remains “within the wall of her class” and her “terrible conscience,” which Almasy, although he has been “disassembled” by her, is unable to “reach through” (155; 157). At their moving reunion in the cave at Uweinat, Almasy tries to hold on to her beauty and grace by rubbing ochre into her face, in a strange ritual of embalming. He still cannot speak to Katharine directly, and retreats into formalities, his voice bouncing against the walls of the cave.

When three years later, Almasy returns to the cave, to recover her body, he begins to braid his own and Katharine’s lives together from a series of episodes or “pockets” of recollected time as a last act of intimacy. As lovers, they would have explored each other through anecdotes from the past and Almasy now enters her life in the spirit of the mythical jackal on the cave murals at Uweinat, “the opener of ways” (258). He claims to have observed her in the Oxford Union Library when she meets her future husband, Geoffrey Clifton, and both of them find their “fates” (259), suggesting that every incident in a single life is potentially important and connected to others, and fate is here marked by his anachronistic presence:

I have lived in the desert and come to believe in such things. It is a place of pockets.... The jackal with one eye that looks back and one that regards the path you consider taking. In his jaws are pieces of the past that he delivers to you, and when all of that time is fully discovered it will prove to have been already known. (258-9)

The meeting place in the library is of some significance too, since Katharine’s introduction to Herodotus, through Almasy’s commonplace book, makes her realize that her own life could take a different direction, become less predictable and fated, even
though she was married to a man whose family genealogy goes “back to Canute” (237). Moreover, the tale of Gyges that she chose to read aloud is essentially one of an invisible subject who is nonetheless present and able to observe. She soon becomes one of the desert Europeans and a disciple of Herodotus, and it is interesting to note that the trail Almásy remembers her following in her quest for knowledge traces his own exploits in the desert as the ‘discoverer’ of the lost oasis and cave paintings at Uweinat, as if she were chasing his spectre across the sand dunes, and he recalls:

After that month in Cairo she was muted, read constantly, kept more to herself, as if something had occurred or she realized suddenly that wondrous thing about the human being, it can change. She did not have to remain a socialite who had married an adventurer. She was discovering herself. It was painful to watch, because Clifton could not see it, her self-education. She read everything about the desert. She could talk about Uweinat and the lost oasis, had even hunted down marginal articles. (230)

In the novel, desire and shared pleasures frequently open windows on the geography of the other. In one such close-up, Hana is drawn into the room of the English patient by the sounds of sheer pleasure, as Kip and the patient share a can of condensed milk, and suddenly and unexpectedly their worlds meet: "We have discovered a shared pleasure. The boy and I. For me on my journeys in Egypt, for him in India" (176). When Kip briefly leaves the room to fetch another can of condensed milk, the patient turns to speak to Hana, but he does not invite her to cross over into the shared space of pleasure that Kip and he have created, and the narrator observes that “[at] no point does either of them attempt to make Hana comfortable in their conversation” (177). In fact, the English patient excludes Hana from their communion, in a logic of inclusion and exclusion: “Kip and I are both international bastards--born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn’t recognize that yet. That’s why we get on so well together” (177). But Kip’s keen eye has already noticed an anomaly on the map of Englishness he is following: “You must have been raised elsewhere,” the sapper says. “The English don’t suck it out that way” (177). The English patient does not seize this opportunity to reveal his name to Kip, suggesting that the only identity that matters to him is the figure of the nameless desert nomad. “For
some years I lived in the desert. I learned everything I knew there. Everything that ever happened to me that was important happened in the desert” (177).

The body of the English patient still remains to be mapped, and in a role reversal, Caravaggio who was captured, interrogated and tortured in Cairo by the Germans, now assumes the role of the interrogator. Caravaggio suspects that the patient is in fact Count Ladislaus Almásy, who disappeared in the desert in 1942 after taking Rommel’s man Eppler across the desert and enemy lines. Thus, for Caravaggio, “There is more to discover, to divine out of this body on the bed … [and] he is still amazed at the discipline of the man, who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almásy” (247). With the help of morphine both of them revisit Cairo, and Caravaggio is able to confirm the identity of the patient, while Almásy learns that Katharine’s husband, Geoffrey Clifton, was in fact a British spy and aerial photographer, who was sent to the desert to track the movements of the cartographers in anticipation of the war. But Caravaggio also learns that Almásy was arrested by the British at El Taj when he came looking for a jeep to rescue Katharine Clifton whom he had left in the Cave of Swimmers at Uweinat, and that his trek across the desert as Eppler’s guide was a belated attempt to recover Katharine’s body. Ironically, in order to protect her, and unaware that he has been known to the British all along, he claims her by naming her: “I didn’t give them the right name. No one listened. They didn’t believe me. I gave them mine. I said she was my wife … all I wanted was a jeep” (251). Since he was promptly arrested, Almásy concludes that to the British officers “I was a second-rate spy, just another international bastard” (251). Caravaggio, moved now by the tragic force of circumstance of Almásy’s story, informs him that his group of cartographers “were not the spies, we were the spies … .You had become the enemy not when you sided with Germany, but when you began your affair with Katharine Clifton…. They were supposed to pick you up and kill you in the desert” (255). As he digests Caravaggio’s information, Almásy feels implicated and he wonders if he as a mapmaker has betrayed both the desert civilization and his fellow explorers. Ironically, his questions based on Herodotus’s transcultural ethos echo the dichotomy inherent in Orientalism: “Was I curse upon them? For her? For Madox? For the desert raped by war, shelled as if it were just sand? Both
armies would come through the desert with no sense of what it was. The Barbarians versus the Barbarians” (257). But for Caravaggio it no longer matters which side he was on during the war, and he allows Almásy to return to the desert with his vision intact of a world that is interconnected rather than divided:

I do not believe I entered a cursed land, or that I was ensnared in a situation that was evil. Every place and person was a gift to me. Finding the rock paintings in the Cave of Swimmers. Singing “burdens” with Madox during expeditions…. Even the four of us, Hana, you and the sapper. (257)

Caravaggio and Almásy are both transgressive characters in love as well as in war. Caravaggio is a thief whose craft and skills, like Almásy’s Orientalist knowledge, were “legitimized” by the war: “We stole. Then some of us began to advise. We could read through the camouflage of deceit more naturally than official intelligence. We created double bluffs” (253). Not surprisingly, Caravaggio is also the character who solves the enigma of the identity of the English patient, but he is also cast as a soothsayer, and is the first to wonder aloud why Kip is participating in the war: “The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn’t be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God’s sake. What is he doing fighting English wars?” (122). But following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is Kip who confronts the English patient with the Orientalist contradiction inherent in exploration and mapmaking.

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them…. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen? (285)

The imagery of mutilation haunts Caravaggio, who in a series of analepses relives his ordeal, and his torturer’s question, Caravaggio, right? The voice asserting his identity may be an echo from the Renaissance, since his Italian torturer is a namesake of the ex-soldier Ranuccio Tommasoni, who, according to Peter Robb, died from his wounds after a street brawl with the painter Caravaggio in Rome in 1606 (99). Shortly after his arrival in Villa San Girolamo, the English patient startles him by suggesting that David
Caravaggio is an “absurd name” for him (116), and explains that the Italian Renaissance painter of the same name late in life painted *David with the Head of Goliath*--a painting which evokes the violence of Caravaggio’s own scene of torture in Rome. In the painting, the young warrior David holds the severed head of Goliath at the end of his outstretched arm. The Caravaggio of the novel, however, has already encountered the severed head of Goliath in the river Arno, when traumatized and bleeding, he rests on the ledge of a bridge and is thrown into the river as the mined bridge explodes, and he is “flung upwards and then down as part of the end of the world. He opened his eyes and there was a giant head beside him [in the water].... He reached towards it but couldn’t even nudge it. Light was pouring into the river. He swam up to the surface, parts of it were on fire” (60). At the time, Caravaggio is left wondering whose head he had seen in the apocalyptic scene. The English patient tells him that it is assumed that in the Caravaggio painting the face of David is the artist as a young man, while the bearded head of Goliath is the painter’s self portrait as an older man: “Youth judging age at the end of an outstretched hand. The judging of one’s own mortality. I think when I see him at the end of my bed that Kip is my David” (116). These two episodes, when superimposed across time and space, foreshadow the final, violent encounter between Kip and the English patient and the apocalyptic event that will shock the world and shatter the group in the villa.

The harsh judgment of youth comes soon afterwards, and the English patient’s “camouflage of deceit” offers no protection against Kip’s sense of betrayal and despair (253). Following the detonation of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kip bursts into the arbour room, and aims his gun at the English patient, but fires at the trompe l’oeil on the wall instead in a provocative substitution as “the plaster explodes dust onto the bed” (283). When Kip closes his eyes “he can see the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities as a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadow of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom” (284). This time it is Caravaggio, having solved the riddle of the English patient’s identity, who steps out of his own echo chamber in order to mediate between David and Goliath, as Kip turns on his English sage:
I sat at the foot of your bed and listened to you, Uncle.... I grew up with traditions from my country, but later more often from your country. Your fragile white island with customs and manner and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in the tie I was out (283).

Kip still thinks the patient is an Englishman, and Caravaggio tries to intercede, revealing that the enigmatic Englishman is a case of mistaken identity: “You don’t know who this man is ... He isn’t an Englishman” (285). As Kip hands the English patient his crystal radio set, the eyes of the sapper and the patient meet for the last time in the “half-dark room crowded with the world” (285), and after having digested the news of the atomic bombs, the old man seems to accept the judgment of the youth: “Do it Kip. I don’t want to hear any more. He closes his eyes. Slips into darkness, away from the room” (285). “No. Not him. Of all people he is probably on your side” (287), protests Caravaggio, but he knows that young sapper is right: “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation. The sapper leaves the room. He has left the three of them to their world, no longer their sentinel” (286). But Kip “looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping” (283). His father figure has not prepared him to deal with the injustice of the world, and his world has now disintegrated: “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (287). That night each of them eats alone in silence, the Englishman eating nothing. In the morning Kip unfurls his tent and mounts his motorcycle, touching Hana’s arm before he sets off: “He would not think of Hana.... When her face appeared he erased it, pulled the handlebars so he would swerve and have to concentrate” (294). As for Hana, the narrator distances himself from her grief by noting that “[w]herever Hana is now, in the future, she is aware of the line of movement Kip’s body followed out of her life. Her mind repeats it. The path he slammed through among them. When he turned to a stone of silence in their midst” (282). Kip travels east in a straight line back in time towards the future, attempting to unwind the path he followed into the war, but the English patient sits as a spectral sentinel on his petrol tank. Ondaatje here folds the past into the present in a palimpsest and sets in motion a series of hybridized spatio-temporal images. Almássy is again present as the
desert jackal *Anubis*, who surveys the past, making the past present again, and he is clearly wanted on the journey:

He feels he carries the body of the Englishman with him in this flight. It sits on his petrol tank facing him, the black body in an embrace with his, facing the past over his shoulder, facing the countryside they are flying from, that receding palace of strangers on the Italian hill which shall never be rebuilt. (294)

Meanwhile in the arbour room of the villa, where the *trompe l’oeil* on the wall has been damaged by the sapper, who is now travelling east at a furious pace, Almásy no longer wants his hearing aid or a candle to light the room. In the early morning void of darkness and silence Almásy suddenly feels the sapper’s presence along with other spectral figures and images from his past, as their lives and worlds merge once again:

He sees for the pulse of a moment, a figure at the foot of his bed.... He mutters something ... but there is silence and the slight brown figure, which could be just a night shadow, does not move. A poplar. A man with plumes. A swimming figure. And he would not be so lucky, he thinks, to speak to the young sapper again. (298)

But the novel does not abandon the characters in the desolation of the “secret of deserts from Uweinat to Hiroshima” (295). As Kip flees the villa, Caravaggio walks “into his path” (289), and puts his arms around him. “A great hug.... He felt drawn in, gathered into the muscles” and Caravaggio tells him: “I shall have to learn how to miss you” (289). Caravaggio’s gesture is one of interestedness and *propinquus*, indicating that mourning is a process of closeness and inclusion: a gathering together. Coincidentally, in the Egyptian pantheon, *Thoth* is a palimpsestic, double deity: the god of death and writing, who takes the shape of an ibis, which suggests that death was figured as a mythical interiority, in the same way that Almásy metamorphoses into the desert jackal *Anubis* to create his temporal and spatial *propinquities* (*Histories* 622). Similarly, Ondaatje now writes the lives of his characters together palimpsestically through a series of spectral and spatial transpositions which reveal that their month-long encounter in the Italian villa has transformed all of them. In this novel, they continue to speak to each other across worlds. Drawing on the editing techniques of the cinema, Ondaatje intercuts
a series of episodes, which begin to answer Kip’s question about his own role in the European war, and affirms Hana’s observation that the private will always be at war with the public. The sapper may have rejected his European father figures, but those whose lives he touched are forever altered by his generosity of spirit:

In the library the fuze box is in midair nudged off the counter by Caravaggio when he turns to Hana’s gleeful yell in the hall. Before it reaches the floor, Kip’s body slides underneath it, and he catches it in his hand. (208)

Not only has Kip’s “slide” saved Caravaggio’s life: the prolepsis which follows the incident in the library of the Tuscan villa cuts to Caravaggio in medias res on a busy Toronto street after the war, and the jump cut reveals that the meeting with Kip has transformed his world. Their lives remain closely intertwined across geographical distance and cultural differences, and Caravaggio has indeed learned “how to miss” the sapper (289), by allowing the connection to inform and spill over into other encounters. Along with Hana, Caravaggio has become a disciple of Herodotus, and he puts his egalitarian transcultural knowledge into his everyday practice of living:

Caravaggio will remember this slide. He could walk away, never see him again and he would never forget him. Years from now on a Toronto street Caravaggio will get out of a taxi, and hold a door open for an East Indian who is about to get into it, and he will think of Kip then.... Now the sapper just laughs up towards Caravaggio’s face past that towards the ceiling. (208)

Once the enduring bond between Kip and Caravaggio has been established as a propinquity, the narrative lifts the reader’s eyes, scans past Caravaggio’s face, past his close brush with death, past Kip’s prostrate body on the floor as he holds the fuze box safely in his hand, up to the ceiling and suspends the scene there until the very end of the novel. An intricate and suggestive spatial and chronological interweaving closes the novel, as Ondaatje swoops the attentive reader back to the incident in the library in Villa Girolamo, and projects two similar accidental dislodgings worlds apart from the one in the Italian library when a startled Caravaggio brushed the fuze box off a shelf. In one scene Hana accidentally knocks over a glass in Toronto, in the other Kip’s daughter drops
her fork in India. Although seated at the dinner table with his Indian family, Kip is miles away in Italy surrounded by his other family of strangers:

Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate in the tent and in the English patient’s room.... Recalling the time, he is just as fascinated by himself as he is with her--boyish and earnest.... During the evening he watches his daughter struggling with her cutlery.... At this table all of their hands are brown. They move with ease in their customs and habits. (301)

The narrative suggests that Kip is content with his life and has become a Westernized Indian who has obeyed the tradition as the second son of a Sikh family and become a doctor, with “two children and a laughing wife ... permanently busy in this city. At six p.m. he removes his white lab coat. Underneath he wears dark trousers and a short sleeved shirt” (299). Kip’s outlook on life has clearly expanded beyond the boundaries of his own ethnicity; he wears Western clothes and his children are using cutlery at mealtimes. There is calmness and cohesion in the Lahore tableau, but also nostalgia for a lost love and a buried life, although he is no longer the eternal boy from Asia who “assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son” (293).

As for Hana, she appears to be unsettled and restless, but there is no indication that she has become “an emotionally disturbed handmaiden” as she feared she might while nursing wounded and dying soldiers in Italy (178). The omniscient narrator pulls back from probing into her life, but the word “regret” clearly registers that unlike Kip, she may not have been able to replace her loss, and the sadness Kip discovered in her remains (170). In a refusal of transparency, Ondaatje slips in a destabilizing “possibly” to mark his own hesitation about imagining Hana in her new surroundings, as she, her hair no longer cropped short, scrutinizes her face in the mirror. In a caveat addressed to the reader, he explains: “She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (301). Hana, who transmigrated from In the Skin of a Lion, has become a stranger to Ondaatje, just as Kirpal across the ocean regards the “boyish and earnest” sapper as a stranger he no longer knows intimately, but as a figure in a tableau “momentarily lit up, flung ironically against [the]
war" (278). Like the young sapper, who recognized in Hana a remarkable and compassionate young woman, Ondaatje implies that she is still bravely searching for a key to a new world, beyond her own, and he takes leave of her as she moves in her own sphere of memory and solitude:

And Hana moves possibly in the company that is not her choice. She, at even this age, at thirty-four, has not found her own company, the ones she wanted. She is a woman of honour and smartness whose wild love leaves out luck, always taking risks, there is something in her brow now that only she can recognize in a mirror.... People fall in love with her.... And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. (301)

But where Ondaatje refuses to go, his protagonist Kirpal Singh can, as a sapper *cum* bridge builder: “Now where does he sit as he thinks of her? These years later. A stone of history skipping over the water, bouncing up, as she and he have aged before it touches the surface again and sinks” (299). Ondaatje locates the sapper, who loved the statues of Italy, and turned to stone before Hana, in his Lahore garden where a stone skipping across the water triggers his memory of the time he spent in the hill town in Italy, and it is Hana he remembers, not “the burned man and the meadows of civilization he tended” (293). Although he slammed the drawbridge between them shut, and metamorphosed into “a stone of silence” (282), he now occasionally contemplates sending her a letter, but clearly prefers to reincarnate her in his imagination.

He sits in the garden. And he watches Hana, with her hair longer, in her own country. And what does she do? He sees her always, her face and body, but he doesn’t know what her profession is or what her circumstances are, although he sees her reactions to people around her, bending down to children, a white fridge door behind her, a background of noiseless tram cars. This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a film’s camera reveals her, but only her, in silence. He cannot discern the company she moves among, her judgment; all he can witness is her character and the lengthening of her hair, which falls again, and then again into her eyes. (300)

---

28 A sapper, denotes a member of the Royal Engineers, who is typically a private. The word has an ambiguous etymology. Although the engineers build bridges, they also sap, or dig tunnels to undermine enemy positions. According to most dictionaries, a secondary meaning of the verb 'to sap' is to insidiously undermine beliefs.
But before Ondaatje lets Hana slip out of his imagination, he writes the lives of Kirpal and Hana together for the last time in a propinquity, a union of “close kinship” and “nearness in place” forged by a dropped fork in India, and a glass accidentally brushed off a counter in Toronto. Kirpal is still Hana’s sentinel:

Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal’s left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it onto the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles. (301-2)

As Kip bends down to catch the fork in India, his gesture swoops up the glass in Toronto as well, since the falling glass does not hit the floor and shatter. There is a fleeting “wrinkle at the edge of his eye” and Hana registers a movement in her brow in the mirror as Kip by grace of habit catches the fork-glass-fuze box across time and space. The implication is that Kip can still reach out to her across all those years and that the memory of Hana and his time as a sapper in Europe is still with him in the continuum of the present. Although neither Hana nor Kip may ultimately be in the company “of their choice,” even worlds apart, they remain emotionally connected in a propinquity, as Ondaatje subtly draws them together in an enduring kinship across absence and presence.

In the novel, Hana emerges as the real stranger—as the one whose life has been most deeply affected by the stay in the Italian villa—but in ways that neither her creator, Michael Ondaatje, nor her Canadian ‘uncle’ Caravaggio, nor Kirpal Singh, a continent away, can quite fathom or map. Caravaggio notices her metamorphosis while they are all still together in the Italian villa, and he observes that Hana has translated herself into “a wonderful stranger.” Her transformation leaves Caravaggio full of awe and wonder, as what seemed familiar in her has become both marvellous and strange. Thus it is Hana who has become one of Herodotus’s unauthorized alternative versions of history, a “planetary stranger,” who like the patient she nursed and was nursed by, has remained open to both the diversity within herself and the world. In an analepsis to the Italian villa, Caravaggio witnesses her metamorphosis:
She had grown older. And he loved her more now than he loved her when she was the product of her parents. What she was now was what she had decided to become... He realized that during the last two months she had grown towards who she now was. He could hardly believe his pleasure at her translation. Years before he had tried to imagine her as an adult but had invented someone with qualities modelled out of her community. Not this wonderful stranger he could love more deeply because she was made up of nothing he had provided. (222-3)

And Kirpal Singh, a world apart, reaffirms Caravaggio’s *al fresco* portrait of the young disciple of the English patient, who stepped out into the world and was transformed by it. Although Hana remains an incarnation of the fresco of the Queen of Sheba, who came to recognize the sacredness of bridges, she is also a mirage:

She will, he realizes now, always have a serious face. She has moved from being a young woman into having the angular look of a queen, someone who has made her face with her desire to be a certain kind of person. He still likes that about her. Her smartness, the fact that she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but it was something she searched for and it will always reflect a present stage of her character. It seems that every month or two he witnesses her in this way, as if these moments of revelation are a continuation of the letters she wrote to him for a year, getting no reply, until she stopped sending them, turned away by his silence. His character, he supposed. (300)

*The English Patient* explores a group of characters who attempt to forge alliances across cultural divides in the aftermath of the last world war. In doing so, Ondaatje’s novel interrogates the discourse of Orientalism through the prism of the personal. In terms of hybridity, as a form of transcultural negotiation, it is interesting to note that Hana’s comment at the end of the novel, “from now on... the personal will always be at war with the public” (293), cannily echoes Patrick Lewis’s observation of *In The Skin of a Lion*, that totalizing discourses “hate the human” (135). The discourse of Orientalism describes a world divided against itself in the wake of imperialism and colonialism. But are these geopolitical divisions surmountable? Edward Said, in the foreword to his Reith Lectures (1993), published as *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), revisits both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, and notes that “the construction of fictions”
like “East” and “West” was in fact what these texts “attempted to combat” (xi; xii). Said continues:

I stated repeatedly that these were lies, as were the various rhetorics of blame they gave rise to; cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident. (xii)

Ondaatje’s world is similarly interdependent and hybridized, and the novel interrogates the ambiguities of identity by dismantling, and occasionally reversing, binary oppositions such as Orient/Occident, spy/ally, friend/foe, same/other and particular/universal, turning them into palimpsests, aporias or double-binds in which the terms have to be constantly negotiated and renegotiated as geopolitical boundaries shift. A palimpsest is a figure of doubling, in which one term obscures or disguises the other. According to Derrida, Aristotle’s term Diaporo (aporia) means “I am stuck, I cannot get out, I am helpless” (Aporias 13). Thus an aporia is a double-bind which requires some form of slippage, risk-taking or transgression to resolve. In Outside the Teaching Machine Gayatri Spivak similarly argues that an “aporia is not a statement of preference, certainly not a dismissal. It is the undecidable in the face of which decisions must be made” (93). In the novel, Kip faces this kind of decision and the atomic bomb imposes closure on his (im)possible role inside Europe as a participant in the war. But as Derrida argues, closures create ever new aporetic double-binds in which certain exclusions cannot be closed down. They return to haunt us. Thus, Ondaatje leaves the problematics of identity indeterminate at the close of the novel as an aporia for the reader to resolve.

As for universality, Said argues in the Reith Lectures that, “Universality means taking a risk in order to go beyond the easy certainties provided to us by our background, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others” (xiv). In the novel, the detonation of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki forecloses on universalism as well, and redraws the ideological boundaries between East and West that Ondaatje’s “international bastards” tentatively have begun to dismantle and hybridize in the aftermath of the war. The interlude in the villa is in fact a count down towards the
August 6, 1945 detonation of the bomb. On the opening page of the novel, for example, Hana hears “a buckle of noise” as she is working in the garden, and she quickly retreats into the arbour room of the villa, which is “another garden” (1). Thus, Ondaatje choreographs her withdrawal from the world, into a private world, and in tracing her movements, he foreshadows Hana’s sentiments that August day: “the private will always be at war with the public” (293).

I have also argued that a hybrid negotiation is a form of risk taking, since the effects of hybridity are unpredictable and unforeseeable. Yet Ondaatje attempts to find a way to negotiate differences in a novel that interrogates a world divided against itself through a discourse of hybridity that establishes cultural interconnectedness. I have deployed the charged terms of Said’s Orientalist discourse in a catachrestical fashion, to trace Ondaatje’s exploration of hybridity in the private, inter-subjective realm, where his characters in rejecting the logic of inclusion and exclusion attempt to build bridges, map differences and explore the alterity of the other across space and time in the face of cultural differences. In the novel, Ondaatje explores and mediates the space between East and West through his protagonist Kirpal Singh. Ondaatje uses the figure of propinquity to establish kinship and proximity between his characters, using cinematographic techniques of intercutting between worlds, but he also constructs a polycentric narrative in the style of Herodotus that negotiates cultural differences and situates his characters. This is a discourse that values the fragment, the digression, and variant versions of the same story, without drawing impenetrable boundaries between fact and fiction. In order to create these spatiotemporal transpositions, or propinquities, Ondaatje also draws on mythical, palimpsestic figures.

Ondaatje’s figures of the “sentinel” and the “jackal,” for example, resemble Michel Serres’s use of angels, as “messengers who take a thousand forms ... [as] they travel throughout a world closely resembling our own” (75). In The English Patient, Kip is fascinated by the faces and statues of angels, and in Serres, hybrids like Kip transmigrate between worlds in the guise of Hermes-like messengers, angels, and parasites, or simply as operators, “busy transposing, exporting, translating,” and they do
not alight on "homogenous, flat spaces," preferring instead to explore worlds that are
"chaotic and fractal," or indeterminate ones, which are "ultimately more faithful to
reality" (75). Thus these concept metaphors operate in a palimpsestic mode creating
propinquities out of incongruous things. With Serres it is worth noting, as he does in
Conversations on Science, Culture and Time (with Bruno Latour) that regardless of
which concept metaphor the hybrid inhabits, the word "[m]etaphor, in fact, means
'transport'. That's Hermes's very method: he exports and imports; thus he traverses"
(66), and in Serres as well as Ondaatje, hybrids traverse both space and time, negotiating
"the fuzziness, complexity and heterogeneity" of the world through "the foreignness of
the [spatiotemporal] leap" (64; 90), a randomness of approach which establishes new
connections as it folds time into space.
Chapter 7: Hybridity and Haunting in Anil’s Ghost

In Anil’s Ghost (2000), Ondaatje again explores a small cast of characters who have been traumatized by war. This time it is a war in the family, or the civil war in Sri Lanka, which provides the backdrop for the novel, as Ondaatje sets out to clarify his own relationship with the troubled country of his birth. As is often the case in Ondaatje’s novels, the meandering plot is secondary to the historical setting and the documentary evidence he presents. Although an unresolved mystery of identity lies at the core of the novel, it is the search for an equally enigmatic truth that remains the novel’s fixed point of orientation. The central character of the novel, Anil Tissera, an expatriate Sri Lankan, is a transnational character, and a nomad who no longer belongs to any particular tradition or culture. Thus Anil qualifies as one of Ondaatje’s “international bastards” (English Patient 251). Her predicament clearly contains many elements of the writer’s own experience of dislocation, but Ondaatje also displaces his own divided loyalties onto other characters and situations on the war torn island, and like one of them, Ondaatje clearly attempts “to travel in mid-river” (88), rather than assign blame for the atrocities to one side or the other in the civil war. At what point then does the native become an outsider? Ondaatje may well be a more clearheaded observer than those caught up in the daily trauma and psychosis of war, but he can still speak through a character who finds himself “on a boat of demons” implicated as “a perfect participant in the war” (224), or recognize his own uncertainty in the ambiguous Asian Nod which, although affirmative, also “included in its almost circular movement the possibility of a no” (17). In an interview in the National Post, Ondaatje tells Noah Richler:

What I was really interested in was the culture of people who are sucked into this kind of world, where conflict becomes part of their everyday life—[yet] they actually have a normal and everyday life simultaneously ... that we in the West have no sense of ... the breakdown we would have, if half of the stuff going on there was going on here.... I didn’t want to be someone coming in and giving an overview ... because I wasn’t interested in the blame element ... so I try to write from those small angles where people are not preoccupied with the war but are part of it. (B4)
In a situation where the “[t]ruth bounced between gossip and vengeance” (54), and everybody has “blood on their clothes” (48), is there a middle way? Is it possible to negotiate a complex truth? In Orientalism, Edward Said argues that there is, and that the “more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily one is able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision” (259). In an essay from 1982 on Michael Ondaatje’s poetry, J. E. Chamberlin becomes one of the first Canadian critics to place Ondaatje in an “indeterminate” place, as a writer who transgresses not only genre boundaries, but national and cultural ones as well. Instead of trying to fit Ondaatje into an emerging tradition, either Sri Lankan or Canadian, he argues that Ondaatje’s ontological position is neither/nor, and that it is this ambiguity that forces him to constantly scrutinize and juxtapose his cultural inheritances in order to make them his own, for “Canada offers Ondaatje a geography, but no inheritance; Sri Lanka offers him a family history, but no tradition, no way of passing things on; the English language offers him both an inheritance and a history, but no time and place” (Spider Blues, 41). Thus Chamberlin suggests that it is Ondaatje’s in-betweenness and complex genealogy that is the source of his creative energies and that his first loyalty is to the English language. In Running in the Family (1982), his first fictional return to Sri Lanka, Ondaatje turns his own ex-centric identity and outsideness into a paradox to claim a double allegiance, arguing that he is both “the foreigner” and “the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79), since he is, as Linda Hutcheon observes, “from the world he writes of (and creates) and yet outside it, both present and absent in the writing” (Spider Blues 308). I will argue that Ondaatje does indeed claim a spectral presence, suspended between absence and presence, native and alien, visible and invisible, in a text that is haunted by ghosts. In The Canadian Postmodern from 1988, however, Linda Hutcheon reads Ondaatje unproblematically as “no alien” to Sri Lanka (89). Yet it is by recognizing the negative tension of being neither fully present nor wholly absent that Ondaatje is able to turn his cultural displacement into an interrogation of alterity and alienation. In this novel, Ondaatje deploys the trope of chiasmus to mediate and set in motion binary oppositions such as present and absent, universal and particular, native and alien. His narrative reveals that these figures are not mutually exclusive, but metonymic ones which can stand in for each other, and belong to the logic
of not one without the other. In other words, they are figures that inform and interrogate each other, even figures that belong to each other. But they are also figures that haunt each other. In this novel, Ondaatje inscribes the space of displacement as a haunted place.

Hauntings occur across a boundary that would seem to be impassable. Derrida’s Aporias is a text that explores death as the ultimate limit and the human condition of mortality. The aporetic border negotiation takes place in a quintessential hybrid space, where the issue is not a clear cut imperative either/or (life or death), nor a negative dialectic neither/nor (neither life nor death) or a possible-impossible reduction (life in death; death in life), but a relational not one without the other (a mortal life). This is a concept of the border as double, as a doubling space, but also as a place of hauntings. On the aporetic logic, hybridity is a double-bind; “an oppositional [double] logic which is an experience of the impossible” (15). But Derrida’s figure of suspended oppositions is also a possible impossibility in that it permits the “haunting of one inside the other” (20), either as a trace or a remainder which produces “an irreducibly double inclusion in which the including and the included regularly exchange places” (80). Oppositions begin to haunt each other. Conceiving haunting as an aporetic border negotiation, as something that slips through or across a border, connects haunting to hybridity, which is also an unpredictable negotiation of alterity. In Ondaatje’s text, hybridity emerges in the enigmatic space between the visible and the invisible in a series of haunting images. In Ondaatje, it is also a transformative space in which absences become haunting presences. The ancient eye ceremony which the artificer Ananada performs at the end of the novel stands for enlightenment: “Without the eyes there is just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence.... The artificer brings to light sight and truth and presence” (99).

The search for truth begins when Michael Ondaatje’s eponymous character, Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist and an international human rights activist, returns to her native Sri Lanka on a difficult UN assignment. During her years abroad, Sri Lanka has become an “out-of-focus world” (59), and she feels anxious and apprehensive about her assignment in the war torn island where “[e]very political opinion is supported by its own
army" (27). Yet the agenda of universal human rights, which she now represents, demands a detached approach:

The application she had made to the centre for Human Rights in Geneva, when a call had gone out for a forensic anthropologist to go to Sri Lanka, had originally been halfhearted. She did not expect to be chosen, because she had been born on the island, even though she now travelled with a British passport. (15-6)

In her mind, the fact that she travels on a British passport is tangible proof of her status as an international observer. But she is also cognizant that her passport provides an escape hatch from a country in which the "justice of death came at any level" (154). Although she keeps reassuring herself that "[t]he island no longer held her by the past ... and [that] she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long distance gaze" (11), she is not entirely confident that she can approach her assignment with the contrapuntal vision of the displaced native, which according to Said allows the exile to assess both familiar and alien cultures "with the same combination of intimacy and distance" (259). Working with the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva, Anil has adopted a nomadic life style by choice as well as circumstance, and the scope of her international human rights assignment is clearly universal rather than culturally specific, and her methods 'rational' and scientific:

In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fé. She felt completed abroad (Even now her brain held the area codes of Denver and Portland). And she had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries. Information could always be clarified and acted upon. (54)

Her universalist approach is reinforced by her forensic detective work, which has taught her that "the permanent truths [are the] same for Colombo as for Troy" (65). The diachronical comparison of Colombo with ancient Troy, no doubt meant to reinforce her impartiality and neutrality as an investigator of war crimes, also elevates her forensic science into an eternal truth. The inclusion of the diasporic Greek settlement at Troy, may also be a hidden allusion to her own condition of exile as the past begins to press in upon
and reclaim her: “Suddenly, Anil was glad to be back, the buried sense of childhood alive in her” (15). But where then is home? The world and/or this place? The notion of exile presupposes that there is a place called home. In The World, the Text, and The Critic, Edward Said suggests that the fantasy of a return requires “belonging to or in a place, being at home in a place” (8), and he notes that outside the notions of home, community and belonging lies homelessness. But even homelessness turns on the notion of a home. As a nomad, Anil Tissera is clearly no longer sure which place is “home” or where she belongs. Home has become an uncanny notion; a place that once was familiar is now hauntingly strange and sublime. In the West, she has left behind a lost soul and a lost love. Her best friend and colleague, Leaf Niedecker, suddenly abandoned Anil in the Arizona desert, only to resurface in the New Mexico desert. Her failed relationship with Cullis Wright, a science writer who fell in love with her disembodied voice on a tape recorder, still haunts her, and she wonders if what kept their long-distance relationship going was “the habit of [her] voice” (262). Leaf, who suffers from Alzheimer’s, now sends her post cards of parabolic dish antennae from the New Mexico desert, where she is looking for signs of extraterrestrial life. A nomad in life, and deprived of her memory, Leaf is slowly dying “unmoored” (255), and a life completely cut loose from place and time is clearly an unsettling notion for Anil. In an essay called “Not You/Like You,” Trinh T Minh-ha succinctly frames Anil’s insider/outsider predicament: “The moment the insider steps out from the inside she’s no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out” (Making Face, Making Soul 373). Unable to drift “in and out” between worlds, Anil feels alien and inauthentic as a Sri Lankan.

Paradoxically, Anil’s forensic and taxonomic work, which requires her to live like a nomad, also demands that she turn “bodies into representatives of race and age and place” (55). In Colombo, her sense of being out of place intensifies as Anil is variously identified as “the woman from Geneva” (71), and “the foreign celebrity” (25). Thus Anil is caught in a dialectic between native and foreigner. But her ontological displacement is also palimpsestic, and in Sri Lanka and abroad people look at and through her as if she
were both spectral and double. She is both surface and depth, visible and invisible, here and there; both painted over and an alluring trompe l'oeil. She is always something more than meets the eye. Anil’s American lover, Cullis, framed her as an exotic Asian rather than an American. “I can’t imagine your childhood. You are a complete stranger to me” (35); “Do you have a difficult middle name I have to learn?” (37). Sarath Diyasena, the Sri Lankan government archeologist who has been assigned to her investigation, remembers Anil as the powerful swimmer she was in her youth, and is rebuffed: “Not swimmer” (17). Since Anil is no longer able to speak Sinhala, she frequently misreads cultural signs. In a Colombo hospital waiting room she notices a man in a black coat, covered with blood, who does not bother to pick up a number like the others. When a nurse calls the man back to duty, Anil realizes that the man is a physician, and she suddenly feels despondent and disoriented. “That’s when she left. If she couldn’t tell who was who in a hospital, what chance did she have?” (38). Cultural codes no longer feel natural, objective or real: “here, on this island ... she was moving with only one arm of language among uncertain laws and a fear that was everywhere. There was less to hold onto with that one arm” (54). Gradually, we learn that Anil, who left when she was eighteen to study medicine in London, has no family left in Sri Lanka. Her parents died in a car crash shortly after her departure, and her brother also lives abroad. A brief marriage to a Sri Lankan student in London quickly ended in divorce. Her only emotional tie to Sri Lanka is her old ayah, but she no longer shares a common language with her nursemaid. Thus, Anil lacks a common language as well. In leaving, she has rejected a traditional life, which she frames ironically as: “A husband in tea or a husband in rubber. There was no other choice. And their house flung on top of a solitary hill” (199). Although the remark is flippant, it also marks roads not taken.

But Anil Tissera’s detachment can also be construed as a defensive posture, as a way of steeling herself for the difficult task ahead since her childhood landscapes have now become scenes of terror and violence. Besides, to be regarded as an insider may compromise her investigation. In Geneva she has studied the reports coming out of Sri Lanka about mass graves and heads impaled on stakes, and concluded that “the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared to what was happening here” (11). On a
professional level Anil sees her task of identifying the dead as a way to bring closure to the living since for them, “Death, loss was unfinished so you could not walk through it” (56). She recalls a haunting line from Archilochus she once translated as a student in Colombo: “In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by,” and she knows that “there was no such gesture to the families of the dead [here], not even the information of who the enemy was” (11). Thus the dead and missing will continue to haunt the living unless they can be reclaimed. But when brother fights brother, who is the enemy? And is justice the duty to remember? Technically, she has been invited by the government to come to Sri Lanka, but she knows that international investigations are barely tolerated, and seldom produce justice. Besides, “If you were asked by the government to leave, you left. You took nothing with you. Not a slide tray. Not a piece of film” (29). The Sri Lankans with whom she works are also skeptical about the prospects of her investigation since in their experience international attention is usually short lived and “investigations don’t mean a lot” (45). Typically, the “American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him.... He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over” (286). Sarath Diyasena, the archeologist, is equally blunt: “I’d believe your arguments more if you lived here.... You just can’t slip in, make a discovery and leave” (44). Gradually, the dialectic between native and foreigner, which leaves her feeling suspended and unmoored in Sri Lanka, begins to impact on her quest for justice and human rights.

Anil’s commitment to human rights and justice requires her to affix blame since “the central truism of her work was that you could not find a suspect until you found the victim” (176). The international protocol she follows does not vary from one killing field to another so there is no reason to fear that her divided loyalties will place her in an ethical dilemma. As a Sri Lankan she can still honour her credo from one of Alexander Dumas’s novels: “We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed” (54). In fact, not to become involved would have contradicted the credo; to turn a blind eye is to be equally implicated in the crime. But what escapes Anil here is that the state of emergency has silenced all opposition on the island, and torture and death are now the inevitable
responses to demands for justice. Sri Lankans encounter the limits to their freedom everywhere. This is the harsh reality, and Ondaatje frames Anil’s ethical predicament halfway through the novel with a line from the Montreal poet Anne Carson’s *Plainwater: “I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear....”* (135). Yet Anil is aware that “in the midst of such events ... there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it” (55). While Anil clearly possesses the transcultural “spiritual detachment” necessary to live up to her ideals, she has not yet developed the corollary “generosity” of Said’s dichotomy to realize that her quest for truth and justice may paradoxically further endanger those who are subject to the state’s brutal exercise of power, and it falls to Ondaatje’s narrator to widen the scope by evoking the middle voice:

In a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed. If people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble. This was the scarring psychosis of the country. (56)

The archeologist Sarath Diyasena, who is Anil’s collaborator, translator and native informant, does not want to take sides, but he tells her that a couple of years ago “people just started disappearing.... Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*”(17). He warns her that the terror and confusion will make the task of identifying and naming the perpetrators extremely difficult since the “government was not the only one doing the killing.... What we have got here is unknown extrajudicial executions mostly. Perhaps, by the insurgents, or by the government or the guerrilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides” (17-18). Anil finds Sarath’s refusal to take a firm stand in the face of such brutality incomprehensible, and begins to suspect that his role is to be the eyes and ears of the government in the human rights investigation. Sarath’s specialty is dating ancient bones from sacred gravesites, and when Anil examines his workspace she discovers by accident bone fragments that are of more recent provenance than the sixth century. She suggests that they go to the archeological site to investigate, and Sarath obtains a permit. In the caves at Bandarawela, they recover three ancient skeletons, but Anil discovers a fourth skeleton that is “not prehistoric” in a restricted area to which only
government officials have access (50). From Anil’s perspective, this is the evidence she has been looking for, but Sarath vacillates, and Anil decides to challenge him: “I don’t know where you stand.... I know you feel the purpose of truth is more complicated, that it’s sometimes more dangerous here if you tell the truth ... but we can do something” (53). Sarath reminds her of the risks involved: “Everyone is scared, Anil. It’s a national disease” and he points out that although they are “six hours away from Colombo.... You’re whispering—think about that” (53). But Anil persists. She has found a representative for “all those lost voices,” and “to name him would name the rest” (56). Sarath, however, regards the find as just another body of the anonymous murdered, arguing that they should let his ghost die. But Anil perseveres, and the four skeletons, which they name Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, find their way to the laboratory in Colombo. Sarath is “aware now more than anything that he and Anil needed help” (76), or some kind of mediation between her sense of justice and his own, otherwise Sailor will return to haunt them. As long as the four skeletons are kept together as a foil, Sarath can claim that he is doing archeological research. Since the three sixth century skeletons are headless, he removes the head of Sailor as well, much to Anil’s dismay. But Sarath has reason to be cautious. His brother Gamini, who is a doctor, warns him that this is the wrong time for unburials, “Just be careful. Nobody’s perfect. Nobody’s right. And too many people know about your investigation. There’s always someone paying attention” (133). He also has a message for Anil about her mission:

those armchair rebels living abroad with their ideas of justice--nothing against their principles, but I wish they were here. They should come and visit me in surgery.... Anyway, these guys who are setting off the bombs are who the Western press calls freedom fighters ... and you want to investigate the government ? (132-3)

Sarath knows that Anil does not accept the “old and accepted balance” or the middle way that Gamini is giving voice to (154), and that for her the journey is to get to the truth at any cost while his own version of truth is a more complex one measured against the Sri Lankan reality. “But what would the truth bring them into? As an archeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use” (154). The truth is never instrumental, but
situated, and Sarath feels caught in the middle, afraid to act and afraid not to act. Sarath clearly has a premonition that Sailor is his spectral double, and in one of many prolepses Sarath now begins to haunt the text. Anil would later remember that Sarath was “looking out into the black shift of the sea” while Gamini delivered his warning that for the individual there is no recourse against the constant threat of violence and torture (133). But Anil remains defiant, since for her it is tantamount to submission not to speak out in the face of brutality: “there is only a mad logic here, no resolving” (186). Anil also takes issue with Gamini’s suggestion that nothing makes sense about the conflict without a sense of humour, and by including herself in the plural pronoun “we,” she identifies herself as a Sri Lankan: “You must be in hell if you can seriously say things like that. We’ve become medieval” (186). Anil has clearly begun to drift in and out between identities.

In Facing the Extreme, Tzvetan Todorov writes that the totalitarian state “obtains the submission of all its subjects, including its victims, by combining ... means of coercion with the threat of physical violence and death. The fact that the victims are so numerous counts for little because they cannot organize, each victim stands alone and thus powerless before an infinitely superior force” (130). In the prologue to Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje makes a connection to the people who disappeared in Guatemala in a haunting “vigil for the dead,” as families wait for the forensic team to identify yet another victim, in order to lay another ghost to rest. “There was always the fear, double-edged, that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son--which meant there would be further searching... The possibility of their lost son was everywhere” (5). Ondaatje’s haunting image of a woman who has lost her husband and a brother, and is anxiously watching the work of the forensic team, connects Anil’s commitment to justice to her own field work: “There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers”(6). In a culture of terror, “the disappeared serve as a reminder ... that once you disappear, you are “lost to your world, without hope of retrieval” (78), notes Avery F. Gordon in Ghostly Matters about the desaparecidos (disappeared) of Argentina. He adds: “a disappearance is real only when it is apparitional” (126). Thus, the most terrifying feature of
disappearance is its spectrality: the knowledge that it lies within the state’s power to control life and death is a public secret. Disappearance is, argues Gordon, “a state sponsored method for producing ghosts” with haunting effects, and “a maleficent magic that is specifically designed to break down the distinction between visibility and invisibility [and] certainty and doubt” (126). To identify Sailor, then, would amount to exposing a public secret. From the perspective of hybridity, it is interesting to note that the radical uncertainty inherent in breaking down all distinctions can in fact be deployed as a form of torture and used to terrorize an entire population.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, then, Ondaatje faces the challenge of writing about a country that is tearing itself apart and is haunted not only by the ghosts of the dead and disappeared, but by the terror of uncertainty and fear. He appears to have taken Roland Barthes’s advice that the writer “can no longer be content to express his own present ... he must learn to distinguish the speaker’s present ... in which event and writing are absolutely coincidental” (*Rustle of Language* 15). Although Ondaatje’s documentary style structures as well as fragments the text, his quasi-direct third person narration tends to suture the fragments together in the consciousness of his characters where the conflicting views come to a head as perspectives shift and contexts change. This is the very ground, the third space, where transformations and time shifts occur when ghosts from the past reappear and make themselves present. Although *Anil’s Ghost* appears to be more linear than Ondaatje’s previous novels, that is not the case. I would argue that it is the increased use of free indirect speech that allows Ondaatje to inhabit the characters, and view their world from many perspectives, since this mode anchors the fragments and makes them appear continuous. These are “moments of cubism” (*Skin of a Lion* 34) that Ondaatje creates in the text drawing on John Berger’s art criticism. Although the fragments break up the narration, Ondaatje typically creates what Rochelle Simmons calls “an era of convergence” which allows multiple perspectives and points of view to come to the fore as crucial events are “relayed by more than one person” (*U of T Quarterly* 700-01). In this novel, Ondaatje has also become more skilled at using prolepses and analepses to carry the narration with its complex argument forward in a dialogical fashion across time and space.
From a hybrid perspective, Ondaatje’s use of embedded analepses is particularly interesting, as disembodied, ghostly voices belonging to the dead begin to speak, or trigger associations which set in motion a process of rememoration. Uniquely, the phantom “is in a position of having already, always responded,” thus the other will “not respond, but he [still] speaks” (62), observes Derrida in Archive Fever. Ondaatje’s method of decontextualization and recontextualization of spectral or recollected speech not only haunts the narrative, but this disembodied speech creates new meanings and palimpsestic characters (a character and his or her ghost), that refuse to disappear. Thus these revenants may be taken as uncanny effects or manifestations of the ultimately unknowable alterity of the other. In conjuring up ghosts and making them speak, Ondaatje turns them into the revenants of history, to be reckoned with by the living, who may only belatedly recognize their responsibility to the other. Like Emmanuel Levinas’s Other of Totality and Infinity who persecutes the subject and demands justice, the ghosts return as haunting presences unannounced and in unpredictable ways. In Ondaatje’s fiction, these disembodied voices effect a temporal realignment between worlds. One such example is a fragment, which at first appears to be an anatomical digression about the Amygdala, a nerve bundle in the brain which among other things houses fear. The concept of fear triggers an analepsis in which Anil remembers Sarath asking her to turn off her tape recorder before speaking of his own fears:

There are at least two unauthorized places of detention in Colombo. One of the locations is off Kollupitiya. Some of those picked up are there for a month, but the torture itself doesn’t last that long. Most can be broken within an hour. Most of us can be broken by just the possibility of what might happen (135).

The full emotional impact of the analepsis is only felt upon a second reading of the novel when it becomes apparent that the fragment foreshadows Sarath’s fate, and that it in fact does double duty both as a pro- and analepsis. In retrospect, the “us” stands out in relief for the reader in the same way that the recollection belatedly moves Anil to recognize the full scope of Sarath’s courage and commitment to truth and justice. Retrospectively, he calls her to responsibility and justice. This is one of many Levinasian moments in the
novel in which Anil comes face-to-face with the other, a spectral other who is infinitely other in that Sarath has, as Derrida suggests, “always, already responded” (62).

Throughout the novel, the third person narration is also frequently used in a hybridizing fashion to mark a third space in which the voices of the narrator and the characters blend yet remain in tension. This is when worlds merge, and the unspeakable becomes speakable since ambiguous and antagonistic meanings can be deposited and negotiated in this in-between space. The stylistic third person form, which Ann Banfield calls “represented speech and thought” (New Literary History 415), suits Ondaatje’s scope and world construction since it allows distant events and recollected experiences—even haunting ones—to enter the consciousness of his characters making present what is distant and absent or past. In Ondaatje, then, this mode of speech resurrects and reanimates the ghosts of the living and the dead, making present what is absent, leaving *traces* of the otherness of the other inside the same. Since this narrative mode of simultaneity gathers the past and the absent into the moment of enunciation, it also makes memory possible (Unspeakable Sentences 107). But more significantly, for a transcultural writer like Ondaatje, this dual voice mode can be deployed to juxtapose, rather than fuse, cultural differences as they emerge, which is what he attempts to do in Anil’s Ghost. As a result, in this novel there are far fewer extended metaphors. When they emerge, they remain in the consciousness of a character, and mark states of mind, as does the haunting image of the contorted bodies that await the exhausted and overwhelmed physician when “the doors opened and a thousand bodies slid in, as if caught in the nets of fishermen, as if they had been maulled. A thousand bodies of sharks and skates in the corridors, some of the dark-skinned fish thrashing” (213). Other shocking images in this novel generally seem to grow out of the gruesome documentary evidence. For example, when Anil examines the skeleton of Sailor, she summarizes “the facts” of his death in a clinical and factual language. “One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit” (65). The full emotional impact of the forensic evidence does not become evident until she *narrates* the victim’s last moments of terror before the *coup de grace*. 
He puts his arms up over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he is on the ground, they come up and kill him.... Then they attempt to set fire to him and begin to dig his grave in this burning light (65).

Many critics have noted Ondaatje’s restraint in describing torture, physical wounds and scars and have detected an impulse to aestheticize and play down both ugliness and pain (Seligman, New Republic 38-9). There are no such restraints in the shocking image of the burning body providing the only source of light as the killers dig a shallow grave. It is, however, easy to slide over the subtle “this” (“this burning light”), the deictic that points to and reveals the shocking brutality of the scene. There are, however, many passages that humanize the victims and the missing. Sailor is, for example, provided with a code name. Despite the practice in forensic science to refer to a dead body by the impersonal pronoun “it,” Anil insists on referring to Sailor by the personal pronoun “he” as if she has a premonition that Sailor will return to haunt her. In contrast, her estranged Sri Lankan husband is never given a name. Thus, naming is an act of appropriation that can be used to reanimate the dead. Another example occurs during the work to identify Sailor when Anil stealthily watches the reconstruction artist tenderly carry the skeleton of Sailor in his arms, and she realizes that she too had felt the urge to “reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself that he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village, who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken” (170). The task of reconstructing Sailor’s life clearly affects Anil, who, working close to death, uses loud rock music to block out the intrusions of the world of the living to keep her own ghosts at bay. One morning Sarath watches the rational and determined Anil execute a wild and furious dance. As she metamorphoses before his eyes he

watches a person he has never seen. A girl insane, a druid in moonlight, a thief in oil. This is not the Anil he knows. Just as she in this state is invisible to herself, though it is a state she longs for. Not a moth in a man’s club. Not the carrier and weigher of bones—she needs that side of herself too ... dancing to a furious love song drumming out loss. (182)
There are also signs of doubt on the part of Anil. During the forensic work there is, for example, a chiasmic transposition of arguments between Anil and Sarath about the moral and human consequences of the reconstruction work, and Anil’s quest is temporarily halted as she begins to question her own “obsessive tunnelling towards discovery” (69). Her questions reveal that she has moved in the direction of uncertainty previously occupied by Sarath: “And in any case, if they did identify him, if they did discover his murderer, what then? He was a victim among thousands. What would this change?” (176). Sarath now occupies Anil’s old ground—an indication that both have been transformed in the traffic between the living, the dead and the ghostly—and he demands an answer: “What’s the purpose here? We’re trying to identify him. We have to start somewhere” (186). Anil regains her resolve when she recalls the thesis of her teacher in Oklahoma, who, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan, argued that “One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (176). Anil clearly wants to remain true to her universal ideal. Through a metonymic replacement one life can stand in for all others. But how does one bear on the other? Anil’s human rights principles involve setting an example, but at what cost? An ideal is by definition universal, but a moral action cannot easily be generalized. Sarath’s ethical dilemma is particular and contextual, unlike Anil’s universal principles. Can the truth be instrumental, as Anil claims? Will identifying one victim translate into redemption for all the disappeared? For Anil, justice is a form of rememoration not an exorcism of the ghosts of the past. Derrida also argues that a spectre brings a certain truth which “is an act of recalling” and “an affirmation of a time yet to come” (Archive Fever 68). But Sarath knows that in a society where brute force represents the ultimate power, truth becomes the first victim. There seems to be no middle ground here, and Sarath and Anil are still worlds apart.

The positions do not shift again until Sarath suggests a detour to the Grove of Ascetics and the blind epigraphist Palipana. In the novel, the enigmatic and discredited sage symbolizes the search for the hidden truth, but he is also a link to a lost tradition and history. Palipana is an egalitarian character, who addresses everyone by the informal pronoun “you.” He rose to prominence during a period of nationalistic fervor as the main
force of the Sinhala movement in Sri Lanka, and “while the West saw Asian history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and colour, and Europe simply as the landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia” (79). His decline began when he published his interpretations of rock graffiti from the sixth century which explained “the political tides and royal eddies” of the island. He claimed to have discovered intertexts and secret inscriptions—a form of ancient samizdat—which added up to “an illegal, buried story of resistance to tyranny” (105)\textsuperscript{29}, an underground version of history that some historians found difficult to accept. But no one could locate the sentences he had quoted and translated, and Palipana could not prove that he was right. And since the truth in any case was “something that could only be guessed at” (83), he was discredited and banished. When Sarath and Anil search out the blind sage and recluse, he has withdrawn to a grove where medieval ascetics once took refuge during times of political upheaval. Unrepentant, Palipana maintains that “these verses contained the darker truth ... the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one wrote and hid the truth when it was necessary to lie” (105). Sarath explains that Anil is searching for the truth about who killed Sailor, and puts the skull of Sailor on his lap. Palipana retorts: “We never had the truth” (102). For Palipana the truth is a point of orientation, just as the Sigiriya graffiti were “enigmatic statements without context” that had to be approached “with many hands” (82), or from many perspectives. But Anil persists and argues that she uses bone to search for the truth about the dead and missing, and that for her the truth liberates: “‘The truth shall set you free,’ I believe that” (102). But Palipana gets the last word “Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion” (102), and as Palipana found out, the official truth is different from the “darker,” hidden truth.

Palipana’s role in the novel is also to provide a link to the artificer and eye-painter Ananda, and he suggests they hire him to reconstruct the head of Sailor using the ancient techniques of collage, because the “artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence” (99). Anil, using her scientific methods, has not been able to determine the year or place

\textsuperscript{29} Samizdat is the Russian word for the underground manuscripts of forbidden texts that circulated during the communist period following Stalin’s reign of terror until the period of Glasnost.
Sailor was murdered. Thus, Ondaatje here set up an intercultural context for Anil and Ananda to fuse their methods. But when Ananda begins to recreate the face of Sailor, Anil remains skeptical and aloof and continues to search for professional markers on the skeleton, a proven scientific method which she is convinced will identify Sailor faster than Ananda’s art and craft. Anil regards Ananda’s project as Sarath’s folly and expects that Ananda’s traditional technique of face construction will result in “a five-and-dime monster” (168), thus marking his art as witchcraft. Still, she would like to give him her exact bone measurements, and information about his posture, but she is not able to approach Ananda since she no longer speaks Sinhala. “And he--God knows what insights he had” (171). Thus Ananda and Anil, working side by side silently and “with many hands,” remain strange and spectral to each other.

When the head is finished, Sarath cautions Anil not to voice criticism if the head does not meet her expectations. The unveiling takes place in the courtyard in the light of a torch of twigs, and the head has been placed on a chair, which adds an enchanted dimension to the event. Anil reflects that it is the firelight that sets “the face in movement. But what affected her ... who felt she knew every physical aspect about Sailor ... was that this head ... was a specific person. It revealed a distinct personality, as real as the head of Sarath” (184). The ominous comparison to Sarath’s face may or may not be taken as a foreshadowing. But it is clearly not a reconstruction of Sailor’s face, and Anil is certain that “no one would recognize the face” (188). When Anil learns from Sarath that Ananda’s wife is one of the disappeared, Anil understands why he has sculpted a peaceful face “comfortable with itself” that has no bearing on how Sailor may have looked, but is a composite image of the missing dead (185). For Anil, Ananda is now a figure that embodies the trauma of the living, those who survived, while Sailor is the symbol of the dead and missing, and Anil “could no longer look at the face, saw only Ananda’s wife in every aspect of it” (189). Ananda’s reconstructed head is a site of loss and anxiety. Anil’s emotional reaction to Ananda’s life and art leaves Ananda not knowing if her tears are for him or whether they are shed because the head is not a portrait of Sailor. But Ananda attempts to console her “in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her.... This was tenderness she was receiving” (187). Clearly,
Anil is no longer in Sri Lanka for “another job” (199), but has begun to drift in and out of her old and new cultures. Suddenly she feels a new connection with Sri Lanka, and when Sarath suggests that she should consider living there, she responds: “I decided to come back. I wanted to come back” (199).

Eventually, the head is displayed in villages near the plumbago mines where Anil, based on her research, thinks Sailor may have worked. In the third village, Sailor is identified as Ruwan Kumara, a former toddy tapper, and plumbago miner. The villagers remember how he was taken away by outsiders: “They brought a billa—someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes—to anonymously identify the rebel sympathizer. A billa was a monster, a ghost to scare children in games, and it had picked out Ruwan Kumara and he had been taken away” (268). Thus Anil’s science and Ananda’s art fuse, as East and West meet in the naming of Sailor, but not without the mediation of Palipana. Palipana’s approach to his art is also to hybridize knowledge. But the epigraphist remains a controversial figure and Sarath, who was once his disciple, explains Palipana’s project as a logical progression in his investigation of the past. “It was just the next step for him---to eliminate the borders and categories, to find everything in one landscape, and so discover the story he hadn’t seen before (191). Thus, Palipana’s hybrid techniques allowed him to cross disciplinary boundaries in search of a past that he wanted to salvage for the future. Having forged new alliances between unlikely things, he conjured up ghosts from the past which begun to haunt the living. Although hybridity is not a return to the past, as a boundary negotiation between past and present, it can call up spectral others. In the case of Palipana, the ghosts of the past became the demons of the future. As Derrida suggests in his “hauntology,” Specters of Marx, ultimately history is a question of absence and presence, of conjuring up something that is never present as such:

Before knowing whether one can differentiate between a specter of the past and the specter of the future ... one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in undoing this opposition ... between actual ... presence and its other. (39)
Once Sailor has been identified, Sarath returns to Colombo. A few days later Anil finds herself in the Armoury Auditorium of the anti-terrorist building and she no longer has possession of Sailor’s skeleton, her most crucial evidence. Yet she is supposed to give her report to an auditorium filled with hostile officials. Unbeknownst to her, Sarath is in the back row:

He listens to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional and angry. It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered hundreds of us.’ *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally us. (272)

Predictably, she speaks her truth, and Sarath realizes that he is in danger. He steps up to the podium to try to discredit her findings. Anil does not understand his stratagem, and repeats: “What I wish to report is that some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people” (275). In order to get Anil out of the building alive, Sarath demands that she leave her notes and tape recorder behind, and warns her not to come back for them. Sarath does not return to the auditorium, but he imagines Anil “two floors above him ... they would halt her at each corridor level, check her papers again and again to irritate and humiliate her.... But she would get out, which was all he wished for” (277). Sarath, Anil’s collaborator and native informant, does not survive the delivery of the report with its indictment of the government. His brother Gamini learns about his death while reading reports of victims of torture for a civil rights organization a few days later, “the darkest hour of [his] week” (67). The faces on the photographs have been covered so that there is no danger of recognizing the dead, but this time “when he got to the third picture, he recognized the wounds, the innocent ones” on the body of the victim (287). In the morgue his worst fears are confirmed, and he begins to reclaim the body of his brother through a ritual of healing, cleansing and remembering—a ritual that Ondaatje depicts as a tender *pietà* between brothers:
He began washing the body's dark-brown markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into this life.... He had been, as he ran down the corridor, most frightened of seeing his brother's face. It was the face they went for.... But they had not touched Sarath's face. The shirt they had dressed Sarath in had giant sleeves. Gaminī knew why. He ripped the sleeves down to the cuffs. Below the elbows the hands had been broken in several places. (288-90)

Within the "contract of the pietà" Gaminī is able to reincarnate his brother, a brother he now recognizes that he has never really known, and unwilling to let Sarath disappear from his life, he realizes that his death could "also be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath" beyond their sibling rivalry (288). Thus, he reclaims a spectral brother who remains other, but present in his life. To be haunted is to live with ghosts, ghosts who direct us to look beyond the present, into something important that we may not have known at the time, or may have misunderstood. Thus haunting not only transports us elsewhere, but involves an active engagement with the spectral other. In the case of Gaminī, then, haunting is not about recovery, or reincarnation, but about transforming loss and pain.

Anil emerges from the Armoury building alive, but in the novel Ondaatje does not confront her with the death of Sarath. Nor does he reveal whether Anil leaves Sri Lanka early the next morning as Sarath urged her to do. In the text there is only a reflection suggesting that "she wouldn't be staying here much longer, there was no wish in her to be here anymore. There was blood everywhere. A casual sense of massacre" (283). There are, however, as I have argued, embedded fragments throughout the text in which Anil seems aware of Sarath's fate. Anil's description of the forensic evidence extracted from Sailor anticipates Sarath's injuries from the torture chamber: "in the sudden lightning of politics [he] raised his hands at the last minute, and so they were broken" (170). Towards the end of the novel these foreshadowings become more explicit, and typically they are framed in the subjunctive mood: "If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gaminī and the memory of Sarath be part of her life?" [my italics] (285). In this recollection, the qualifier ("the memory of"), is only attached to Sarath's name, indicating that Anil is aware of his death, and that in
the process of mourning she is leaning to live with his ghost. In earlier fragments the spectrality of Sarath’s voice remains opaque, and these textual fragments become ominous only in retrospect: “Driving with Sarath once,” Anil reflects, “He asked ‘Is your tape recorder off?’” before telling Anil about the torture chambers which he feared might break him. “Is your tape recorder off? he had said. Yes, it’s off. And only then had he talked” (135). At the end of the novel, when Ananda observes that, “[he] and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena” (305), Ondaatje signals that Sarath’s alterity, which according to Emmanuel Levinas can never be grasped, since the alterity of the other is unknowable, is an obligation and a call to justice. Sarath has become a spectral other, a ghost occupying a space that does not belong to time, which Levinas calls the not-yet time of justice, that is, a time of justice, a futurity we can only conceive in the present but nonetheless still act upon. In Levinas, “the other who dominates me is ... the stranger, the widow and the orphan, to whom I am obliged” (Totality and Infinity 215), and he adds that in facing the other lies the possibility “of finding onself while losing oneself,” or freedom tempered by justice (11). Moreover, in Specters of Marx, Derrida suggests that “the dead can often be more powerful than the living” (48), and that it is therefore necessary “to learn to live with ghosts ... to live otherwise and better ... more justly, but with them” (xviii). In coming face-to-face with the other, Ananda has learned to live with his ghosts. He is not only one of the custodians of Sarath’s ghost, but in crafting the composite head of the disappeared, other ghosts can now begin to haunt the living and demand justice. Transformed by his encounter with the ghosts of the disappeared, Ananda has found the confidence to become an artificer again. His face-to-face encounter with the other has brought him peace, and Ananda can now “walk through death and loss.” As for Anil, Sarath’s ghost haunts her and calls her to justice. Ironically, Anil once told Sarath, “Some people let their ghosts die, some don’t” (53). Anil’s ghost refuses to die, and will presumably lead her towards a more just concept of justice—a justice mediated between the particular and the universal in which Sarath’s sacrifice will be inscribed as an act of justice. Or as Emmanuel Levinas formulates the judgment of the Other:
He who speaks to me and across the worlds proposes himself to me and retains the fundamental foreignness of the Other who judges me; our relations are never reversible. This supremacy posits him in himself, outside of my knowing, and it is by relation to this absolute that the given takes on meaning. (Totality and Infinity 101)

The novel ends with Ananda reconstructing a giant statue of Buddha that thieves have blown up while looking for treasure. Instead of recreating a smooth face from the recovered blocks of stone, Ananda fuses the rock so that close up the face looks quilted and scarred. Thus, Ananda humanizes and hybridizes the statue of Buddha so that it reflects the strife of the times, and in doing so he exorcizes his demons of the past. As the narrator observes, in the third voice: “it came to be seen that the work done by Ananda was complex and innovative” (301). A monument to the spirit of Sarath and his time, the statue speaks allegorically about the past and the present. There is clearly a refusal on Ananda’s part to monumentalize something that is still traumatic, and the statue contains a heart of darkness that remains spectral and disturbing. While Ananda is knitting together the last pieces of the statue, wearing one of Sarath’s shirts, a new statue of Buddha rises into the sky on the horizon. The work on the two statues, which face each other, finishes days apart, and Ananda is chosen to perform the eye ceremony on the new statue. Again, he is wearing Sarath’s cotton shirt under his elaborate brocade costume. He climbs the bamboo ladder and holds up the metal mirror so that it reflects the “blank stare” of the statue,”[the] eyes unformed, unable to see. And until he had eyes--always the last thing painted or sculpted--he was not the Buddha” (306). While on the platform about to bestow sight, Ananda takes in the view looking at the “combustible world of weather even without the human element” (306). Yet “[as] an artificer he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation” (304). Symbolically, Ananada’s Buddha remains scarred and blind, no longer a god—a broken god for a time out of joint who speaks the unspeakable—while the smooth and seeing Buddha silently surveys the world from a great distance.

In Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje weaves a complex tapestry that investigates and interrogates the nature of identities. Ondaatje’s novel is written from the transformative
interval between identities, and does not resort to strategic essentialism to inscribe identities in order to narrativize hybridity. Instead, he problematizes identities by pushing them into ambiguity and uncertainty, as his characters reveal themselves to each other and change in the process of negotiating their alterity. In Ondaatje’s fiction, identity is relationally negotiated from amongst competing claims that make conflicting and awkward demands upon the subject. His protagonists remain subjects in process and must resist closure. Moreover, Ondaatje’s approach to alterity is aspectival, and thus not a form of relativism, since his characters are transformed by the encounter with the other as they drift between binary oppositions attempting to dissolve them. As they transgress cultural boundaries, the worldviews of his protagonists clash and intersect, and Ondaatje leaves the reader to negotiate hybridity as it erupts in medias res in the novel in the intercultural space between his characters. This, then, is a text haunted by the other.

But the novel, Anil’s Ghost, is above all haunted by the spectre of justice: the justice of the other. As Ondaatje examines the nature of truth and justice, both turn out to be pharmaka, either cure or poison if applied without regard to the circumstances and tempered by concern for the other. The terror of the civil war haunts the entire Sri Lankan population, and Ondaatje suggests that the truth is complex, situated and aspectival. Anil Tissera, who returns to Sri Lanka on a human rights mission, believes in a universal form of justice, while Sarath Diyasena, her native informant, has a more contextual approach to truth. In the novel, Anil represents certainty and clarity, and her mission is to assign blame. Unlike the idealistic Anil, Sarath is pragmatic and understands that in a society that has broken down into warring factions, the truth can take many shapes and even come back to haunt you: “Sometimes, the law is on the side of power, not truth” (44). In the novel, justice becomes an impossible judgment call and truth an aporia.

In the terror of the civil war, distinctions between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, life and death have broken down. As a result, the ghosts will not be put to rest, and the disappeared and dead continue to haunt the living: the possibility of their lost son was everywhere. Sarath draws a line: he will help to identify one of the disappeared, but remains reluctant to confront the government. Anil, however, wants
justice and closure. One of the dead must be identified and symbolically reincarnated to make up for the losses of war. One of the torture victims is eventually identified, but does not become a symbol of justice, as Anil had hoped. Ultimately, Anil’s quest turns into a double-bind that conjures up ghosts from the past and creates new hauntings. Thus they remain in haunting evidence.

Ondaatje’s novel is not a narrative of ethnic or cultural recovery. Although Anil Tissera rekindles her Sri Lankan identity during her stay, and briefly considers returning to the island, ultimately it is the ontological paradox of Anil’s alienation that the novel explores. In Dislocating the Color Line, Samira Kawash describes Anil’s predicament as “a split self” fated “simultaneously to be what it is not, and not to be what it is” (177). This is a liminal condition that Samira Kawash calls “the knot of being and not-being,” and Frantz Fanon designates as an arid “zone of non-being” (Qtd. in Kawash 177). Anil Tissera feels alienated abroad and estranged in Sri Lanka, and her self-representation indicates that her identity and her affiliations are primarily tied to her work as an international forensic anthropologist rather than to a specific culture. Her transculturation is, however, set in motion as she travels across the island with Sarath as her guide and native informant. When she begins to negotiate her multiple and serial selves, including identities buried deep in her childhood landscapes as paths not taken, a composite, transcultural self emerges. Sri Lanka comes alive again in her mind, only to be closed down by tragedy, as Anil’s fantasy of a return to origins turns into a harrowing ordeal.

The title of the novel is somewhat ambiguous. Anil is clearly not the revenant, but it is Sarath Diyasena, who sacrifices his life for Anil’s concept of justice. Sarath’s ghost will continue to haunt and challenge Anil, just as his uncomfortable truth haunts her throughout the novel. Sarath, then, is an epiphany in Emmanuel Levinas’s sense. But Ondaatje’s novel is haunted by other ghosts as well: the ghosts of the disappeared, the ghosts of the past, and the ghosts of the future. As Avery F. Gordon observes, the ghostly is a force that combines the injurious and the utopian: “When you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter (or when it touches you) you get something different than you might have expected” (Ghostly Matters 135). As Ananda surveys the world from the omniscient
height of the gods--but “with human sight”--his young helper reaches up to him and gently pulls him back among the living: “He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world” (307).
Chapter 8: Hybridity and Time Travel in *The Holder of the World*

Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993) remains the writer’s thematically most ambitious novel to date. Set in Puritan New England, Restoration England and Mughal India, the novel is a layered palimpsest that rewrites several American and Indian intertexts, explores the past through the life of a Puritan orphan, and brings all these worlds together. The intertexts double-code and structure the novel, but Mukherjee’s narrative strategies of splitting and doubling spill over and cross the boundaries they define, as she reimagines and excavates her story from the silences and omissions of those texts. But the historical narrative, which spans three continents and two centuries, is also interrogated through a contemporary frame narrative. These metafictional explorations of the textual spaces of inclusion and exclusion disrupt the narrative, but they also open up gaps between what the narration expresses and reveals. The novel culminates in an interactive detour into virtual reality, which leads to an unexpected resolution of the story. But it is primarily from the spaces between ”The gaudiness of Allah [and] the porridge of Jehovah” (9), that cultural hybridity erupts as worlds collide in the novel. Hybridity also emerges as Mukherjee teases out the historical and cross-cultural ironies of the novel by juxtaposing a young seventeenth century world-traveller, who does not feel “bereft of roots [or] traditions [but] unfinished” (163), with a self-reflexive contemporary narrator, who from her omniscient perspective says: “What must these worlds have thought, colliding with each other? How mutually staggered they must have been; one wonders which side first thought the other mad” (12). As is always the case in her fiction, it is the voyage that defines Mukherjee’s protagonist, not the origin or the destination. Ultimately, the novel, which reverses the East-West trajectory of Mukherjee’s fiction by dispatching an American to India, explores the challenges of narrativizing hybridity across worlds.

Mukherjee’s novel clearly qualifies as a historiographic metafiction, which Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* defines as a genre in which “documentary historical actuality meets formalist self-reflexivity and parody” (7). The act of narration is...
foregrounded throughout the novel, which may be an affirmation to the Indian epic, the Ramayana, one of the intertexts, which according to R. K. Narayan, in keeping with the oral tradition, features a narrator “who occasionally comes forward with an explanation and an introduction” (10). The American intertext, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, also has an intrusive narrator who poses as a storyteller and interjects commentary. But the story also takes shape and changes dialogically as the American narrator, Beigh Masters, discusses her manuscript with Venn Iyer, her companion, an American of South Asian Indian decent, who listens, reads passages, and offers comments and reactions as the story develops. Often, the narrator becomes defensive, and when Venn takes issue with sentiments about India expressed by Master’s protagonist, Hannah, whom she tends to idealize as “a goddess-in-the-making” (163), Masters is forced to admit: “I detect Hannah’s irony, but I too, had hoped to find censure. I cannot defend Hannah to Venn. All the same, I invent secretive excuses. Maybe Hannah was still unready, unformed” (115). In fact, Hannah eludes all attempts to categorize and fix her in time and space, and Beigh Masters constructs her both as an anachronism and a time traveller, as someone who was born in the wrong century:

Of all the qualities I admire in Hannah Easton that make her entirely our contemporary in mood and sensibility, none is more touching to me than the sheer pleasure she took in the world’s variety. She was ... in some original sense of the word ... a tourist. She was alert to novelty, but her voyage was mental, interior. (104)

In an interview in the Boston Globe about The Holder of the World, Mukherjee reveals that she has gradually come to realize that “all [her] fiction is disguised autobiography” and that she is “finding ways of talking about the things that obsess [her], transformation in this case” (30). In the novel the challenges of narrating a fluid transcultural self figure prominently, and Mukherjee’s Indianness andAmericanness become assets to negotiate and explore the world otherwise. But why does Mukherjee deploy an American narrator and a bicultural interlocutor? Since the distant Puritan world often strikes Venn Iyer as exotic, uncanny and strange, his commentary provides a counter narrative to Masters’s American point of view, and as a bicultural American steeped in Indian traditions and cultures he is also Beigh Master’s cross-cultural
translator. The same split applies to the common ground between Beigh Masters, an asset hunter and researcher who locates and authenticates works of art, and Bharati Mukherjee, the writer who researches, reimagines and rewrites history and lives. Taken together, these interventions, which dislocate the act of narration, provisionally provide Mukherjee with a license to explore both the Indian and American settings in several narrative voices. But the adventure narrative set in India also loops back to take in American history, blending the Indian and American settings, as in this simile which evokes the American frontier mentality: “Perhaps piracy on the Coromandel Coast--going to sea, raising one’s own flag, being the boss and dividing one’s loot ... was the seed of the frontier dream, the circus dream, the immigrant dream of two centuries later” (165).

Thus Mukherjee continues her exploration of Americanness in a novel that claims the world as its province. The fact that the trajectory of the protagonist takes the novel out of America, back to Mukherjee’s native India, does not necessarily make the novel any less American. It is in fact possible to argue that this novel lays claim to a more heterogeneous Americanness as it interrogates what it means to be an American through the unsettling prism of a transcultural writer who begins to fold historically excluded liminal spaces and transcultural encounters into the American fabric in order to transform Americanness from within. In Migrancy, Culture, Identity Iain Chambers argues in a similar vein that transnational encounters and multiple cultural affinities have positive effects. They transform and hybridize the language and the national culture we inhabit as the “entwining of national language, literature and identity is unpicked, and the epic of modern nationalism is forced open to meet the exigencies that emerge from more complex patterns” (30). Mukherjee spent more than a decade in Canada, between 1966 and 1980, before moving to the United States. In the introduction to her short story collection, Darkness (1985), she writes that she felt “aggrieved” by being categorized as a “visible minority” in a country that “boasts its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation” (2). Mukherjee has repeatedly stressed that she now regards herself as an

---

30 Mukherjee’s notion of “Americanness” typically traces the national contours of the United States. This might be a pragmatic move since “United Stateness” is a somewhat awkward compound.
American writer, who does not want to be classified as a hyphenated Indian-American or postcolonial writer. Instead, she claims a plurality of affiliations as an American immigrant writer of Bengali-Indian origin, as she does in an interview with the postcolonial journal jouvert, in which she also discusses the immigrant experience as a formative and transformative force in her work: “I experience simultaneously, the pioneer’s capacity to be shocked and surprised by the new culture, and the immigrant’s willingness to deform and re-form that culture” (6). Typically, she inscribes the foreigner’s capacity to be shocked through the figure of *ostranenie*, or defamiliarization, and acculturation as a process of reterritorialization that traces the figure of a chiasmus. As notions of the familiar and unfamiliar cross and gradually displace each other in the consciousness of her protagonists, they generate new liminal spaces in which cultural hybridity erupts. Thus hybridity in Mukherjee is an unpredictable force that in the figure of the migrant *cum* pioneer is capable of disturbing and distorting as well as creatively realigning cultures across worlds. In Mukherjee, cultural difference is transportable, and the foreignness of the migrant is both a dangerous supplement and a valuable asset.

In this novel, Mukherjee turns the rewriting of an American canonical text into a hybridizing practice that begins to interrogate the homogeneity of Americanness from the margins as well as the centre. Predictably, Americanness turns out to be a complex and fluid notion in which what appears natural is in fact cultural. The novel suggests that like all identities, Americanness is constituted as a narrative refracted through multiple perspectives and constructed from actual experiences and historical events. Thus the notion of Americanness is open for revision and can be made to include narratives that historically have been excluded. Mukherjee signals that she intends to do just that by selecting Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as her intertext for a transformative tale about the effects of cultural dislocation and alterity. According to Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Hester Prynne is “the central female character” of American fiction (*Critical Edition* 275). Mukherjee locates several sites of unrealized potential for hybridity in Hawthorne’s text, and she recovers a buried story about “a woman misplaced in time” who breaks out of her captivity and the restrictions placed on her by her time and place (276). Ironically, it is the intertext itself that invites Mukherjee to excavate a buried
migration story. In the introduction, Hawthorne suggests that his protagonist might consider leaving for Europe, where she could “hide her character and identity under a new exterior,” or enter the forest, “where the wildness of her nature might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her” (Scarlet Letter 75). Thus Hawthorne implies that his character could easily shed her past, transform herself, and avoid the stigma of the scarlet letter either by migrating, or by ‘going native’. But where Hawthorne ultimately could not go, Mukherjee can. As a transnational American writer, Mukherjee is in a position to actualize Hawthorne’s buried plot, and she walks down the bifurcating path by splitting the escape routes held out by Hawthorne between Rebecca/Hester, who abandons her daughter and elopes with her American Indian lover, and Hannah/Pearl, who marries an adventurer and sails for India via England.

Thus the novel resembles Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea in that it reimagines and rewrites the life of one of Hawthorne’s characters in a narrative that immerses her both in the history and culture of Mukherjee’s land of birth and her land of adoption, and includes buried cultural traditions usually discounted as adulteration, magic or witchcraft. Mukherjee also fills in the gaps at the end of Hawthorne’s tale which intimate that Hester may in fact have left Salem following her lover’s death, since she is not heard from again until years later when “a tall woman in a grey robe” approaches Hester’s cottage (199). In the intertext, Pearl is never seen or heard from again, but we are told that Hester following her return “was the object of love and interest with some inhabitant of another land,” and the narrator speculates that Pearl has “found a home” in some “unknown region” (200). Initially, it is Hester Prynne’s status as a liminal figure and outcast that catches Mukherjee’s attention, but she becomes even more intrigued by the possibilities inherent in the figure of Pearl, for while she displaces aspects of Hester’s character onto three different characters, Pearl is transfigured as Hannah Fitch Easton, a Puritan orphan destined to become a citizen of the world.

Mukherjee’s creative deployment of Hawthorne shows that the practice of appropriation, revision and repetition can open up a transformative intertextual dialogue
not only between the literary precedent and the reimagined text, but between the past and the present since, as Brian McHale suggests, “entities can pass back and forth across the semi-permeable membrane between two texts, as well as between the real world and the world of fiction” (Postmodernist Fiction 36). In terms of tracking the effects of hybridity, the transmigration between fictional worlds clearly expands and enriches our experience of the world since it opens up other possible worlds across time and space. As Homi Bhabha argues, in positing migration or “the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture [and] metamorphosis” as a “metaphor for all humanity” the experience of migration creates new “hybrid realities by yoking together unlikely traditions of thought” (Critical Fictions 63). In this text, such unlikely traditions often fuse, and Hannah’s sewing skill, which literally sutures lives and worlds together, is one of them. Hannah’s healing skills, learned from the forest Indians, are first deployed to repair scalped skulls in New England by grafting skin and suturing bones. In England she lectures a surgeon on the practice of medicine in the Bay Colony, while he with ill-concealed awe and amazement watches Hannah successfully operate on a head injury. Her transcultural synthesis of healing practices also saves her war-injured Indian lover, the Raja of Devgad, only to see him return to the battlefield and a certain death. Ironically, her sewing and grafting, her special magic, are dismissed as witchcraft in both England and India. “She knew woodland secrets. Some said she possessed uncanny powers, the sort associated with conjurers and devils ... and wasn’t it passing strange that she hailed from Salem, the very town where the prevalence of witches had called special courts into session...?” (83–4) notes the narrator of Hannah’s magical healing powers.

But what kind of intertextual spaces does Mukherjee create for her characters to traverse? For there are several ways to foreground and integrate foreign elements in the structure of a text, suggests Brian McHale, though “none is more effective than the device of borrowing a character from another text” (57). But more importantly, from the perspective of hybridity, fictionalized characters who develop what McHale (borrowing a term from Umberto Eco) calls “a transworld identity” in the process of transmigration from one text to another, clearly metamorphose as they cross over “from one fictional universe to another” or from one culture or world to another (57). Brian McHale also
suggests that names used as homonyms set up an intertextual frame of reference which both echoes and parodically inverts the intertext, turning them into possible sites of transformation (Postmodernist Fiction 36). Moreover, as Kimberly W. Bentson argues, Toni Morrison’s strategy of rewriting canonical texts reveals that the vision of liminal characters “of necessity entails looking beyond and out, beyond the template of the familiar, beyond the restrictions of community, to the possibility of self-generation elsewhere” (American Identities 93). In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon argues that the strategies of transformation and naming associated with rewriting allow women writers in particular “to contest the old—the representations of both their bodies and their desires—without denying them the right to re-colonize, to reclaim both sites of meaning and value” as they negotiate textual and cultural boundaries (168). But it is above all the possibility of escape from circumscribed and predictable lives that drives Mukherjee’s narrative, and her use of homonyms that migrate between fictions, creates fluid identities that transcend time and space. In the novel’s Indian setting, for example, the chief factor at Fort St. Sebastian carries the last name “Prynne,” and Hannah’s Indian servant Bhagmati assumes the name “Hester,” and she in turn bestows the name “Mukta” (which means “Pearl”) on Hannah.

In Mukherjee, hybridity is not just another transposed, hyphenated or delineated identity that can be known, assumed and named, but the fashioning of a transcultural yet-to-be-known self from the actual experiences her protagonist undergoes on the difficult journey into another culture. For Hannah Easton, the journey to India brings about a life-altering transformation: “She knew she had been transported to the other side of the world, but the transportation was more than mere conveyancing... Many years later she called ... her long residence in India, her ‘translation’” (102). And in juxtaposing “translation” and “conveyance,” Mukherjee here stresses transportation: to be physically carried over; to be transported into another realm. In Mukherjee’s fiction, mobility sets cultural transformations in motion, but the ability to change across cultures requires immersion and respect for differences rather than “fear of the unknown” (104). In Mukherjee, migration is “a diving board into the unknown” (161), and the narrator suggests that for Hannah, “[g]etting there was important, but savouring the comparison
with London or Salem, and watching her life being transformed, that was her pleasure. She did not hold India up to inspection by the lamp of England, or Christianity, nor did she aspire to return to England” (104).

For eleven years Beigh Masters has been tracing the life of “the Salem Bibi, a woman from Salem who ended up in the Emperor’s court” in seventeenth century India (5). Ostensibly the narrator and asset hunter is working on an assignment for a wealthy American client to locate “the Emperor’s Tear,” the most most perfect diamond in the world, but it is her own quest for the hidden identity of the Salem Bibi that structures the narrative: “What I hadn’t figured on was the secret life of a Puritan woman whom an emperor honoured as Precious as Pearl, the Healer of the World” (20). As an asset hunter with the globe as her field, she knows that “[n]othing is ever lost, but continents and centuries sometimes get in the way” (5). In the novel, space is compressed into the time frame of one colonial life, that of Hannah Easton. Yet Beigh Masters speculates that it is no longer “the place that makes us as much as the time we live in” since with the advent of virtual reality “[t]ime will become as famous as place” (7), and “with sufficient passion and intelligence” it will become possible to “deconstruct the barriers of time and geography” (11). Despite Beigh Masters’s “hunger for connectedness” (11), Hannah, however, remains elusive and distant, put out of reach both by her time and timeless: “Time has made her free from me, just as an ocean made her free” (89). But when Beigh Masters accidentally discovers that the Puritan orphan is a distant relation, she begins to see patterns in Hannah’s life that intersect with her own. Thus Hannah’s life is also a pretext for Beigh Masters’s own search for origins, and her obsessive need to reconstruct Hannah’s story, to know and possess her and make her one of “us” again, reveals her own longing for a properly bounded and situated self. But she also identifies with Hannah as an American woman who has a connection to India. Excavating Hannah’s story “led circuitously to Venn. And to the Salem Bibi and the tangled lines of India and New England” (11). The story of “Hannah Fitch Easton Legge aka the Bibi from Salem” becomes significant because “it may predict what will happen to us during our lifetime” (91). Lives transform lives across worlds in this novel where everything is interconnected and nothing is ultimately lost beyond recovery.
Hannah Easton’s naive American/Indian embroidery becomes a metaphor for Mukherjee’s project of historical reinscription and revision as she stitches together a reimagined life by turning a predictable and hemmed in life into an utterly unpredictable and picaresque adventure, in the same fashion that the young protagonist’s cultural cross-stitching connects and hybridizes imaginary and familiar worlds in her quilt work.

A twelve-year-old Puritan orphan who had never been out of Massachusetts imagined an ocean, palm trees, thatched cottages, and black-skinned men casting nets and colorfully garbed bare-breasted women mending them; native barks and, on the horizon, high-masted schooners. Colonial gentlemen, in breeches and ruffled lace, buckled hats and long black coats pacing the shore. In the distance, through bright green foliage, a ghostly white building—it could even be the Taj Mahal—is rising. (44)

Hannah’s colourful colonial embroidery of an “uttermost shore” is an embroidery of desire, shot through with “pagan iridescence” (45), as Beigh Masters observes, which employs the “same economy and the same apparently naive sophistication as the Mughal paintings that would later feature her” (44). While in India, Hannah does an embroidery for Raja Singh, her Indian lover, and this time the images are of a world remembered, an embroidery of longing as well as trauma, featuring “Nipmuc warriors scalping amber-maned Puritans; a field of Massachusetts wildflowers ... snowdrops and crocuses” (230-1). In a metafictional intervention, Beigh Masters can already imagine “the consternation of the first Sotheby’s catalog, trying to explain the origin of such transcontinental adumbration!” (230). Walter Benjamin’s examination of art storytelling conjures up the figure of the woman embroiderer, who although a captive of her own world, is able to break out of her circumscribed life by exoticizing her world, as hand and mind creatively fuse time and space. Based on an observation by Valéry, Benjamin writes:

‘Artistic observation ... can attain an almost mystical depth’. The objects on which it falls lose their names. Light and shade form very peculiar systems, present very individual questions which depend on no knowledge and are derived from no practice, but get their existence and value exclusively from a certain accord of the soul, the eye and the hand of someone who was born to perceive them and evoke them in his [or her] inner self. (Illuminations 108)
The Mughal miniatures also fuse unlikely fragments of worlds in collision, and when Beigh Masters examines a Mughal miniature painting that "could be covered with the palm of [her] hand" (17), she suggests that it is an art form "that knows no limit, no perspective and vanishing point, no limit to extravagance or to detail ... a miniature art forever expanding" (19). Here Masters gives voice to Mukherjee's concept of artistic structure, but she also describes Mukherjee's novel that has no vanishing point as it fans out to take in a world "full of sensory and informational overload" (6). Mukherjee values the art of the Mughal miniature since it depicts a heterogeneous and interconnected world in which time and space are compressed and "there is a sense of interpenetration of all things," which allows "the most complicated stories [to] be told" through "its insistence that everything happens simultaneously, bound only by shape and colour." Moreover, there can be "a dozen separate foci ... since "the corners are as elaborate as the centres" (Critical Fictions 27-28). Thus, the writer discovers in the Mughal miniature a hybridizing mode, since it can fuse several worlds into a single image, reflecting Mukherjee's view that we inhabit a heterogeneous world in which the experience of one is spatially and historically bound up with the other.

It is interesting to note that in Mukherjee's essay "The Four-Hundred-Year-Old-Woman" (1991), in which the writer discusses the creative possibilities inherent in this ancient Indian art form, she pledges: "I will be writing in the Mughal style until I get it right" (28). In the essay, Mukherjee posits herself as "exotically raised" in declaring her artistic vision as a writer: "Make the familiar exotic, the exotic familiar" (25). Mukherjee's first attempt to emulate the Mughal aesthetics is a miniature called "Courty Vision," included in her first short story collection Darkness (1985). The story is framed as a miniature painted "on paper" in a paratextual label placed at the conclusion of the five-page story. The 'label' is typeset in italics and mimics an auction house label (or catalogue description) citing name ("Emperor on Horseback Leaves a Walled City"), provenance ("Painter unknown. No superscription"), date ("c.1584 A. D."); measurements ("24 cms x 25.8 cms"), and price ("Est. Price $750"). True to her artistic credo, Mukherjee's textual miniature attempts to write two incongruous worlds together.
Up front is Count Barthelmy, a pink-faced European explorer, “swathed in the coarse, quaint clothes of his cool-weather country ... who holds a peacock feather to his lips ... and has tamed thirteen rivers and seven seas” (195). Languishing in the arbour, the aristocratic adventurer is clearly enamoured of the Begum. Lotuses sprout from the fists of the Begum, and her dreamy eyes are lifted to the horizon “where fugitive cranes pass behind a blue cloud,” as she contemplates “her night of bliss” standing behind a marble grill (196). In the courtyard below the Begum’s window, and surrounded by itinerant jugglers, two Portuguese Jesuit priests display iconic paintings of “Mother and Child. Child and Mother” to the Mughal courtier, who finds them “repetitive.” The Portuguese priests are on proselytizing mission, and “want to trick the emperor into kissing the bright, white, healthy baby,” but the emperor declines, and rides out of the palace on a piebald horse at the head of his army, applauded by flatterers and loyal citizens. Before the emperor spurs his horse, in an apparent mise en abîme, “he twists back on his saddle and shouts a last-minute confidence to his favourite court painter” (198). The command is: “Give me total vision” (199), which the Mughal style will provide in contrast to the reductive and repetitive art of the Europeans. The miniature is teeming with exotic Mughals, animals and plants, and equally exotic Europeans. Unlike the similarly lush and “exotic” style of Rousseau (le douanier), whose large canvases are static in comparison, Mukherjee’s textual miniature is kinetic and tells a story; a postcolonial story to boot, since the Europeans at the Mughal court all have ulterior motives, and are savagely parodied, or in Hutcheon’s idiom, “satirized,” as sinister Eurocentric intruders. There is no fusion of cultures here, the distant Mughal world remains exotic, and the Europeans, whether perceived as pathetic (lovelorn) or grotesque (proselytizing), are clearly alien figures in the Mughal world. Depending on the reader’s cultural orientation, the Mughal miniature style can clearly be read either as a palindrome31, in which the label “exotic” always marks the world of the other, or as a chiasmic exchange in which the label “exotic” crosses over from one world to the other, making the familiar exotic, and the exotic familiar, thus hybridizing both worlds in the crossing. Mukherjee’s miniature does not attempt to familiarize the exotic world of the Mughals, however. Instead, her strategy

---

31 A palindrome is a word or a sentence that remains the same read backwards or forwards. The name Hannah is a palindrome.
in “Courtly Vision” is to realign both worlds through a postcolonial optics, and in leaving the alterity of the other intact, she transposes the hybridizing effects to the interstices between the two worlds as two alterities meet and reveal themselves. Paradoxically, then, in this early miniature, respecting the alterity of the other also ends up marking the other as exotic and strange. Similarly, in The Holder of the World, a novel in which Mukherjee’s implied reader, as well as her protagonist, is American, the other must be inscribed as unfamiliar (“exotic”) for hybridity to emerge in the tension between the familiar and the strange. Mukherjee’s narrative of hybridity in the novel thus risks invoking alterity as a strategic essentialism. So does Mukherjee’s use of exotic images in this novel escape the distorting and exoticizing narrative of Orientalism? Or do cross-cultural ironies keep exoticism in check?

According to Edward Said, the earliest Euro-Orientalist genre of the tableaux generally depicted the Orient as an exotic locale, a “free-floating” and “chameleon like” figure of “[s]ensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure [and] intense energy” (Orientalism 118-9). As I have argued, Mukherjee’s “Courtly Vision” can clearly be interpreted that way. There are in fact several tableaux in The Holder of the World patterned on Mughal miniatures that could be read as exoticizing the other. Thus, the Indian Mughal miniature clearly poses a double-bind, which the infusion of cross-cultural irony and parody does not completely resolve. One such example is the Mughal miniature of Hannah’s estranged husband, Gabriel Legge and his Indian bibi (mistress), which depicts Gabriel stealthily leaving the Coromandel Coast, disguised as an Indian Muslim, having narrowly escaped a Mughal massacre in retaliation for having looted a pilgrim ship bound for Mecca. He is described as: “An emaciated firangi (Englishman) dressed in a Muslim’s ascetic’s garb” with “a seductive, veiled, dark-skinned woman [who] extends a gold-bangled arm towards him…. In the woods, we see the eyes of demon forms, tigers, half-human, multi-headed monsters,” no doubt images which allude to the Englishman’s fears about going native (207). The grotesque (which can be glimpsed in the depiction of the Europeans in “Courtly Vision” as well) here enters Mukherjee’s Mughal aesthetics in full force. In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White evoke the grotesque in their discussion of hybridity from a structuralist point of view:
Hybridization, a second and more complex form of the grotesque than the simply excluded outside or 'low' to a given grid, produces new combinations and strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting the very terms of the system itself, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it. In practice we often find a hybridization, inversion and demonization mixed up together. (58)

But the vivid, tropical and mythical world of India, whether evoked as familiar or pushed into the grotesque and exotic, is only one pole in a clash of cultures which the reader ultimately has to negotiate as cultures cross each other and generate images of hybridized excess by mixing the familiar and the unfamiliar in unpredictable ways. In this novel, no doubt taking a leaf from Salman Rushdie, Mukherjee also tropicalizes the North American landscape, as she does when Beigh Masters uncovers a series of Mughal miniatures in a museum, and one of them depicts a cove in New England. At the water's edge, sitting in a circle, American Indians in bright feathers roast fish over a campfire. As Beigh Masters studies the landscape, she realizes that the Oriental imagination constructs the Occident in terms that can only be described as mysterious, exotic and fabulous, and Beigh Masters notes: "I was right, they were fascinated by us. The artist cannot contain the wonders, fish and bird life bursts over the border.... I am witnessing the Old World's first version of the New, of its natives, of its ferocious, improbable shapes, of its monstrous women, that only the Salem Bibi could have posed for" (16). Beigh Masters Master's comments here reveal that the underside of the sublime and marvellous elsewhere is the uncanny and monstrous. But the three-hundred year old Mughal miniatures which feature the Salem Bibi also turn the Puritan orphan into a time traveller, who, before the advent of virtual reality technology is able to insert herself "anywhere anytime on the time-space continuum" (6), and the Mughal miniatures confirm that "every time traveler will create a different reality--just as we all do now" (6). In fact, Master's concept of virtual reality is that "[no] two travellers will be able to retrieve the same reality, or even a fraction of the available realities" (6), and her explanation clearly applies to the vanishing perspective of the Mughal miniatures as well as to virtual technology and fiction. Ultimately, what creates meaning is the perspective we bring to the text or the image, and Mukherjee's deployment of the Mughal miniatures throughout
this text helps her make the point that a given culture is only “one particular way of partially comprehending the world” (Darkness xiii), and that the markers “strange” and “familiar” are in fact shifters.

Does Mukherjee then slip from the grasp of criticism for exoticizing her alterity? W. M. Verhoeven argues that although Mukherjee’s early writing does not “seem to be especially exotic at all” (Mosaic 108), her “self-proclaimed commitment to a maximalist esthetic” valorizes the marginalized viewpoint and makes it “the more sophisticated one.”32 Verhoeven takes issue with one of Mukherjee’s essays called “Immigrant Writing: Give us Your Maximalists!” Verhoeven quotes this passage:

Minimalism is that search for Easter eggs in a plastic garden in the middle of a suburban shopping mall…. I feel that minimalism disguises a dangerous social agenda. Minimalism is nativist, it speaks in whispers to the initiated. As a newcomer, I can feel its chill, as though it were designed to keep out anyone with too much story to tell. (New York Times Book Review 28)

According to Verhoeven, Mukherjee here assumes that “her ethnicity is a self-evident concept, as a stable and natural category … that can be lost and regained” (108), rather than emphasizing “the constructed nature of her ethnic identity.” I would argue that Mukherjee valorizes her multiple cultural traditions in this essay, and is not expressing her “belief in an authentic culture” (108). The article is Mukherjee’s declaration that she intends to change and be changed as an American. It is also an early commitment on her part to the Mughal aesthetic. Verhoeven’s argument about self-exoticization seems to be based on an either/or logic, with the laudable aim to decentre the centre/margin binary opposition, but the effect, according to Verhoeven is a “tendency among writers from minority background not merely to idealize their ethnic identity, but also to position that

32 Verhoeven quotes Frederick Buell’s comments in National Culture and the New Global System about the effects of self-exoticizing strategies: “The marginalized viewpoint…becomes the more comprehensive and sophisticated one; it creates an elite community with the [most complete] knowledge of the ‘systematicity of the system’ that constructed all inside it. The outsider becomes the insider; the marginalized hold the keys to the construction of both center and margin.”
identity in ideological terms considerably beyond the ethnic identity of the cultural hegemony" (108). Ironically, Verhoeven’s focus on ethnicity here appears to reinforce the boundaries between centre and margin instead of centering them. Mukherjee’s strategy has all along been to avoid ethnic self-immurement. As Gayatri Spivak observes: “tokenism goes with ghettoization ... and when you are perceived as a token you are also silenced in a certain way” (The Post-Colonial Critic 61). There is certainly triumphalism in Mukherjee’s article, which celebrates multiplicity and alterity. Mukherjee’s strategy is twofold: to pluralize the American nation, and move from the margins to the center in order to effect change from within the nation. Mukherjee’s considerable transcultural literacy as a North American writer of Indian origin makes her uniquely positioned to reject tokenism and self-immurement in an ethnic identity. Mukherjee, however, does not resist cultural assimilation, but regards it as a condition of possibility for her project to inscribe alterity in the narrative of the nation.

But Mukherjee’s novel foregrounds not only exotic images, but textual fragments and discourses which evoke the prejudices and misconceptions of their time and place as well. It can indeed be argued that the historically accurate language which Mukherjee’s narrator uses to reconstruct the prevailing world view and the beliefs of her protagonists, in fact, ends up reinscribing those misconceptions and prejudices, as the narrative oscillates between worlds, “between us and them, imagining our wonder and their dread” (13). Although Mukherjee’s narrator can empathize with the other across time and space, she is on occasion flippant about the other in her own world. The confusion inherent in the term “Indian” occasions her to clarify what she means by suggesting that a painting looks “Indian” by adding: “Indian-Indian, not wah-wah Indian” (13). On the other hand, the narrator consistently deploys the term “native” to include herself as a native born American. As a narrator, Masters is generally able to deconstruct the stereotypes of her protagonists through historical irony. Although Hannah Easton literally steps out of Hawthorne’s text, the intertext itself is not implicated in this regard, since Mukherjee takes her character out of Hawthorne’s orbit, and sends her out into the world where she discovers that her world view is only one set of cultural beliefs among many. Moreover, both novel and intertext are captivity narratives which construe the Puritan world as
hegemonic. While Hawthorne’s captivity narrative can only suggest the possibility of escape, Mukherjee’s revision stages a series of escapes beyond the compass of Hawthorne’s text. In the novel, Hannah’s father, for example, leaves Salem to settle in Nipmuc country, and the narrator规格es that like Hannah, he found the Puritan world too confining and preferred to live in “an unfenced world” (27): “Did the Puritans, with their gloomy quest for godliness, hold for him more terror—as later they would for Hannah—than the presumed Satan who reigned over Penacook, Abnaki and Nipmuc?” (25). But his dissent is not exempt from critical scrutiny, as one of the period cameos of Hannah’s maternal grandfather reveals. The eruption of the present in the depiction of the past releases the historical irony:

Elias Walker held the usual attitudes of his time, and ours, toward the Indians: they are children; they are trusting; they are proud and generous. Even capable of nobility. But at heart they are savages: bestial, unspeakably cruel. He counselled, and cultivated, the path of mutual avoidance. (21)

Mukherjee’s narrative strategy, however, is not “the path of mutual avoidance” (21), but to juxtapose and push these belief systems up against each other across time and space in order to release and recover new and unpredictable meanings in the hybridizing space in-between them. As Steven Connor observes about the practice of rewriting in The English Novel in History, “[in] engaging with their literary precedents, such novels engage with the history of beliefs and attitudes to which those originals have belonged and which they have helped to shape. In reworking their precedents, such novels both acknowledge the continuing force of the novelistic past in the present, and investigate the capacity of novels to intervene in that present” (167). Similarly, Mukherjee’s historicity chooses to engage with and try to surmount the belief systems of the historical past in order to imagine a different elsewhere. As the geographer Edward W. Soja argues about historicity, echoing Bakhtin’s claim that the novel always emerges from a chronotope: “The constitution of society is spatial and temporal, social existence is made concrete in geography and history” (127). Soja adds: “To be human is not only to create distances but to attempt to cross them” (133). Cultural as well as spatial distance can be transformed
and connected across time and space “through intentionality, emotion, and attachment” (133).

In this novel, Mukherjee seems to fall back on George Simmel, who fuses proximity and distance in the figure of the stranger whom he posits as both “near and far at the same time” in his essay “The Stranger” (Sollors 41). In Mukherjee as well as Simmel, the stranger is a figure of mobility, and alterity is “merely the strangeness of origin” of someone “who comes today and stays tomorrow” (37). In Simmel, distance is alterity and proximity is familiarity, and his use of the present tense marks strangeness as an ongoing spatial negotiation. Thus, the stranger is both a provocation and a challenge. Both “far and near,” he is a defamiliarizing outsider who confronts the group from the inside as a temporal presence. Ultimately, argues Simmel, “the phenomenon of the stranger is ... a specific form of interaction,” or a commerce between a group of insiders and an outsider who typically takes up a position of trader or middleman among them “importing qualities ... which do not and cannot stem from the group itself” or new cultural influences (Sollors 37). The flipside of Simmel’s composite stranger is the notion of the self-exoticizing foreigner. I have already discussed this critique in connection with Mukherjee’s hybridized Mughal miniatures.

Simmel, then, posits the figure of the stranger as a hybridizing disseminator of newness, located in a zone between cultures, on the very boundary that separates, essentializes or materializes cultures. Similarly, the discourse of hybridity erects boundaries and creates distance in order to negotiate hybridity as a fluid and unpredictable in-between concept. This is a classic double-bind, and as Samira Kawash points out, in crossing boundaries we risk reproducing the distinctions that boundaries name and misname. However, in Dislocating the Color Line Samira Kawash argues that hybridity also “crosses out” and “negates” those very identities and distinctions marked by the boundary, adding that hybridity is that which emerges as “the limit, the rupture, the constitutive outside of identity,” and is thus something that cannot be claimed or contained (22). Thus, Kawash theorizes hybridity as a transformative force which “erupts” as a surprise and in an unsettling fashion. How then is hybridity narrativizable?
Is it even narrativizable? Samira Kawash suggests that hybridity is only discernible, since it is a singular eruption—a “different different” or an “other otherness”—that marks unknowability and undecidability (22). As a result, in Kawash, hybridity becomes a form of ambiguity or a contagion which is typically excluded or pushed outside the narrative frame:

In [its] limit relation to identity, hybridity is not narrativizable, not subject to representations or positivist description. Heterogeneity or hybridity is the difference that interrupts the relation of same and different, a different different that does not relate to the order of the same. Hybridity does not conform to any law or follow any rule. Hybridity is what penetrates the certainties of narrative and the mimetic premise of representation, what sets knowledge scrambling to shore up its fragile assurances of certainty. (22)

The challenge posed by the amorphous figure of hybridity to epistemological certainties has influenced the reception of Mukherjee’s transnational fictions, despite the fact that she regards migration as a two-way street, and argues that while her migrants are changed by America, they also alter the North American landscape irrevocably. Similarly, Mukherjee’s deployment of the figure of ostranenie to cross, displace and defamiliarize racial, ethnic and cultural demarcations, has frequently been taken to task for exoticizing rather than familiarizing the Indianness of her characters in America. Hybridity, then, is a risky textual practice since it requires the reader to negotiate the effects of hybridity. Moreover, this negotiation is inflected by the position of the reader in relation to the boundary. In Orientalism, Edward Said reminds us that “all we know about time and space ... is more than anything imagination ... geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself, and by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (55). Although The Holder of the World reverses the East-West trajectory of Mukherjee’s previous fictions, the question of whether Mukherjee exoticizes India and Indianness in the novel remains a hotly contested critical issue.

Mukherjee’s 1989 novel Jasmine, which chronicles the successful passage of the eponymous protagonist from India to America, has come under the most intense scrutiny
in this regard. Since the earlier novel deploys many of the same figures of displacement that The Holder of the World does, it is clear that Mukherjee’s cross-cultural use of the potentially hybridizing strategies of distancing and displacement remain problematic in her fiction. Susan Koshy, for example, argues that “Jasmine’s success (financial independence, romance, mobility) is linked to her ability to exoticize some elements of her ethnicity while shedding others, at will.” The implication is that “selfhood and fulfillment lie outside ethnicity” (Diaspora 79). Koshy also suggests that Mukherjee ends up underwriting the American Dream by first constructing South Asian Americans as “a model minority” by stripping them of their cultural markers, before swiftly deploying them as “quick studies” in acculturation (79). Since this text reverses the trajectory of Jasmine, by narrating a white woman’s acculturation in India as a translation which does not, in Koshy’s idiom “lie outside ethnicity,” but in-between her Americanness and her Indianness, it complicates ethnicity, and reveals that the discourse of hybridity can in fact reproduce the ethnic distinctions that the boundary marks. Thus, if Mukherjee were to do away with the markers of ethnicity, her narrative would not produce cultural hybridity, which emerges in the face of cultural or ethnic differences. Koshy also takes issue with Mukherjee’s staking of a claim for herself as an American immigrant writer in the pioneer mode, since it implicitly inscribes the American frontier as a space where “America is being remade in the collision and fusion of ethnicities” (80), which is, of course, the very space of potential transformations that Mukherjee seeks to inhabit in order to narrativize cultural hybridity. Instead of taking note of this as a challenge to a hegemonic culture that seeks to exclude rather than include differences, Koshy argues that in Mukherjee “[m]igration becomes a form of upward mobility, which is displaced to the narrative of outward mobility, or the pioneer tale” (80). But as this novel shows, mobility can also be an escape from captivity—a quest for freedom which can set unpredictable transformations in motion. Thus, Koshy’s argument reinforces Kawash’s contention that hybridity is not narrativizable. Moreover, it posits ethnicity and identity as static distinctions that must be fortified against transculturation and transformation at any cost. In effect, hybridity becomes mobility, not transformation. Predictably, the effect of these slippages is to erase the in-between space of hybridity as a zone of unpredictable
and uncanny transformations, where America is continuously made and remade by shifting the critical focus from the present to the past, and from ends to origins.

Mukherjee has also come under criticism for endorsing rather than problematizing assimilation, and for her tendency to transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, race and class. It is interesting to note, that in an interview from 1993, Mukherjee reveals that the idea for the *The Holder of the World* came to her at a pre-auction viewing of seventeenth-century Indian miniatures in New York, and that her fascination with the out-of-place white woman in the Indian setting is predicated on her assimilation into Indian society. The woman in the miniature appears to be acculturated: something more than a traveller or a sojourner.

There on the wall I spotted a painting, ‘A European woman in Emperor Aurangzeb’s Court,’ A woman in full [Mughal] court dress, long ringlets, very Caucasian features. I said, ‘My God, I’m looking at a version of myself.’ Here was a woman who three-hundred years ago [made] this dangerous journey ... to a totally alien part of the world, but had not stayed in Whitetown, or the European trading [post]. She had assimilated. I had to know her, to imagine her. (Boston Globe 30)

Mukherjee’s insistence on the need to assimilate, to dive headlong into the adopted culture and become American, is discussed by Carmen Wickramagamage in her essay “Relocation as a Positive Act,” and she observes that it requires courage for migrant others to adopt a contested subject position as Americans when the majority opinion dictates otherwise. She notes that Mukherjee’s rearticulation of the immigrant experience from an American subject position, continues to foreground the impulse to migrate as an “optimistic belief in a second chance” (*Diaspora* 171), and insists on directing these new Americans to the centre rather than the margins of their adopted society to actualize that dream. Mukherjee’s stubborn refusal to represent “life on the margins as enabling” in a culture, which “automatically relegates America’s nonwhite immigrants to a hyphenated existence on the periphery,” has not always been able to make itself heard, argues Wickramagamage, who adds that Mukherjee’s intervention is a necessary and overdue revision, since it “contests the dominant image of the migrant as
alien, lost,” as someone who is “unable to come to terms with the new culture” and should seek the certainty and security of the ethnic enclave (171). Instead, Mukherjee attempts to narrativize the transformation of the migrants beyond fixed identities and to foreground their ability to “alter and be altered by the new cultural landscape in unexpected ways” (Diaspora 173), observes Wickramagamage.

Pace Susan Koshy, Mukherjee’s vision in The Holder of the World of transforming a fenced-in world into an unfenced world, is a task which requires fence breakers, or protagonists who seek rather than resist change, are mobile, adaptable and willing to break out of their circumscribed lives. Mukherjee’s creative challenge then becomes to draw a circle around her characters; that is, to rein them in and keep them in captivity until they stop wondering “Who am I?”, and instead begin to ask “What can I become?” In Mukherjee’s fictional universe any transformation is clearly possible. Cultural transformation is a possibility that Claire Messud has no problem discerning in a review of the novel in Times Literary Supplement. Messud describes the novel as “an alternative history, which could revise for ever the imaginative relations between immigrants and ‘natives’ in Mukherjee’s America” (23). In a review in The New York Times Book Review, K. Anthony Appiah writes that “in this celebration of a life lived three centuries ago across cultures ... [t]here is no place ... for mawkish talk of tolerance and understanding.” He adds that in “Mukherjee’s world, in the real world, we understand as much through butting heads as through shaking hands” (7). In a 1993 review of The Holder of the World, Susan Koshy finds connections with Mukherjee’s earlier fiction, including “migration as the will-to-translation, romance as the idioms of cross-cultural encounter[s], and America as the emergent space of trans-national consciousness” (Amerasia Journal 188). Thus, Koshy tacitly confirms that Mukherjee’s fiction stages an utterly unpredictable and contingent negotiation between fixed identities, producing hybrid effects, which cannot be accounted for thematically, but have to be negotiated. For ultimately one cannot choose to be or become a hybrid, which Beigh Masters seems to realize when she suggests that, faced with the contingencies of life, “the one who survives is the one who improvises, not follows, the rules” (234). Or as Kawash might argue the case for hybridity: Identities make us predictable; hybridity unpredictable.
In *The Holder of the World*, Hannah’s mother Rebecca makes such an unpredictable cross-cultural choice by shedding her Puritan identity. Following her husband’s death, she has continued to farm with the help of a Nipmuc man, who becomes her lover, and during King Philip’s War she stages her own murder by setting the house on fire. Before joining her lover in his unfenced world, she arranges to have Hannah dropped on the doorstep of a neighbouring pioneer family. Hannah, now an orphan, deals with her mother’s defection by remaining silent about the circumstances of her mother’s disappearance, and about what she has witnessed and suppressed. But the memory haunts her, and Hannah’s stepfather, who is a decent man, cannot understand Hannah’s “spells and anxieties” about being branded “a worthless sinner and daughter of Satan’s lover” (42). When the Nipmuc rebellion erupts, her world is suddenly ripped apart. Beigh Masters notes that as an orphan Hannah has always felt her Otherness, as someone “who had the privilege of remaining outside of family and society by virtue of her loss and secret” (53-4). However, the Puritan rhetoric of the feminine Other as witch now begins to unsettle her since her “life-loving” mother’s primeval forest is a forbidden liminal space beyond the Puritan order, inhabited by witches, demons and devils (54). Her mother’s ghost, who appears in her dreams, with the outline of an Indian sewn on her sleeve (for “Indian lover”), urges boldness, dissent and independence. Only later will she learn that this dangerous liminal space between ravishment and abjection has its Indian equivalent in the legend of Sita in the *Ramayana*, in which “scores of mortals and demons are slain” (175). As Beigh Masters observes:

> It is just that Hannah is a person undreamed of in Puritan society. Of course she must suffer ‘spells’ and be judged an invalid. Outside agencies—the devil, the forest, the Indians—must be blamed. She is from a different time, the first person, let alone the first woman, to have had these thoughts, and this experience, to have been formed in this particular crucible. Either she will take society with her to a new level, or she will perish in her attempt. Either people will follow her, or they will kill her. (59)

The Puritan world operates through exclusion and inclusion, and miscegenation collapses boundaries. Thus, learning the truth about Rebecca’s defection would be
construed as a threat to a system that marks this zone as perverse and deviant. Outside the categories of Puritan order lies the chaos and disorder of hybridity in a zone of exclusion: the wilderness; the forest; the unfenced world of the Indians, which Hannah’s mother, who ran away with an Indian, now inhabits. It is the chaos of this outside world which manifests itself as difference, randomness and deviation that the order of the inside must deny, exclude or destroy in order to secure its own place as order. It is a world that demands ever more fences to keep the dangerous other at bay. In Hannah’s fenced-in world one cannot be both, and she reacts to a system that threatens to exclude her and hold her captive as an eternal outcast. As Samira Kawash argues, “it is not by trying to efface and escape the limits—but by plunging into the excluded zone—that we can perhaps begin to imagine the possibilities of an elsewhere” (22). Hannah’s opportunity to explore an elsewhere arrives when she is given in marriage to Gabriel Legge, a mysterious stranger and adventurer with a rakish black eye patch, whom she recognizes as a braggart and fabulist. After an interlude in England, Gabriel Legge signs on as a factor with the East India Company, and they sail for the Coromandel Coast. Thus, her transformation from a Puritan orphan to a pirate’s wife and Salem bibi is set in motion.

The legend of Sita, from the Indian epic Ramayana, defines the virtues of a faithful and virtuous wife, and according to R. K. Narayan’s Gods, Demons and Others, the characters in the epic are “prototypes and moulds in which humanity is cast” (4). More significant though, in the context of Mukherjee’s novel, is his observation that “the events in Indian myths follow a calendar all their own, in which the reckoning is in thousands and tens of thousands of years, and actions range over several worlds, seen and unseen” (5). In the novel, the holder of the world is the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb who is a many-headed Ravana figure insofar that “the evil-minded pursue power and the acquisition of riches” (Narayan 9). The bellicose emperor, who “is more experienced in conquering and acquiring than anyone but the kings of Spain, France and England” (262), is waging a costly war on the last Hindu stronghold in Devgad and its raja, Jadav Singh. The concessions from the European traders and freebooters on the Coromandel Coast keep both of them with well equipped armies. Hannah’s life story will intersect with both
of them, but not until she has broken out of her last confinement--her marriage to Gabriel Legge.

According to Kawash, the cross-cultural boundary negotiation that permits hybridity to erupt from the seams and absences of a text is difficult, if not impossible, to narrativize. Yet Mukherjee frequently attempts to narrativize hybridity by gradually removing Hannah's blinkers about her life in White Town and Gabriel's duplicity. This strategy allows her to mark prejudices as obstacles to transcend and demolish, and their subsequent removal as a process of translation and transformation. Narrated through the objective and detached lens of the historian, and shot through with irony, the narration compresses the sweep of history through the consciousness of Gabriel Legge. The effect of the seemingly sympathetic narration is to implicate him as a ruthless opportunist, hypocrite and participant in the Western plunder while it exposes "the twisted logic of the white man's burden" (127):

The ideal of England in India moved him. The idea of spreading enlightenment, science, sanitation, and, as he understood it, Christian tolerance, and of absorbing the best of the culture around him was a continual delight. His practical nature was not at war with his lust for maximum profit, and an open mind. But the idea of the "glorious enterprise" being the exclusive reservation of the Company and of posturing little potentates ... reduced him to rage and, finally, treachery. (142)

Following the convention of historical narratives, Beigh Masters offers her own interpretation of the facts as a corrective, by deconstructing the notion of the civilizing mission as a cynical justification in the guise of idealism, and in doing so, she exposes the hypocrisy and greed of the Coromandel adventurers:

What we are seeing is progressive derangement. God-fearing, land-starved, profit-seeking Welsh and English and Scottish and Irish second sons, jilted by primogeniture, sexual repression, passion denying, furtively engaging the favours of native women, girls and boys ... while being waited on, cooked for, fanned, massaged by servants a thousand times more loyal, submissive and poorly paid than any in the world, in the middle of the biggest real estate boom, jewel auction and drug emporium of the past five hundred years. (107)
On the Coromandel Coast Hannah learns that to be the wife of an English factor in India, paradoxically, requires that she uphold the same lines of demarcation that Puritan Salem had erected against the chaotic wilderness outside: “One separated oneself from them primarily by staying clean and upright: starched, dignified, sober, righteous and faithful” (127). Thus, her life in White Town demands that she erect a bulwark against the inhabitants of Black Town, which is teeming with “idol-worshipping robbers” and “heathens” (159). The text in fact requires her willing participation in another captivity narrative. She will be held captive until she once again unpacks the logic of inclusion and exclusion, and breaks out of the circle of confinement it draws around her. Although she is required to bolt her doors against “Zentooz and Moors,” and is told that the “jungle is no place to turn the other cheek” (158), she senses that her new world is “full of furious meaning, [which] refuses to reveal itself” (157). When Gabriel joins “the cutthroat rivals” of the East India Company to become a pirate and freebooter, she realizes that “[t]o let Gabriel go was also to let herself expand” (163). Paradoxically, being ostracized, this time as a pirate’s wife, opens up “unwalled worlds for her” (164). Hannah is now free to explore the otherness of the demonized other.

This time she puts her fate in the hands of her servant, Bhagmati, an outcast like herself, who introduces her to the narrative of Sita, and Hannah finds herself attracted to the trials of the Indian foundling who, faced with a choice, breaks away from her captivity and tries out “new surroundings and whatever they will bring” (176). In the epic, Sita convinces her husband Rama to move with her into the forest. When she accidentally steps out of the white circle her guardian has drawn around her hut, to keep her safe while her husband is hunting a deer, she is abducted by the demon king Ravana who, disguised as a mendicant, carries her off to Lanka. “White Circle, White Town” (175). The parallels between Sita, her own life, and that of her mother, suddenly come into relief for Hannah. In a metafictional intervention, the narrator connects the Indian legend to the Puritan captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson who, having come face-to-face with her Indian captors, had found the natives agreeable. But she notes that Sita’s

33 In their essay “Why Categories Thrive,” Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tannenhouse explain that the classic captivity narrative is Richardson’s Pamela and that “the captivity narrative requires
story differs in that it does not end with her rescue, but with a new series of trials and complications, a troubling observation that is underscored by the many variations on the orally transmitted epic. Still, Hannah remains “within the protective magic circle that she has drawn for herself” in the European trading post (179), which she cannot break out of until she begins to ask: “What would Sita have done?” But Bhagmati’s story always ends with Sita emerging triumphant out of the flames to rejoin her husband. This version has, however, changed over the ages, and Venn’s mother, a scientist in Boston, tells a hybridized variant version in which Sita, having passed her trial by fire, and thus proven that she remained faithful while in captivity, throws herself right back on the fire “to spite Rama and the hegemonic rules of Rama’s kingdom” (176). Venn’s friend Jay Bass, has another version from Calcutta, in which Rama begs Sita for yet one more trial by fire to prove her innocence since he, riddled with doubts, needs certainty. This time Sita refuses, stands up to Rama and “the unfair institutions of Ayodyha” (177). Miraculously, the earth swallows her whole, leaving no trace of Sita behind. Hannah, caught between the warring factions on the Coromandel Coast, senses that her situation in White Town is fast becoming as precarious as Sita’s, and she reflects that the Europeans on the Coromandel Coast have no home, no loyalties except for themselves. Their homelands were imaginary. For them there was no going back, and no staying on. They were in a perpetual state of suspension, which was not the same as floating free. They where ghosts, trapped in space meant for full-fleshed and warm-blooded humans. She would need to root herself, she was not sure where, nor how, before she too became ghostly. (182)

White Town has become a place to leave behind. When Hannah discovers that her husband has a bibi (an Indian mistress), she decides to leave, and her first thought is to return to England, although “[i]t would be a bleak, gray, dismal life, she feared, after some of the excitements and colours and violence of the Coromandel Coast. But a life

the female captive “to ward off the threat of another culture by writing while in captivity,” and that the narrative must stage the reincorporation of the freed and “individualized captive into the culture from which she has been separated.” Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative is discussed in the novel. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tannenhouse, The Imaginary Puritan (Berkeley: California UP, 1993) 210-11.
without treachery, without killings” (199). But fate intervenes when a riot breaks out against the East India Company and the high taxes imposed on the local population by the warlords. When the packet ship arrives, Hannah Legge does not board it, and she “was thought to have died in the riots, and her piratical husband to have drowned” (207). Instead, a second Ravana-figure intercedes in the figure of Jadav Singh, the King of Devgad, who, disguised as a mendicant, carries Bhagmati and Hannah off to his tower as they flee from White Town. Hannah has now crossed over into a totally Hindu world, and she realizes that she does not know even the simplest rules. She has to learn to improvise, since she “had no way to measure new experiences and nothing in her old life with which to compare them” (225). The narrator suggests that the idea of Hinduism is frightening but also alluring, for English attitudes of the time “saw Islam as a shallow kind of sophistication.... Hinduism [as] a profound form of primitivism” (219). Unlike Sita, however, she falls in love with her captor and seduces him. “She wanted the Raja and nothing else” (229). She is finally prepared to expect the unexpected in crossing cultural boundaries:

With Gabriel she had clung to Salem’s do’s and don’ts. She had pulled and pummelled the familiar rules, hoping they’d help make sense of her own evolution. With Jadav Singh, she’d finally accepted how inappropriate it was in India--how fatal--to cling, as White Towns tenaciously did, to European rules. She was no longer the woman she had been in Salem or London.... She was no longer a wife. She was the bibi. (234)

In the palace at Devgad her relationship with Bhagmati, her servant, undergoes a sea change as well. She has entered an unknown Hindu world and in this world Bhagmati knows the rules. “Bhagmati was no longer a servant. Perhaps, she was about to be come one,” Hannah reflects as Bhagmati initiates her into her Indian culture (220). As Bhagmati teaches her to wear and fold a sari, she suddenly discovers that Bhagmati has a history and a past, and the insight takes her back to her childhood, a world apart:
Why had Hannah not sensed that before? Perhaps Rebecca’s embracing the wilderness had started like this: a moment’s sharp awareness, My God, they’re alive! She remembered her mother, suddenly, wearing the beaded belt her lover had given her, showing it to Hannah for admiration. They’re humans; they have a richer life than I do. (222)

But Hannah soon discovers that the Raja is a warrior king whose first duty is to fight, and she reflects that “India seemed determined to teach her the cruel side of every pleasure, the evil behind every innocence” (247). During a fierce battle she is captured by the victorious Emperor Aurangzeb’s general and made to participate in the elephant walk, in which elephants trample the dead and injured on the battlefield. When the elephant approaches her warrior-lover’s body, Hannah takes out her dagger from the folds of her sari and kills the general without hesitation. She has entered an alien world on its terms, prepared to change and be changed, only to discover that the cruelty, corruption and greed she wanted to leave behind in White Town is as rampant on the other side of the boundary. In a moment of despair she reflects:

The world was rotting; there was no honour, no protection. These people were innocents, the troops were innocents, but corruption was everywhere. Peace brought profit to everyone, but peace was a curse word on the Coromandel Coast. She had travelled the world, a witness to unimagined visions, merely to repeat her mother’s folly, and to live her mother’s life over. (238)

It does not take her long to realize, though, that because she straddles the boundary between two worlds, she can draw on both traditions to try to negotiate an end to the war. It is an audacious idea, bordering on hubris, and a mission unlikely to succeed, but she is convinced that because she is a woman and a foreigner she must try since “[o]nly a person outside the pale of two civilizations could do it” (259). But when Hannah arrives at the court of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, to sue for peace, she is promptly bound and taken hostage by the Great Mughal. When Hannah is finally granted an audience she is surprised to meet a frail, lean and ascetic looking man, not a demon king, but a man “as somber in manner as any Puritan of the same great age” (263). Gradually, she earns his respect, but when he tells her that because she has “placed herself where no woman has a right to be” (267), he has decided to return her to her
people, the *angrezi* (English), Hannah protests, but she does not claim another identity. Hannah is no longer one or the other, but a kaleidoscope of unfolding identities as hybridity has traversed her and made her unpredictable and impossible to categorize: “In one rainy season, Hannah Legge had gone from woolen-clad English married woman on the Coromandel Coast to pregnant sari-wearing bibi of a raja: a murderer, widow, a peacemaker turned prisoner of the most powerful man in India” (271). She has been transformed, but she is still a captive. Hannah’s peacemaking can also be construed as a mission to civilize. She thinks of herself as impervious, standing above and beyond the warring factions as a *firangi*. Still, her *hubris* leads to another transformation. Coming face-to-face with the Mughal Emperor, she realizes that he does not fit the description of the ten-headed demon Ravana in Muslim disguise, prevalent at the Raja’s court, and she is able to humanize him, although she cannot accept his proselytizing zeal. Thus, her meeting with Aurangzeb marks her final translation.

The Indian narrative ends in indeterminacy, as Hannah, on the eve of the battle, steps out from the Mughal’s war tent to fix the stars, realizing that she has failed in her mission to bring peace and “stop the war before it destroys the world” (269), which is her world now. The Emperor’s army is massing and ready for the kill. Jadav Singh will be defeated, but the Emperor’s victory is pyrrhic, suggests Mukherjee with the irony of history, since it creates a political vacuum for the British to move in and colonize India thirty years later. In Mukherjee’s version of the Puritan tale, Hannah/Pearl returns to Salem with her daughter, and finds her mother in “a workhouse for the mad and indigent” (284). Still stigmatized, Rebecca/Hester, who has five half-Nipmuc children, insists on wearing her badge identifying her as an “Indian lover.” But her daughter Pearl/Hannah has a badge of infamy as well, suggests Mukherjee, “her black-eyed, black-haired, lively daughter, named Pearl Singh” (284), whom the townspeople call Black Pearl. Although Mukherjee’s fiction has reimagined the lives of Hawthorne’s protagonists, upon their return they are still outcasts in Salem, living on the fringes of town and subject to the gossip of the townsfolk, who warn their children to stay away from “the voluptuaries” (285). In a departure from the adventure story that Beigh Masters has narrated, Mukherjee suggests that their lives are altered since both have stories to pass on about
lives transformed and enriched. In Mukherjee’s fiction, their stories are passed on
metafictionally, for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s great grandfather, John Hawthorne, befriends
Pearl as a young boy and “seemed to have found in her company, doing odd jobs, running
errands, a corrective to the orthodoxy of his household” (285). But the tall story
Mukherjee has told about two women who defied the morals of their time and place and
transgressed the ultimate American boundary remains controversial, and ironically she
suggests: “Who can blame Nathaniel Hawthorne for shying away from the real story?”
(284). The implication, of course, is that only a transcultural migrant would dare imagine
a different story.

In a metafictional digression, Beigh Masters tries to establish Hannah’s role in
Indian history, and discovers that it resides in other people’s stories, and that oral history
is a “complex narrative tradition” which reflects “the mood of the times and [the]
regions” (176). Masters also finds a notation in Tales from the Coromandel where she is
recorded as “a white divorcée” and “pirate’s wife” who consortcd with “a Hindu noble”
and as “an adventuress of obscure origins” (258). But the irony of history also ties her to
the diamond. On a research trip to the site of the battle, the Indian guides tell Beigh
Masters that the great Raja Jadav Singh, who has now gone down in history as Peter-the-
Great of India, had a rani (wife) who was American. “A Salem witch--true! She had
magical powers, killed whole armies, operated on everyone, transplanted body parts
before Christian Barnard. True, True!” (257). Beigh Masters wants to find out if they
know what happened to the “Salem witch” and is told that she defected to the Great
Mughal’s camp (257). One of them suggests that the Great Mughal installed her in his
harem, and another that she was a spy, “Mata Hari before Mata Hari. She killed the
Hindu god! ... She was after the diamond only” (258). Thus oral history has transformed
the tale of the Salem Bibi into one of an adventuress who came to Devgad to steal the
Emperor’s Tear, and “the war was fought over a diamond and the demands of an
American lady” (258). The ironies of history have transformed Beigh Master’s American
pioneer and world-traveller into a witch, traitor and spy. Predictably, the narrative of the
nation erases the contagion of hybridity and distorts its manifestations as it redraws the
boundaries in order to construct a homogenous nation.
Beigh Masters, however, does not want leave the story open-ended or ambiguous. Her research has been driven by the need to know the identity of the Salem Bibi, and the fate of the "Emperor's Tear" is obviously a mystery she wants to solve. Venn, who has programmed her manuscript into his interactive program, suggests that she might find the diamond through virtual reality. As she enters the virtual reality of the novel, she does so assuming the identity of Bhagmati. She immediately recognizes Emperor Aurangzeb, and the "old man is holding the diamond aloft.... Victory is his, vengeance and retribution and an open road to unlimited plunder and mass conversion, and suddenly his mouth opens wide, he tries to scream, but the battle sounds are too loud..." (281-2). Hannah has obviously stolen the diamond, which she hands over to Bhagmati (Beigh), and they flee, but Bhagmati (Beigh) is injured and Hannah fades from view. Ironically, her detour into virtual reality reinscribes Hannah as the adventuress of oral history. Since the virtual reality program responds to the wishes of the user, it is clear that Beigh Masters, the asset hunter, now is far more interested in the ultimate fate of the diamond, and locating the diamond will provide narrative closure. In the virtual reenactment of the battle of Devgad, Beigh Masters briefly holds the diamond in her hands, a feat her recovery of Hannah's story from the archives of the past could not actualize. Historical research only gives a mediated access to the past through the traces left in the archives. Akin to the jealous and doubting Rama of the Ramayana, Beigh Masters needs to know, to solve the mystery of the diamond, and her reconstruction of the life of the Puritan orphan produces a narrative which ends in uncertainty. For an asset hunter, fictions, although fabulous, are not virtual enough.

In The Holder of the World, which spans three continents and historical epochs, Mukherjee uses the aesthetics of the Indian Mughal miniature, a technique which she describes as "crowded with narrative, sub-narratives, sometimes meta-narratives, so taut with passion and at the same time so crisp with irony" (Jouvert 8). The Mughal style of narration, which has no vanishing point, and compresses time and space into a simultaneity, allows Mukherjee to write incommensurable worlds together. The Mughal miniature also permits Mukherjee to stage chiasmic exchanges which produce cultural
hybridity; but she also uses it as a cross-cultural contact zone in which cultures clash. In
Mukherjee, cultures are transportable and mobility sets transformations in motion.
Although Samira Kawash suggests that cultural hybridity is not narrativizable, only
discernible, and typically erased, Mukherjee’s transcultural fiction deploys historical and
transcultural irony to tease out hybridity from the cross-cultural encounters in the novel.
Indian-born, Mukherjee regards herself as an American writer, and her credo is “to make
the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar” (Darkness xiii). Postcolonial critics frequently
charge her with exoticizing India, and suggest that her refusal of self-marginalization is in
fact a form of self-exoticization. The novel demands that the reader can recognize and
negotiate hybridity as it erupts in the interstices between texts and cultures. Since cultural
hybridity emerges from a boundary negotiation across cultures, the novel must inscribe
the boundary between the familiar and the strange before it crosses and dissolves it. As a
result, the discourse of hybridity in Mukherjee can be a form of intercultural strategic
essentialism, which inscribes notions such as “exotic” and “strange” in order to negotiate,
transform and familiarize them. In the Mughal style narrative, however, concepts such as
“strange” and “familiar” can also become shifters reflecting the positionality of the
reader. Since Mukherjee’s protagonist is singled out as the community’s Other within, the
writer contrasts her lack of security as an orphan with the gain of new opportunities
which lie elsewhere. The novel explores both the transformative and turbulent nature of
affiliations by accident, chance and distance.

The cultural hybrid is a multiple and fluid self that cannot be contained within
history, community or linear narratives, and Mukherjee uses captivity and adventure
narratives to explore the unrealized potential and the unpredictability of transculturation.
Associated with mobility and migration, in this novel hybridity is a narrative of becoming
which spills over boundaries and refuses to be tied to an origin. Thus, Mukherjee’s
narrative strategy illustrates the risks involved in the practice of imagining and
negotiating a multiple self outside the security of a known community and a bounded
identity. In this text, the displaced self has to improvise and make up a new self out of
what it finds and encounters. Thus cultural hybridity becomes a project of assembly and
realignment. In Mukherjee, then, the hybrid is a cataphresis, a figure of doubling that is
both and neither, and at the same time refuses closure as neither/nor. In her next novel, Leave It to Me, Mukherjee continues to explore hybridity as a cultural assemblage.
Chapter 9: The Orphan as a Figure of Hybridity in *Leave It to Me*

In *Leave It to Me* (1997), Mukherjee braids together cultural myths, fairy tales and cosmologies into a complex *métissage* in the guise of an orphan’s quest for her lost origins. In this picaresque novel, Mukherjee once again deploys the orphan as a figure of displacement and mobility as she has previously done in her short fiction, and in the novels *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Holder of the World* (1993). But the figure of the orphan, cut off from its past, is also a catachresis in Mukherjee’s fiction, through which she interrogates the loss and gain of ontological discontinuity, since orphans lack origins and a pure, continuous lineage and are oriented towards the future, open to chance and whatever the future may bring. In this novel she uses the figure of the orphan, who turns her back on her adopted family, to investigate not only the deceptions and ambiguities of the self and its mythologies, but those of a whole culture. The novel is in fact a critical interrogation of the American Dream and the divisive and lingering legacy of the war in Vietnam, with Mukherjee’s orphan *cum* avenging angel straddling the fault line running through post-Vietnam America. As a liminal figure the orphan is oxymoronic, split or double; a figure of separation between past and present and here and there. The orphan is generally thought to be “strange,” and since strange is an equivocal term, both “uncanniness and unhomeliness” attach themselves to the figure of the orphan, observes Karl Miller in *Doubles* (47-8). Not surprisingly, Mukherjee uses the figure of the orphan *cum* vagrant in this text to explore her thematics of “housing” or acculturation and “unhousing” or displacement. Orphans in fiction come in many shapes and forms, and Miller observes that the topos has a dual image of someone who paradoxically is “both at home and away,” and simultaneously can be both “benign and fierce, lost and found, bound and free” (40). The orphan, then, is a borderlander who can be used as a transcultural go-between. In fiction, the orphan is marginal, mobile and displaced, as Miller’s list of metonymies reveals:
outcast, outsider, stranger, changeling, foundling, bastard, lad, lamb, urchin, ragamuffin, wail, wraith, victim, outlaw, guerrilla, fugitive, refugee, escapee, evacuee, tramp, vagrant, vagabond, wanderer, maverick, clown, artist, writer, monster, misfit, queer (45-6).

But in Mukherjee’s cosmology orphans can also be divine. There are many echoes of gods and goddesses from several pantheons throughout the narrative. In the novel’s intersecting and competing orders of reality there are, as Edward Said observes of Dickens’s novel Great Expectations, intimations of “divine errancy, the Incarnation, and transformed God into man” (Beginnings 99). The prologue also makes clear that the troubled orphan, who thinks of herself as “special,” but frequently comes across as a psychopath, is in fact on a divine mission endowed with “the will to save and the strength to kill” (5). In this orphan text there is a double discourse running through the narration, which Mukherjee uses to undermine and ironize her protagonist’s self-inventions, sly evasions, claims of naïveté and retrospective justifications. According to Derrida, this type of “double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging writing” typically brings “low what was high” (Positions 42). As a discourse that participates in two different registers producing unpredictable and unsettling effects, hybridity is never a project of recovery, but a rupture or transformation and, within the context of Mukherjee’s aim to demonstrate how migrants have transformed and hybridized America, the double-voiced narrative familiarizes the unfamiliar and defamiliarizes the familiar. In the process, hybridity emerges in-between as an eruption or disruption which denaturalizes and destabilizes what appears to be natural and given on either side of the boundary.

Mukherjee’s orphan initially sets out to actualize the American Dream: “Go for bliss, dump pain, pity and rage on somebody else. Pursue happiness: that’s the American way” (61); but she quickly has to adjust her vision and ambition to reflect her new life as a vagrant, beggar and outcast on the streets of San Francisco. Undaunted, she still feels entitled: “When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything. Who but a foundling has the moral right to not just a city, but a neighbourhood, and fashion a block or two of it into a home?” (67). Disinherited, homeless and down-and-out, she oscillates between
triumphalism and uncertainty. There are allusions to T. S. Eliot’s evocation of dispossession and despair in “The Waste Land,” in which a line from Nerval’s poem *El Desdichado* (“The Disinherited”) is quoted.\(^3\) In her analysis of Nerval’s poem in *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva notes that the disconsolate poet, who takes on the persona of the melancholy prince of Aquitaine in his crumbling tower, does not mourn “the deprivation of ... a transferable heritage, but the loss of an unnameable domain, which one might, strangely enough, evoke or invoke, from a foreign land or constitutional exile” (145)--that is, through the optics of dislocation. Kristeva argues that the poet’s quest for the elusive “lost object” or “thing” which typically takes on “the consistency of an archaic mother” in the imagination, is the reworking of a trauma that turns the present into the past (145). The poet becomes “that which is not” (146), and straddling the borderline between appearance and disappearance, the visible and invisible, his identities become fluid and have to be performed or invented:

The “I” then asserts itself on the field of artifice: there is a place for the “I” only in play, in theatre, behind the masks of possible identities, which are as extravagant, prestigious, mythical, epic, historical, and esoteric as they are incredible. (145)

In an interview, Bharati Mukherjee suggests that in this bleak novel her intention was to “disturb what came before” by treating the frontier as a staging ground for a series of transformative dislocations and relocations (*Jouvert* 1). For Mukherjee’s young protagonist, however, the frontier holds out the promise of a “freaky-costumed freedom” as well as magical, fairy-tale transformations (65). But when she arrives in San Francisco the street scene paradoxically seems more like a gallery of familiar albeit displaced people like herself: “A lot of people reminded me of people I’d known, like we’d all drifted west till we’d run out of land, and then started to mutate” (71). Thus, in this novel, Mukherjee clearly wants to mythologize and carnivalize the frontier, as she continues to

\(^3\) The translation of the line “*Le prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie*” (The prince of Aquitaine whose tower has crumbled) can be found in *Black Sun*. My supervisor, Victor Li, pointed me in the direction of T. S. Eliot. There are also echoes of T. Alfred Prufrock, particularly towards the end of the novel, as the protagonist floats free of her moorings and the mermaids sing. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 140-1.
interrogate what it means to be an American, and she does so writing about the street life and cultural diversity of the neighbourhood in which she lives in Berkeley, California.

In this novel it is the opportunities inherent in claiming a different future that turn Mukherjee’s protagonist into a boundary crosser and archaeologist intent on recovering or salvaging an *arche*, a displaced past. Paradoxically, then, hurtling headlong into the future, she turns to the past in order to salvage a future. The allegory of the journey of self-discovery, and the attendant search for roots, evoked in the novel as an American birthright, are undermined on several levels in the text. The search for origins begins where it ends, and ends where it begins: in violence and mayhem. Ironically, it also sets the protagonist adrift once again rather than setting her free, and instead of achieving wholeness and reconciliation, Mukherjee’s abjected protagonist feels as if she has been cast in a Restoration revenge tragedy. At the end of the novel, the young protagonist is no closer to an identity or a subject position she can call her own, and she concludes: “I am that dark, ghost, *thing*” (239). When she surveys the gruesome carnage on the houseboat, which includes the dead bodies of her wretched biological parents, she feels no sense of catharsis. Instead, a “ferrous taste of fear invades [her]” as she drifts out to sea, presumably to be claimed by a cosmic mother (10). The Asia of her origins has only given birth to demons and monsters and turned her into a ghost. Thus this novel deploys a negative theology in its refusal to endorse the search for roots and blood lines as a panacea to the alienation of orphanhood, and the trauma of abjection. Since the novel is apocalyptic, and ultimately posits the *arche* of the orphan as a poison rather than a cure, the narrative does not problematize adoption *per se*, since the protagonist’s fixation on the past ultimately is framed as a quest for revenge. Moreover, her decision to shed her adopted identity is cast in radically pragmatic or flippant terms in the text, and reveals that what she really seeks is upward mobility, and the excitement and unpredictability of a life of adventure. “I am, or was, Debby DiMartino, a fun-loving twenty-three-year-old American girl. I was adopted into a decent Italian-American family.... That’s the upside of adoption.... It’s just that Debby DiMartino has no weight, no substance. I had to toss her out” (10). Along with her adopted identity she also tosses out a predictable life: “In my family, ambitious women my age went down to Manhattan to get a life. They always
had, and they always would” (64). Driving west to California in search of her biological mother she metamorphoses into Devi Dee, picking the name from a license plate of a sports car as she crosses the Donner Pass.

Devi arm-wrestled Debby. I was quicker, stronger as Devi; my intuitions were sharper, my impulsiveness rowdier. I came into possession of my mystery genes. Thank you Clear Water. And you too, thank you, ‘Asian National’ (64).

Although Debby DiMartino’s retrospective, first-person narration is frequently insightful, it is also evasive and unreliable. Her decision to trace her roots is initially framed as a legitimate need to know her genetic inheritance, but she also needs “to believe in the bigger picture. Most orphans do” (16). Similarly, Said notes the need of orphans to “dream and even for a while be something they cannot long remain, and akin to Dickens’s Pip, Mukherjee’s orphan is also “conceived as excess, wanting more, trying to be more than [she] in fact is” (98). Once she adopts the optics of the disinherited orphan, kin and kind are split apart in her mind. The DiMartinos are now “aliens” (27), and only her cousin and sister are classified as “true DiMartinos,” who can “afford to be hooked on Danielle Steel and fairy tales because [they] have a family ... [and] a family history” (64). Yet, as her narration makes clear, it is the orphan who has cast herself in a fairy tale. In a chiasmic and ironic reversal of the problematics of ethnic visibility and invisibility, she begins to envy people “who [know] who they [are]” (66). From the orphan’s perspective of lack, origins and authenticity are assets, not ambiguous or imposed categories, and she begins to label those she can readily identify by their ontological markers as Chinese or Indian rather than simply American. “They knew what they inherited. They couldn’t pass themselves off as anything else. No evasions, no speculations, no let’s-pretends. They didn’t see themselves as special or freakish” (66). Thus Mukherjee’s orphan, who passes for an American, is not just interested in passing, but in becoming. In “Passing through Hybridity,” Sara Ahmed posits voluntary passing as a “technique,” a “movement through and across,” and as an “undecidable moment” (94). Accordingly, “passing takes place through encounters with others in which there is a crisis of reading, a crisis that hesitates over the gap between an image that is already assumed and an image that is yet to be assumed” (94), with the verb form “assumed” here
doing double duty to undermine those assumptions. Reluctant to turn “the undecidable moment” into a fluid and unpredictable negotiation, Debby DiMartino wants to fix and mark the ambiguity that would make her “special.” In other words, she wants her difference or excess to be “seeable and visible,” while in racialized passing, as Ahmed argues, the “crisis of knowledge” is tied to visibility, of knowing that “there is always a danger of being seen” (94). Gradually, her self-exoticization turns into a quest for certainty fixed on her lost origins, and like Benjamin’s angel of history, she is blown backwards in her quest for a different future which, with or without divine intervention, turns into “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of [her] feet” (Illuminations 66).

Ultimately, Debby DiMartino’s search for a new identity as an orphan shows that identities are formed through inclusions and exclusions, which in Stuart Hall’s Derridean formulation, means that they require “a constitutive outside” or something beyond: “a margin, an excess, something more” (5), and he suggests that the “unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term [identity] treats as foundational is not natural, but a constructed form of closure” (5). Thus it is what is left outside--or what identity lacks—that would pluralize and destabilize identity from within. Hall’s rearticulation of identity as plural and open-ended, rather than closed and homogeneous, hinges on what he calls a series of “strategic identifications,” which based on “the logic of more-than-one” would inscribe new “symbolic boundaries” and produce “frontier effects” within identities (3). These are presumably the same frontier effects that in Mukherjee’s fiction produce fluid identities and hybridized transformations in response to dislocations.

If it is possible to think of identification as a form of anthropological field methodology, as a gathering and processing of information, images and impressions, then Mukherjee’s protagonist adopts a protean stance, forever changing shape, as she moves from context to context, fashioning complex new identities, improvising new roles in response to each situation without obvious earlier counterparts. In fact, Diana Fuss argues in a similar vein in Identification Papers that,
Identification names the entry of history and culture into the subject, a subject that must bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world. Identification is from the beginning a question of relation, of self to other, subject to object, inside to outside. (3)

In this novel, cultural hybridity becomes an inventive game, an improvisation and a fluid, unpredictable performance based on identifications and misidentifications. Fuss also notes the “astonishing capacity of identifications to reverse and disguise themselves, to multiply and contravene one another, to disappear and reappear years later [which] renders identity profoundly unstable and perpetually open to radical change” (2). Since identifications are mimetic in nature and can be playful fantasy idealizations, and recognitions as well as misrecognitions, the very plasticity of identifications leaves plenty of scope for unpredictable, even monstrous hybridizations. Identifications can also bring back phantoms from the past, and the past is a dangerous site of nightmares and potential violence for Mukherjee’s orphan since “the other two I owe my short life to were lousy people who’d considered me lousier still” (10); and it is the orphan’s sense of abjection which leads her to conclude that “the upside and downside of being recyclable trash don’t quite balance” (10). She even wonders what her adoptive parents saw “in a baby girl whose unnamed mother identified herself as Clear Water Iris-Daughter, and whose father, also unnamed, was called ‘Asian National’ in the adoption papers.... It was the mid-seventies and I was just a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail” (13). Thus it is the gaps in her life, her lack of knowledge about her origins, that unsettle her identity, and she wonders: “Who are you when you have nightmares and fantasies instead of dates and statistics?” (16). From her adoptive mother she learns that she was named Faustine after a typhoon by the Gray Nuns in Bombay, and that her name was changed to Debby, after Debbie Reynolds, her mother’s favourite movie star (41).

In Outside the Teaching Machine Spivak suggests that identities based on ontological givens risk making a “fetish” of identity, but that the act of claiming an identity is essentially a “catachrestical claim,” which involves seizing and displacing “a previous coding of value” in a logic of exchange and displacement (64). For Debby DiMartino, who both passes for and thinks of herself as an Italian-American, or “upstate
Italian” (25), and uses the acronym SWF (single, white, female), to identify herself, it is the possibility of claiming a more exotic identity as a birthright that beckons since it would make her special: “Debby DiMartino is a lie ... [the] unclaimable part of myself is what intrigues me” (10). Becoming another is clearly a process tied both to identification and subjectivity which throws the notion of identity into crisis. But ultimately it is her own body image that eludes her efforts to metamorphose into something more exotic as an Asian-American. She is both normalized by, and trapped in, an either/or logic, or what Miller calls “an adversary duality” (31), which sends her searching for an alternative self. But her body image in the cracked mirror on the wall refuses to deliver her from the ontological prison of her body.

I was a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an exotic girl in a very American town.... But I wasn’t tall, beautiful, or exotic enough to trust any of it, and so I made up my mind to find out if I was someone special or just another misfit. (16)

In her thesis, “Under Other Skies: Writing, Gender, Nation and Diaspora,” Susan Koshy argues that in Mukherjee the narrative of sexual awakening, which transforms exotic beauty from a liability to an asset, and typically “rests on a notion of identity as linear and progressive (91), is a recurring theme in Mukherjee’s fiction. In this novel, “the exotic” becomes a means to social mobility in Debby DiMartino’s self-transformation, but an ambiguous one. Koshy also establishes that through this othering “the darkness of the Indian subcontinent is reconstituted as the darkness of the Indian woman’s body” (70). According to Koshy, while Mukherjee’s female protagonists are acutely conscious of the way their beauty is read by Americans, they are themselves engaged in the process of writing their American experiences as the narrative of sexual awakening, material promise and individualistic assertiveness, a narrative enabled by their exotic beauty. Therefore they collaborate in the perpetuation of their own exoticism. (70)

Written from within the American experience, Mukherjee’s novel does, as Koshy argues, establish that “the exotic,” is perceived as both mysterious, enabling, and alluring by the American protagonist and her culture. Although Mukherjee’s protagonist, Debby
DiMartino, codes her ‘lost’ alterity as “special” (16), in the novel, “the exotic” and “the mysterious” are also problematized and ironized since her search for origins ends in disaster. The orphan’s legitimate search for her biological origins is further complicated by Mukherjee’s deployment of vengeance as an instrument of destruction.

One of Debby DiMartino’s early instructors in identity formation is Wyatt, her rehabilitation counsellor, who convinces the rebellious teenager that although she may be a thirteen-year-old shoplifter and an ugly duckling, she is in fact special, and that fate has better things in store for her than a predictable life in small-town America. He encourages her to seek out her biological parents: “Wyatt was the first to ask me about adoption, what I knew, what I remembered. He put a lot of stress on it, and I know it would have upset Pappy if he’d known that rehabilitation meant bringing up feelings I didn’t know I had” (13). When she shows no interest in her origins, thinking of adoption as fate, he takes her to an animal shelter to instruct her on the plight of stray animals, waiting to be adopted or destroyed: “Cuteness is all that counts.... I’m saying you’ve got a chance, don’t blow it. You might never have made it out of that orphanage. Someone must have seen something” (13). Wyatt is both a fairytale prince and a morally ambiguous figure, who before he abandons her, introduces her to drugs and sex, and even endorses “the integrity of shoplifting in a consumer society” (14). “I was just a small, dark thing, and he said, ‘you know, Debby, I can tell you are going to be tall and beautiful very soon, and someday you’re going to be rich and powerful.’ He thought he had everything to do with it” (14). Not surprisingly, the life-altering lesson she takes away from Wyatt is that her body has an exchange value: “Looks and a body: that’s a Get Out of Jail Free Card” (68). For a while she is able to convince herself that she is “lucky to be an orphan. From the families I’d been given, I’d scavenge the traits I needed and dump the rest” (15). The “crossed signals and conflicting impulses” of orphanhood now open up the possibility of a redoubling, of a second chance, and she begins to think of her prospects in life as a series of adoptions (49). “All I had to do was be beautiful, be available, and my other life, my real life, would find me” (18).
For an orphan, cut off from her past, and convinced that she is entitled, special and beautiful, mirrors can be both distorting and enabling, and as Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Seductions*, “I’ll be your mirror’ does not signify ‘I’ll be your reflection’ but ‘I’ll be your deception’” (69). In discussing narcissism, he argues that, “To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion. It is to be taken in by one’s own illusion and move in an enchanted world” (69). In the intertwined myth about the goddess Devi, one of the Indian deity’s weapons is the power of illusion, or the art of seduction. Since her cosmic mission is to destroy the evil demon, “the strategy of seduction” or deception, which as Baudrillard suggests, “lies in wait,” is potentially “a source of fabulous strength” (70). In a culture mediated by visual images from popular culture, identifications can clearly also become simulacra, dislodged from reality.

Upon graduation, Debby DiMartino’s first job is in telemarketing, selling invisible fitness equipment for a globe-trotting former star and producer of Kung Fu movies, Frankie “Flash” Fong, whom she promptly seduces. He introduces her to a different Asia than the one for which her adopted mother had raised mission money. “Frankie wasn’t an immigrant the way Paolo DiMartino had been. No steerage, no crippling gratitude” (29). In his kickboxing films, Flash Fong takes on many worlds: outer-space aliens, cowboys, bikers, Maoists and French colonials. His Asia is both fabulous and sordid, but as a recent immigrant from Hong Kong to New York, he also shows her a different America:

I didn’t read the papers or watch the news, but I knew, because all DiMartinos were Republicans, that the country had gone to the dogs, and the cities had been taken over by crack-cocaine addicts, rapists, muggers and welfare queens. Frankie changed all that. For Frankie, the New World was green and crisp as a freshly counterfeited hundred-dollar bill.... I started thinking like Frankie, a cornered rat with options. And suddenly I was sniffing out possibilities where the world only saw problems. (32)

Fong teaches her self-discovery through the art of self-invention. “Every time he told his life story, he gave himself the luxury of a different hometown. I loved his made-up childhoods” (24). But when Debby DiMartino is brutally jilted by Fong, she promptly
burns down his Saratoga Springs mansion, and decides to head west both in pursuit of her biological mother and to “get a life” (60). At the California border she panics for a brief moment: “I’m a disgrace to California, I deserve to be turned away: That was my last true Debby-thought, all wrapped up in ash, sack-cloth and guilt” (62). As she enters the “Golden State” she feels “[r]eborn, admitted, launched into clean, conquerable gravity-free space” (63), and like the warrior goddess Devi, Debby becomes bionic and superhuman “all allure and strength ... running away from shame, running to revenge” (67). In the Hindu pantheon, Devi is an eight-armed goddess, incarnated as a vagrant, who roams the world on the back of a lion. Strange and alluring, her task is to destroy the evil Buffalo Demon who has usurped the gods, now petrified and in hiding. Since this is a cosmic mission, why do the gods send a troubled young woman to battle a demon? The gods are not cowardly but cunning, argues R. K. Narayan in Gods, Demons and Others, “for how could anyone take seriously a young woman who may be out of her mind?” (56). Devi’s prowess resides in her luminous beauty, which functions as a lure, and those who are seduced by her, ultimately fall prey to her powers of destruction since, as Narayan observes, the goddess saw through every form that the demon assumed and “had a weapon to match each of his wiles” (62). On the street, Devi Dee soon enough finds out that she has unwittingly named herself after an Indian goddess, and although she drives a car rather than rides a lion, she is now “a Cowbabe in Goodwill chaps riding a Japanese auto” on a mission of her own: “Muddy Clear Water’s conscience. Or better still, make Bio-Mama pay for her shallow-pocketed maternalness” (68; 61). Devi clearly does not have a family reunion in mind, but a confrontation. Devi sheds her old identity without regrets, and deals with any lingering guilt by demonizing Debby: “Debby’d burned Frankie’s house down and possibly killed a rival. Devi was more mature, but you wouldn’t dis her and get away with it” (132).

Reincarnated as Devi Dee, she settles into the Heights neighbourhood of San Francisco, the “cradle of flower power” (69), where she finds her space, [her] turf, [her] homeland”(68). Despite the hyperbole, Devi has in fact become homeless, sleeping in her car, and begging and stealing to survive. Yet she feels no “sour odour of dim futurity”
(69), even though the “space” she calls “home” is a parking space, which has to be vigorously defended against film crews, shoppers and tourists.

The car was room, and board came from neighbourhood soup kitchens. Faustine and Debby were brought up Catholics, but Devi followed her nose: The Hare Krishnas, Buddhists, Baptists, Black Muslims... I felt free; I was free. It just happened overnight; one day I was afraid on the outside, the next day I was a kind of outlaw, on the side of other outlaws. Maybe I was programmed that way; it seemed totally natural to identify with dropouts, to step around cops, to look out for scanners and closed-circuit monitors... I didn’t look jobless and I didn’t feel homeless. (69)

In Outside the Teaching Machine, Gayatri Spivak suggests that “the main agenda” of the “struggle of the marginal in metropolitan space” is to explode the fantasmatic ‘whiteness’ of the metropolitan nation” (64). Mukherjee’s inscription of the immigrant experience clearly attempts to do that, but according to Spivak, Mukherjee’s project also runs the risk of founding a “new orientalism,” which Spivak regards as totalizing in that it “views the world as immigrant” (64). In contrast, Spivak, who prefers to remain “a resident alien” in the United States, attempts to reclaim and inhabit the figure of the native informant catachrestically. As a transnational critic, Spivak can claim transcultural literacy yet not be beholden to her host culture. Thus “informant” in Spivak means a transcultural critic, and “native” Indian-born. The problem with accepting a subject position as a migrant is, according to Spivak, tied to the fact that the “migrant must still consider the question of identity, plurality, roots” (225), and in the process “identity” can become “a fetish” (65). In contrast, Mukherjee refuses to regard her “Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration” (Darkness 3). Thus there is no return to origins in Mukherjee, who considers herself a mainstream American writer, and remains unapologetic about celebrating the hybridizing effects of the migrant’s dislocation and acculturation.

In the introduction to her short story collection, Darkness (1985), which marks her birth as an American writer, Mukherjee rejects the Canadian mosaic, since as a “visible minority” she was marginalized in Canada based on her alterity, although a Canadian citizen. In other words, Mukherjee argues that in Canada she was made visible
as Other, not as a Canadian. In contrast, the United States holds out the promise of accepting the writer as American. In Darkness Mukherjee states: “I see my ‘immigrant’ story replicated in a dozen American cities.... I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grandparents had passed through Ellis Island. Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world” (3).35 Thus, in Mukherjee’s fiction, it is the United States, and not the world that is immigrant. In Mukherjee the world is interconnected, and from the migrant’s perspective there is an old and a new world. In terms of the ontological dilemma facing Mukherjee’s protagonist in Leave It to Me, Spivak positions herself as an orphan claiming what Karl Miller calls an “adversary duality,” while Mukherjee views adoption as a position from which she can negotiate both the loss and the gain of dislocation as an American. In an interview in 1990 with Maya Jaggi in the South Asian magazine Bazaar, she argues:

If I had only been interested in being heard and selling, I would have written quaint little stories about the Indian ghetto, or nostalgia about aristocratic Calcutta, which is what publishers want. I could have done an Anita Desai or Maxine Hong-Kingston number. But so far, I’m the only one among non-European immigrant writers, or the first-second-or-third-generation Chinese American writers who is writing about the whole country as opposed to the ghetto world. I give people the ashcan realism, the downside as well as the upside, the hustle and the sleaze as well as the heroism and excitement of being a dislocated person in the New World. (8)

In this novel, Mukherjee fans out to include a wide spectrum of characters, outcasts and vagrants as participants in the struggle for recognition and inclusion of the marginalized, in which the heteroglossia and thematics of the picaresque mode of the novel participate. According to Francisco J. Sanchez and Nicholas Spadaccini, in The Picaresque: Tradition and Displacement, the picaresque mode is a discourse of

35 Ironically, Darkness was first published in Canada. According to Mukherjee, “in 1985 no U. S. publisher was willing to publish it ... because at that time there was no marketing category for “ethnic Immigrant American fiction” (76). In an interview with Jouvert, Mukherjee reveals that the book was eventually bought for $3,500 Canadian dollars by Penguin Canada, and published “as a paperback original that was meant to get lost” (76). It is still in print and widely taught. Jouvert (1997) <http://Jouvert.com>. 
marginality that brings together a variety of voices and languages to question a social order that blocks and frustrates the picaro’s expectations for a better future. Picaresque narratives are double-voiced discourses that open windows on the abject condition of the excluded, and reveal that from the perspective of the outcast “moral transgressions and social aggression” are often seen as their only recourse to challenge the very “idea of cultural homogeneity” that excludes them (305). Put another way, the vagrant or rogue may resort to transgressive behaviour in order to achieve social mobility. In Mukherjee’s novel, the orphaned narrator expresses similar sentiments about an America divided along lines of race and class and prone to violence: “Vietnam wasn’t a war; it was a divide. On one side, the self-involved idealists; on the other, we, the napalm-scarred kids. In between, a country that elected leaders, who got boys like Larry to pull the triggers” (167). The picaresque is a protean mode, argue Sanchez and Spadaccini, and an indicator of changing societal values in which popular culture and “the marginal, unheroic and everyday” can be expressed in many different registers of speech. Sanchez and Spadaccini add that in the picaresque mode, the global effects of migrancy can be explored from the perspective of the displaced, and they argue that “there is a political need to enlarge the social discourse to include the voices and experiences of those individuals and groups who have not had the privilege of feeling that the culture into whose midst they have been thrown is also their own” (305). In this novel, those voices come from the street, roaming houses, soup kitchens, bars, restaurants and popular culture. This is the world of the displaced: the urban nomad, the bricoleur and the improviser. On the street, the reader

is made to see the extent of the picaro’s marginalization in the solitude of the city, roaming among other individuals, engaged in various processes of adaptation and survival. In other words, the reader is likely to experience the cultural event of the city through the gaze of the marginalized. The city is seen as a process involving relations between different individuals; it is viewed as a field of conflict and struggle in which the Other refuses to be reduced to the same. (297)

San Francisco is an earthquake prone city built on a fault line, and Devi’s arrival rather predictably produces ominous tremours. Her new friends on the street include the Stoop Man, the Duvet Man, and Loco Larry, a panhandler, drug dealer, and one of the
survivors of the war “who didn’t make it through peace” (135). All of them teach her new survival skills. Tortilla Tim, for example, who is a University of Toronto graduate, and who is also variously known as Gabe, or Gabriel “after the archangel” (71), teaches her to beg.36 He also fills her in on the lore of the Hindu goddess Devi. Soon the street people refer to her as the “Goddess” (73), and Devi and Tortilla Tim join forces begging in an ecumenical fashion by soliciting “a buck” for “an angel and a goddess” (72). Their intercultural panhandling works well until Tortilla Tim vanishes with the cash box. While defending her parking spot Devi makes contact with Ham Cohan, a film producer, and draft dodger, and through him she finds permanent employment at a media escort service called “Leave It to Me.” Devi now quickly seduces Ham, moves into a rooming house, and hires a private detective to track down her American flower child mother who gave birth to her while back-packing in India, setting the stage for the final confrontation.

The San Francisco rooming house is clearly a metaphor for America’s new diversity, which the protagonist describes as a network of interconnected lives: “All my neighbours had come home to the Beulah rooming house from somewhere else. Vanuatu man wasn’t the only refugee, and Loco Larry wasn’t the only war-maimed. Everything was flow, a spontaneous web without compartments” (98). On the street, “Vietnam’s war-bastards” and “democracy’s love children” join forces and create a counterculture that is both supportive and violent. Although Devi feels at ease and energized by the cultural diversity in the rooming house, on every street corner graffiti slogans encourage her to “[t]rust coincidence, [and] aim for revenge” (98). Devi soon begins to wonder whether her employer, Jess DuPree, who has travelled widely in Asia, might be her birth mother, and it is Jess DuPree’s ‘exotic’ office that sets her imagination in motion. Devi’s description takes the form of a hybridized Mughal miniature:

36 According to Howard Mancing in the “The Protean Picaresque,” literary picaros are usually orphans and they typically serve a series of masters. They may work alone or with others in delinquent or rouguish activities such as petty thievery and cutpurse. They may be unemployed and travel freely as vagabonds, drifters, tramps or vagrants. This frequently leads to another picaresque activity: begging. Picaros are often some sort of trickster, and they are capable of assuming whatever disguise may be necessary to carry out their mission. Giancarlo Maiorino, ed., The Picaresque: Tradition and Displacement (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996) 281.
The camel harness on the floor was meant to be sat on. Wool shawls embroidered with paisleys hung in place of blinds or drapes in the windows. All ledges, sills and table tops were cluttered with brass gods, mirrored elephants, copper urns, lacquered boxes, sandalwood beads and stone eggs on tarnished trays. This wasn’t California. It wasn’t even America. (148)

Prowling around San Francisco exploring the legacy of the counter culture, Devi feels that she is “inchng closer to the times, maybe even the block, of my flower-child Bio-Mom” (97). Devi also realizes that the war that Ham had protested “wasn’t the war Larry had fought” (139), and that the war in Vietnam had been “an apocalypse segregating hawks from doves, cynics from idealists” (141). As for her birth mother, she imagines that she must have been “a romantic floating into the sixties in a haze of sex, drugs and the sanctity of rebellion” (141). In Loco Larry’s kitchen alcove, she studies snapshots from Vietnam displayed on his refrigerator door, and discovers another version of Asia and the war in Vietnam: “Buddies looking like summer campers grinned out of pedicabs, Okie faces, some African American faces. All of them romantics and innocents. And, all of them, fated to be victims or villains. I identified with those guys. I’d been drafted too” (138-9). But it is clearly the circle around Ham Cohan, the affluent side of Berkeley, that holds the key to her origins, and in particular the identity of her mother. But Ham Cohan has in fact begun to fear her prowess:

Now I wonder if my feeling so special wasn’t because Ham was scared of me, or maybe not of me but of what he’d started. He needed to believe that I was some kind of fallen princess, not a no-name street person living out of a car and soup kitchens. (98)

When Fred Pointer, the private detective, reports that her father “was one of the most notorious serial murderers in modern history” and that he is “rotting in an Indian jail” (121), he adds the disconcerting news that “[o]ne of his early victims, in fact, was his baby daughter. In other words, you... You died Devi, and you turned into a ghost” (121). An eyewitness report from the hippie trail in India, as told by Hari, the oldest resident of the village of Devigaon, increases her feelings of abjection. It is a lurid tale—which ironically inverts the early travellers tales of European explorers and conquerors—concerning “a sahib and his memsahibs who smoked hemp, danced naked and made
human sacrifice” (118). Hari also caught a glimpse of Devi’s father, before he strangled his infant daughter and left her for dead, and Hari describes him as a Bombay “film hero, only more handsome ... moving the way a cheetah springs for the kill” (119). An interview with Sister Madeleine of the Grey Nuns (originally from Québec) confirms that a small child was indeed found near death in Devigaon, “the sixth [child] that year” (125), and that when they took the child to her American mother in prison, the “firangi woman prisoner” thanked the nuns for the cigarettes they had brought her, but refused to acknowledge the child (125).

Before Fred Pointer, her detective, is brutally killed, he confirms that Jess DuPree is indeed her birth mother. In an Oedipal twist, Ham Cohan and Jess DuPree rekindle their old relationship at the wake for Fred Pointer, and Devi is again jilted. Distraught that the woman she now knows is her mother has also become her rival, she joins Loco Larry on an expedition during which the Vietnam veteran kills two women returning home from the wake. Devi has now become an accessory to murder, and she in her turn kills Loco Larry. At the wake for the victims of the shoot-out, Devi celebrates: “I grieved with them in public. In private, I celebrated. The dead women were the same age as Jess. Two stand-ins for mother down. I was closing in” (174). But Jess DuPree is now scared, and she seems to acknowledge that Devi has returned as an avenger in league with a killer. “Someone has me in his cross hairs.... Call him off, Devi.... The sins of my youth have come back to haunt me big time” (185-6). While the body count mounted, Devi continues to work as a media escort in her biological mother’s office, and one of her clients, Ma Varuna, a spiritual guru from Delaware, who seems to be well versed in Indian wisdom and mythology, unsettles her by questioning her identity as Devi:

Your name, you say, is Devi? You know what your name means? Do you have right to such a name? Devi is not a name to find and choose. It has to find you.... Devi is the female gender of Deva.... But you are trailing no aura of light. For you Devi is the wrong name, the worst name. ‘Devi’ comes from the Sanskrit word ‘shine.’ You are not a shiny woman. (203)

Predictably, Ma Varuna turns out to be Romeo Hawk, her father, who in disguise has come to settle a score with her biological mother, Jess DuPree. Although Devi does not
yet realize it, she has in fact come face-to-face with the Buffalo Demon, who immediately saw through her illusion by questioning her identity as Devi, before she recognized her own adversary (the Buffalo Demon) in the guise of Ma Varuna. Hence his intense dislike for the name Devi. Ironically, at the time Devi noted two “factoids” about her assignment, which she intended to pass on to her employer/mother, Jess DuPree. The first observation reveals that her own incarnation as the “flame-bright” goddess Devi is still incomplete: “Deities don’t glow.” The second implies that the demon has arrived on the scene in disguise: “The devil’s horns are retractable” (202). Eventually, Devi recognizes that she has a madman for a father. But Devi first has to face yet another monster, and when she confronts her birth mother, Jess DuPree, she curses, spits twice in Devi’s face, and denies that she is her birth mother. At the final showdown, her father, the Buffalo Demon, who with the aid of her mother, Jess DuPree, has killed a total of seventeen young backpackers in India, and nearly “choked to death a no-name baby of no fixed address” (226), strangles her mother, and beheads Ham Cohan on board his houseboat while, Devi, now in shock, watches the carnage. Fearing for her own life, she finally fulfills Devi’s apocalyptic mission, as a big earthquake hits, causing the Buffalo Demon to stumble:

*Violent propensities.* The sea has them, the Earth rocks with them. I claim my inheritance kneeling Bio-Dad ... hard as he tilts his head ... the cleaver fuses to my arm. It soars and plunges, soars and plunges. “Monster!” I scream, I keep screaming as I cradle Ham’s tormented face to my bosom. I am screaming as I dial 911. (235)

While she waits for the police to arrive, she reflects that, “the man and the woman who’d given [her] life were as strange ... as honeymooners from Mars” (224). Mukherjee casts her protagonist loose. Orphaned once again, Devi drifts away with her deadly cargo:

I heard the urgent police sirens. I waited a long while for the waist chains, handcuffs, leg shackles. And just when I prayed for my misery to be over, the waves rocked wild and heaved *Last Chance* free of its moorings. The houseboat skimmed a molten sea crying its cargo of dead and living towards a horizon on flames. I heard mermaids sing and police sirens screech, but not for me, not that night the big one hit. (240)
The earthquake delivers divine justice, and gives Mukherjee’s protagonist pause to contemplate the difference between justice and vengeance. As she drifts out to sea, she hears “mermaids sing” just as J. Alfred Prufrock did during his solitary walk on the beach while contemplating his own identity crisis.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novel explores a young orphan’s quest for her “true” identity and biological origins. In the novel, Mukherjee holds up a silverless mirror that refuses to resolve the orphan’s identity crisis by reflecting an identity grounded in ethnicity. Thus, the novel suggests that identities, hybridized or otherwise, are not fashioned by a return to origins, but by responding to the past, and by facing the future. As her protagonist surveys the wreckage of her reclaimed origins, she experiences no deliverance, only horror. In this novel, violence begets violence, and like Benjamin’s angel, who symbolizes the prison of history, Debby/Devi is doomed to relive the violence and trauma of her origins as long as the spirit of revenge rules. Thus, there is no return to origins as a source of plenitude and authenticity. Instead, Mukherjee’s apocalyptic novel celebrates the inventiveness and unpredictability of identity formation: the headlong thrust into the future of a hybrid transformation in process. In Mukherjee cultural hybridity is an assemblage or a series of fluid identities. What interests Mukherjee is clearly the energy, and the sheer unpredictability of identity formation, rather than the closure of identity itself since, to paraphrase Bruno Latour, if “difference is politics pursued by other means” then cultural hybrids gain their power from being unpredictable (We Have Never Been Modern 107). Thus, it is not the achievement of a fixed identity that Mukherjee advocates, nor a return to origins, which may mean destruction.

Throughout the novel, Mukherjee foregrounds her protagonist’s opportunities for friendship, belonging and affiliation on terms other than biological kinship in the spirit of the roominghouse, and as an adopted Italian-American. Her quest for origins, thus closes down other potential routes for the orphan to claim her birthright to America’s diversity in favour of clarity and certainty. A return to origins can be a destructive illusion, as Julia Kristeva suggests in Powers of Horror, particularly if it involves an ego, “wounded to the point of annulment ... [which] cowers somewhere, nowhere, at no other place than the
one that cannot be found” (47). Thus, the novel problematizes the orphan’s fantasy of a return to origins as a way to belong otherwise.

In an interview, Bharati Mukherjee reiterates that as an American writer of Indian origin she intends to “show Americans their world in a different way, so that they’ll never be able to walk down their own streets in quite the same way after reading [her] books” (Beatrice Interview 3). Seen through the eyes of a street-smart, young orphan, America is revealed in Leave It to Me to be a nation still divided by the war in Vietnam, which also remains deeply ambivalent about cultural diversity. In the novel, Mukherjee suggests that if America writes Devi as other, then Devi writes back about the trauma of an unredeemable past. She writes as a “bastard, half American” (9), “a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail” (13), as a “cornered rat” and “a misfit” (15), a “dark ghost” (239), and about “mugged identities” (15). She also writes about a strangeness that brings the self to crisis, about “crossing signals and conflicting impulses” (47), and about the belief that a fantasized identity holds out the promise of a new birth: “Do your own thing. Feel free, and you shall be free” (68). Looking back on her destructive journey of self-discovery, Mukherjee’s protagonist concedes: “Only one thing Wyatt got wrong: Cuteness counts for some but not all. You get put down when you finally run out of wrath and a canny sense of timing” (45). In Leave It to Me, Mukherjee’s protagonist occupies a fault line in a culture in which the American Dream stands for the idea of transformation and inclusiveness, yet continues to close down the unpredictable and unfathomable other.

In Mukherjee’s fiction, cultural hybridity emerges as the third way to negotiate alterity and belonging from within the American diversity. Mukherjee’s refusal to posit alterity as a contagion, or a set of “crippling assumptions,” remains controversial since she appears simultaneously to reject her ethnicity yet valorize her alterity as exotic (Days and Nights In Calcutta 169). As Gail Ching-Liang Low observes: “Instead of consolidating cultural specificities against a dominant white, urban America, she positively rejects it” (Women 9). Low suggests that in interrogating the centre ground from within, Mukherjee is able to “ruthlessly [hold] the nation…to ransom for what it pretends to espouse” (11). As I have argued, it is Mukherjee’s very refusal to accept
marginalization as a natural and given consequence of displacement that allows her both to confront and critically question the promise of the American melting pot, and the Canadian cultural mosaic. Her interrogation of both models as potential sites of belonging reveals that they fail to deliver on their promise. Ultimately, though, she rejects cultural tolerance as a rhetoric founded on non-belonging in favour of the promise and optimism of belonging. What marks Mukherjee’s ontological project appear new and bold then is her insistence on defining belonging as a mutual commitment to change: “I’m saying that we haven’t come to accommodate or to mimic; we have changed ourselves, but we have also come to change you” (Bazaar 9).

Thus, Mukherjee’s fiction ultimately investigates the limits to tolerance and hospitality, as she sets out to demolish the barriers to belonging otherwise on the grounds of alterity. In Mukherjee, fluid identities are formed in the turbulent contact zone between cultures where utterly unpredictable cross-cultural transformations occur, and generate new ways of being American. As a result, Mukherjee’s protagonists have to leave the safety and security of the ethnic community, step across into their new culture, and risk both change and destruction in order to add their alterity to America’s diversity. Mukherjee’s deployment of the term “assimilation” in her fiction, then, both implies and requires hybridization on both sides of the boundary. Ultimately, Mukherjee’s fiction explores and foregrounds the much underrated need to belong.
Conclusion

The narrative of cultural hybridity is always double-voiced in the intercultural novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Michael Ondaatje and Salman Rushdie, and it can conjure up monsters and ghostly incarnations as well as cultural change and new ways of being in the world. All three evoke radically fragmented or turbulent worlds, but they also bring these worlds together through the optics of hybridity. Their novels are narrated from multiple perspectives and across vast spatiotemporal terrains, and the hybridity they advocate is always a boundary negotiation or transgression. As the writers translate, mix and juxtapose cultures, they establish new perspectives on the world. In the writers I discuss, the world is unfinished and the ways of the world can be challenged and transformed.

In the novels of Mukherjee, Ondaatje and Rushdie, hybridity frequently disturbs and unsettles the boundary between East and West. Standing at the boundary between cultures, the writers explore the possibilities of cultural hybridity to mix cultures and generate new literary forms. Thus, if the intercultural writers invoke cultural traditions and forms, they do so in order to critically interrogate the epistemological closure imposed by these traditions and forms. When they reach an impasse, they typically push up against, challenge, and shift the cognitive boundaries that limit their cross-cultural expression.

I also establish that narrativizing cultural hybridity is fraught with difficulties, since hybridity always involves a boundary crossing and erupts in uncanny and unpredictable ways. Because the narrative of cultural hybridity first has to inscribe the boundary it is about to cross or dissolve, the writers typically leave it to the reader to negotiate and recognize the transformative effects of cultural hybridity as they erupt in the text. I also establish that hybridity as a boundary negotiation obeys a negative yet inclusive logic of not one without the other, and that hybridity is a cultural mixing that attempts to overcome the exclusionary logic of neither/nor, either/or or not-quite.
My discussion of the novels confirms that hybridity always emerges in a contingent fashion and cannot be willed. According to Samira Kawash, hybridity is an enigma, or "the thing that is what it is not, and not what it is" (177). As cultural hybridity erupts in the seams and interstices between cultures, uncanny transformations occur among individuals who have to learn to improvise, adapt and reinvent themselves beyond notions of original and copy. With Samira Kawash, I have argued that the individual is not necessarily hybrid, but that hybridity traverses the individual and produces fleeting and often uncanny effects of hybridity. Hybridity does not supplant identities, but disturbs, multiplies and extends them. Cultural hybridity does, however, provide a transcultural subject position which is typically an ontological (im)possibility.

As the characters in the novels I discuss attempt to cross over from one culture to another, they must negotiate both the losses and the gains of displacement and fragmentation as they translate themselves. Once the protagonists of the intercultural writers I explore have translated themselves, they can attempt to belong to the world in new ways. The writers use a number of literary devices to fictionalize the ontology of the in-between, and posit hospitality as an active involvement with the other. In the crossing, abysses open between the same and the other, but transformative relationships are also forged which explore new, open-ended ways of inhabiting and constructing identities and subject positions.

Mukherjee, Ondaatje and Rushdie all write historiographic metafictions, and straddle the boundary between the postcolonial and postmodern paradigms. Thus the past remains a dynamic, rather than an antagonistic, site for rearticulations and provides models for multiplicity as the writers attempt to set history in motion. Cultural hybridity is typically released in their texts as irreconcilable worlds meet, collide and evoke closure. The logic of closure creates a double-bind, and in the tension between what is included and excluded, strange and familiar, hybridized transformations occur. In their fiction, cultural hybridity is also that which is erased, excluded and eliminated as abject or as a contagion, and uncanny distortions are often produced through the practices of
intercultural mimicry. As a distortion, cultural hybridity ultimately cannot be excluded, but returns to contaminate and disturb the pure and bounded.

In Salman Rushdie's fiction these disturbances typically take the form of obsessions or delusions, but can also erupt in self-destructive and apocalyptic forms of violence. For Rushdie, the pain of dislocation can be world destroying, particularly if what constitutes his characters' self and world suddenly ceases to exist. The fantastic and the real are frequently juxtaposed in Rushdie's fiction; his narrators are often unreliable, and his characters are typically confused, perplexed and disturbed by the effects of cultural hybridity. As a result, in Rushdie the negotiation of cultural hybridity can lead to unexpected metamorphoses as well as parodic distortions. Both Mukherjee and Rushdie use myths to structure their narratives, and construct hybridized worlds in which the turbulence of migration propels marginalized and dispossessed characters into previously unimagined lives. Rushdie's narrative of hybridity typically stages a fall into uncertainty and doubt, followed by a rebirth through mongrelization. He also constructs possible worlds of multiplicity, and recovers lost worlds of cultural diversity which he makes visible again. In Rushdie's world construction, boundaries between worlds and otherworlds tend to become permeable, and his tropes include doubles, palimpsests and double-exposures.

All three writers also explore the conditions of homelessness and dispossession, and the ontological challenge of belonging otherwise on the grounds of alterity. Rushdie's novels, in particular, are haunted by the prospect of homelessness, yet they frequently fail to resolve the need to belong otherwise. Michael Ondaatje explores the ontological predicament of homelessness through vagrants, outcasts, and nomads. In the novels, the migrants have to establish a tenuous foothold against great odds in a new culture, and their lives remain precarious and their prospects daunting. Thus the desire to belong, to be accepted, and put down roots is typically frustrated in the novels. The writers also attempt to resolve the problematics of belonging otherwise by turning alterity into a positive value, and explore the possibilities of inclusion through strategies that occlude as well as accentuate alterity.
Ondaatje’s interrogation of identity explores belonging without affirming any particular identity, thus approximating Alberto Moreiras’s “negative universalism” which regards the transcultural subject as neither particular nor universal, yet marks it both as a singular and multiple singularity beyond identity and difference. In Ondaatje, the need to belong is typically explored through a group of outsiders who come together to form a contingent community or extended family based on cross-cultural affiliations. Ondaatje’s poetics also strips away markers based on alterity that can be used to divide and separate humankind, until his characters become generic, and identities become fluid, ambiguous and enigmatic. In his fiction, alterity can also be deceptive and make his characters unrecognizable and unclassifiable, thus placing them beyond the grasp of distinctions.

Michael Ondaatje’s approach to the other is aspectival and hybridity typically emerges as his characters reveal themselves in *medias res*. Ondaatje’s meandering plots are organized around a quest which ultimately defies resolution, and his characters frequently inhabit a world that is in turmoil, a world in which his characters have become unmoored and traumatized. The boundaries between worlds can be porous in Ondaatje’s fiction, but geopolitical events quickly solidify them again, breaking up the temporary alliances of strangers. I also establish that Ondaatje uses the rhetorical figure of propinquity and cinematic intercutting techniques to write worlds together across time and space.

The need to belong otherwise is the central theme of Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction. In her novels, the orphan figures prominently, and Mukherjee typically sets her characters in motion by releasing them from captivity into an adventure narrative, and she negotiates cultural hybridity through a set of fluid identities. The turbulence of the frontier is Mukherjee’s preferred location and the site from which she continues to write herself and her characters into the American fabric. Mukherjee also deploys the aesthetic of the Mughal miniature to create and compress worlds within worlds and to defamiliarize the exotic and exoticize the familiar.
In Mukherjee’s fiction, alterity is a value at the core, and the cultures of her migrant protagonists are portable and can become a valuable asset in their quest for inclusion within the host culture. Thus, in Mukherjee, the alterity of the migrants is a form of cultural capital, which has the potential to increase their prospects for inclusion, but which can also lead to their exclusion. Since Mukherjee’s fiction explores belonging, her displaced characters also have to be prepared to change and be changed by the host culture. In her fiction, failure to improvise and refusal to change on the part of the migrants lead to marginalization or self-destruction. In Mukherjee, self-immurement in the original culture, or within a marginalized ethnic or diasporic community, blocks the migrant’s access to the host culture, and makes a hybrid negotiation or cultural improvisation impossible. Mukherjee also explores a virtual version of time that approximates Walter Benjamin’s “now-time” which sets history in motion by yoking unlikely traditions together and points to alternative versions of history. Suspended between worlds, this continuum of time has the potential to become a site of belonging for displaced and fragmented migrants.

In the intercultural novels, liminal figures straddle the border between here and there, and now and then. Yet they all have come to stay. A return to origins is generally closed down in the novels, and even when a character returns to origins, as is occasionally the case, that world has changed beyond recovery, and become a foreign land. In Mukherjee, the impossibility of a return to origins turns an orphan’s legitimate quest for her biological origins into a journey of self-destruction; while in Ondaatje the loss of language marks a protagonist who no longer belongs to the old world. As the past recedes into memory, the displaced characters of the novels must learn to fold their worlds into a continuum located in time, and to orient themselves towards the future. In the novels, nostalgia for an unchanging past blocks cultural hybridity, and is the mark of the exile and the expatriate. In contrast, multiplicity and cultural hybridity stand for cultural adaptability, dynamism and vitality, and their texts problematize the certainties of identity formations based on nation and origin.
In the wake of the disruptions and displacements caused by colonialism and mass migration, the writers I discuss attempt to evoke an interconnected world that does not automatically marginalize or close down alterity, but posits it as a lever to a civil society which tries to accommodate cultural diversity. Although the world of diversity is frequently defeated or deferred in the novels, the writers nonetheless set their sights on a world that will eventually allow multiplicity to come into being. The writers all turn to history to provide models for hybridized diversity and to mobilize alternative pasts that challenge the teleological certainties of the present. Rushdie’s novels even suggest that diversity and hybridized intermingling have been the occluded norm throughout human history, not purity and authenticity. From the intersections between cultures their narratives cross frontiers and begin to articulate the potential dynamics of such an interconnected world, and all of them stress the potential of cultural exchanges both to unsettle and enrich our experience of the world. Thus cultural hybridity in the intercultural novels is both a relational and transformative practice as the writers continue to search for new and often unlikely connections across cultures, identities and histories.

How then does newness enter the world? In my discussion, I suggest that the double consciousness or double vision of these writers clears a space for newness through egregious and liminal figures with divided loyalties who carry mixed messages. Since these characters are on the move, images gradually begin to circulate across worlds, and new meanings are released from the energy that comes from cross-cultural conjunctions and juxtapositions. In Salman Rushdie’s novels, the migrants frustrate the prevailing order as they push up against cultural absolutisms and break down barriers through parody, irony and hyperbole. In Bharati Mukherjee’s fiction, they set themselves in motion and negotiate a set of fluid identities in response to the contingencies of life which challenge fixed identities. In Michael Ondaatje’s novels, ex-centric characters attempt to build fragile bridges across worlds, and in the process they offer fresh angles of vision and open new windows on the world.

In the intercultural novels, then, the boundary is both a limit and a possibility for seeing and inhabiting the world in new and different ways. I have argued that the novels
suggest that one homogenous culture or one distinct and coherent national identity no longer corresponds to the world as it unfolds in the novels. Moreover, the novels suggest that it is the stranger’s alterity that transforms cultures and creates new ways of being in the world. Néstor Canclini, who regards all identities as hybrid constructions, argues that “a new distinction between the real and the imaginary” is necessary to make sense of the contemporary world (Consumers 80; 110). Identity, observes Canclini, is no longer determined by “belonging to a nation, a spatially delimited entity, where everything shared by the inhabitants--language, objects, customs--would differentiate them neatly from others” (78). According to Arjun Appadurai, the globalization of culture is not the same as homogenization; rather it is a site of contestations and disjunctions “between the triumphant universal and the resilient particular” through which “new and uncertain landscapes are created” (43). The intercultural fictions I discuss create these new landscapes, which enter Appadurai’s new social practice of fantasy on a global scale. In his post-fatwa essay “In Good Faith” (1990), for example, Salman Rushdie argues that cultural hybridity is a transformative practice, and he emphasizes “the great possibility that mass migration gives the world.” He defines cultural hybridity as:

impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes from new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics and songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this, and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. (Imaginary Homelands 394)

The intercultural novels of Ondaatje, Rushdie and Mukherjee, however, require readers who are prepared to transgress the identical/non-identical boundaries that constitute identity and separate them from the Other. In the traffic between worlds, their readers must learn to import, translate, transpose and transform the strange and the new that they encounter in the intercultural novels. The writers, then, turn their readers into transgressors, transformers and translators of cultures. Thus, the intercultural writers make the boundaries that separate cultures permeable, and by making the lives and the worlds of their characters visible and observable in all their otherness, their characters begin to speak across worlds and cultures in new and unpredictable ways. This, then, is how newness enters the world.
Bibliography


---. The Rustle of Language. Berkeley: California UP, 1989


