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Abstract

In this thesis, I analyze the work of Nina Mingya Powles through a critical mixed race lens. Powles is a multiracial author and poet who writes about her experiences navigating multiracial girlhood as she travels to and lives in various locations tied to her heritages. Focusing on Powles's use of water imagery, I examine how both her prose (*Small Bodies of Water*) and poetry (*Magnolia*) illustrate the multiracial body's fluid nature. I argue that the multiracial body is a fluid entity that permeates racial boundaries via its occupation of peripheries, allowing it to exist beyond the rigid classification of colonial racial categories. Through this occupation, multiraciality exists in and moves through the contested in-between space, deconstructing socially constructed categories of identity that dictate power hierarchies within the colonial framework. Although multiracial fluidity serves as a site of colonial deconstruction, I also argue that this mutability leaves the multiracial body vulnerable to external racial exploitation. I term this multiracial malleability, theorizing that the multiracial body's racial ambiguity is a source of manipulation on both an individual and institutional level. I argue that this malleability may be the root of multiracial fetishization, as it allows external forces to shape the multiracial body into the desired racial entity. In my theory, the multiracial mythic serves as an embodiment of both multiracial fluidity and malleability by occupying the borders between concretely defined entities, therefore existing within the in-between and blurring discrete categories of identity.

Introduction

I am white and Malaysian Chinese, though not everyone can tell this straight away. My mother was born in Malaysia and moved to Aotearoa New Zealand when she was seventeen. I was born in Wellington. We moved to New York when I was three for my parents' work, moved back to Wellington four years later, then packed up again four years after that and relocated to Shanghai. I was fifteen when we left Shanghai to move back home again, although by then, home was a slippery word.

– Nina Mingya Powles, *Small Bodies of Water*

Nina Mingya Powles, author of both *Small Bodies of Water* and *Magnolia*, is a New Zealand poet and essayist who focuses much of her writing on her multiracial heritage. Born in Wellington to a Chinese-Malaysian mother and European father, Powles explores her multiple racial lineages through her prose and poetry, employing water imagery throughout her works to illustrate the fluidity of her multiracial identity. By examining her multiraciality, Powles grapples with the colonial structures that dictate our perception of race, ultimately rejecting the strict racial categorization that is enforced by colonial institutions. In doing so, she reinserts agency over herself as a racialized subject. However, *Small Bodies of Water* and *Magnolia* also confront the vulnerability that is created by existence as a fluid racial entity. Being a mutable force leaves Powles's multiracial body susceptible to the external molding of her racial being and the fetishization of her identity, which she contends with throughout her works.

Published in 2021, Powles's most recent novel, *Small Bodies of Water*, explores her relationship with the concepts of home and belonging. Through a series of essays reflecting on the migrations of her childhood, Powles finds solace in the various bodies of water in her life, mapping out her racial heritages during her transformative journey through water. The water serves as a fluid, in-between space amidst the solidity of the land that dictates Powles's preconceived notions of belonging, allowing her to flow through her different identities in

permeable ways. To Powles, “home [is] a slippery word” since her family underwent multiple relocations throughout her childhood, preventing her from planting permanent roots in any individual place. Although she has cultural ties to these various homes, Powles struggles with truly belonging. Home is not just a slippery word, it is a scattered word spread thin across the various communities of Powles’s girlhood. Her multiraciality complicates the already tangled relationship of her homes because Powles’s very existence as a multiracial body means she does not fit neatly into discrete racial categories. These distinct racial units are typically linked to one's racial or ethnic background, so Powles’s inability to fit neatly into these categories complicates her relationship to the conceptual notion of home. Despite the physical scattering of her communities and her contention with colonial constructions of race, Powles creates her own definition of home and belonging by finding reprieve in the in-between space of water. This water acts as a connector between the physical landmasses of her heritages, linking Powles’s scattered homes and allowing her space to exist within all of her identities simultaneously.

In the first chapter of *Small Bodies of Water*, Powles reflects on how her multiple racial lineages and constant relocations have caused her to feel a sense of alienation from her cultures. She contemplates the validity of her belonging, questioning:

Where is the place your body is anchored? Which body of water is yours? Is it that I’ve anchored myself in too many places at once, or nowhere at all? The answer lies somewhere between. Over time, springing up from the in-between space, new islands form. (Powles 3)

By opening the novel with this inquiry, Powles grapples with how the colonial system defines her multiracial body. Under the Western colonial structure, which serves as a foundation for other forms of colonialism, rigid classifications are enforced on every level of identity: on race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. An example of this rigid classification is the structuring of the U.S. Census, which, until 2000, did not allow for multiple selections of racial identifications¹. Prior to its reform, participants were restricted to singular selections of either White, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. The distinct racial categories of the U.S. Census illustrates how the colonial system forces its subjects to confine themselves to a singular racial identity, even if this does not accurately capture the individual's racial lineage. Although Powles may not be a U.S. citizen, the underlying colonial beliefs that are at the root of the U.S. Census's rigid classification are the same colonial ideologies that shape Powles's experience in other Western nations, such as the U.K. and New Zealand. The entirety of the colonial framework is based upon the rigid classifications of the colonial subjects' being. The multiracial body contradicts these colonial notions of race by occupying multiple racial identities, so how can Powles exist in a space designed against her very being? She faces colonial pressure to choose a singular positionality that contradicts her ancestral lineages. To be anchored is to be fixed, to be immobile; anchoring her body to a single place denies Powles her true racial heritage, forcing her, as a colonial subject, to conform to the oppressive power structures that confine race to discrete units. However, she rejects strict racial categorization, instead finding peace within the in-between space of racial identity, the entity of water, that provides her racial liberation. This opening of *Small Bodies of Water* sets the tone for the remainder of the novel, allowing Powles to further explore these questions of belonging and categorization.

¹ See www.census.gov, "About the Topic of Race"

Magnolia, Powles's poetry collection released in 2020, explores similar themes as *Small Bodies of Water* by examining the relationship between place, culture, language, and belonging. This collection delves deeper into Powles's Chinese-Malaysian heritage as she reflects on how her ancestral migrations and resulting multiracial heritage have created gulfs between her and her cultures, preventing her from achieving true belonging to any of her lineages. Powles grieves the loss these chasms create – the loss of language, the loss of connection, the loss of meaning – and mourns her inability to feel whole due to these losses. Through this mourning, Powles unveils the colonial structure as the perpetrator of these cultural losses: the colonial system's rigid and enforced categorizations of her identity have left her fragmented and distant from her individual lineages. Powles contends with the fragmentation of her identity through *Magnolia*'s poetry and attempts reconciliation with her heritages by utilizing water as a bridge between her the pieces of her identity. In my reading of this text, I am interested in how Powles writes the in-between and how she moves through the world as a multiracial entity contending with nonexistence under the colonial framework.

This thesis explores both of Powles's texts in tandem, concentrating on how she employs water imagery to illustrate the fluidity of her multiracial body. In examining this fluid nature, I demonstrate how multiracial mutability acts as a site of racial liberation for the multiracial subject through its use of the in-between racial space, which exists outside of colonial classifications of race. This thesis also delves into how fluidity can leave the multiracial body vulnerable to racial molding by external forces. These colonial forces can exploit the multiracial subject's racial malleability in order to create a racial entity that best suits their purposes. I believe this vulnerability to racial manipulation makes the multiracial body desirable under colonial structures as, by imprinting their racial desires onto the multiracial subject, these

structures strengthen their control over racial categorization and racial power hierarchies. Thus, while a fluid racial identity does create a space for the multiracial body to liberate itself from the confines of colonial categorization, it also serves as a methodology of oppression by the very same institutions the multiracial seeks to unchain itself from. My goal is to explore and juxtapose multiracial fluidity and malleability through Powles's works in order to deconstruct these colonial racializations and hierarchies.

Literature Review and Terminology

Before I delve into my close readings of Powles and my theories on multiracial fluidity and malleability, here is a brief overview of some major discussion topics in mixed race studies that I believe are relevant for my purposes.

To begin, I want to provide some insight into my choice of terminology. Throughout this thesis, I strictly adopt the prefix multi- to identify the multiracial body rather than terminology such as “mixed”, “mixed race”, “biracial”, etc. This is consciously done because I believe multi- is the most inclusive terminology for the multiracial population. Language involving the word “mixed”, specifically, I aim to circumvent because the notion of a “mixed race” implies an existing racial purity, which has historically served as the justification for horrific racial violence and exploitation. As David Parker and Miri Song note in *Rethinking Mixed Race*, “The term ‘mixed race’ is itself contradictory; either it applies to everyone, or [we] must assume at some time past there were pure ‘races’ which when mixed produce a new third ‘race’, a new category that only makes sense by combining existing racial categories” (11). “Mixed” implies a combination of separate, distinct components coming together to form an entity easily broken down into those individual elements. Therefore, by utilizing “mixed” to describe the multiracial body, we can inadvertently give power to the colonial institution who has created these distinct

racial categories that allow for the illusion of racial purity. Using multi- instead of “mixed” includes the multiplicity of multiracial identity, delineating a whole racial being who cannot be simply broken down into distinct racial categories. Multi- is also inclusive of a wide number of racial makeups, whereas terms like “biracial” limit racial identity to two distinct races. In being conscientious of my language, I hope to further contend with and deconstruct colonial notions of racialization and racial purity.

Secondly, I want to draw attention to the post-racial utopia narrative that has surrounded the multiracial body in previous scholarly discourse as well as in general societal dialogue. This myth has origins in José Vasconcelos’s *The Cosmic Race* where Vasconcelos theorized the emergence of a fifth race that would consist of multiracial individuals, the Mestizos, who would create Universópolis, a new society that would transcend race. Through Vasconcelos’s theory, the multiracial body became a site of racial transcendence. Gloria Anzaldúa extended Vasconcelos’s cosmic race theory further in her influential work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*: “The future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (102). Anzaldúa theorized that, in order to transcend race, the multiracial body and “*mestiza* consciousness” must work to deconstruct the dualities present within the colonial system. The multiracial body, therefore, becomes the medium through which colonial racialization can be conquered. While both these theories have contributed valuable and transformative ideas to the literature, their understanding of the *mestizas* as a site of racial transcendence neglects violent racial histories and can, inadvertently, ignore unique cultural distinctions in favor of multiraciality. This romanticization of the multiracial can cause the erasure of distinct Indigenous and Black cultures, which, through the theories, are mixed with European cultures to create the *mestizas*. This continues to center

whiteness and perpetrate anti-Black narratives, problematic tendencies prevalent within the field. By defining the multiracial body as a site of racial transcendence, these theories can oversimplify the complex racial histories and relations of Indigenous and Black communities, elevating the multiracial body over Indigenous and Black bodies.

These theories uplifting multiracial bodies as “emblems of a utopic future”² have been widely criticized by scholars for presenting a dangerous and unrealistic narrative. Multiracial author and mixed race studies scholar, Minelle Mahtani critiques the post-racial utopia narrative for romanticizing multiracial bodies and deeming them responsible for taking on the racial issues of our colonial society. The existence of the multiracial does not inherently equate to an “optimistic racial future”², because, as Mahtani claims, “We are not the purveyors of a new racial order based primarily on our mixed race parentage, nor are we the people of the future. What we do share, if anything, is a similar set of racialized experiences that cannot be understood without unravelling the cultural capital that some, but not all, [multiracial] people share” (6). Mahtani demystifies the conception that multiracial individuals possess elite qualities that allow them to fully dismantle colonial racialized structures. The mere existence of the multiracial body, while it does pose challenges and complications to these colonial institutions, cannot, on its own, transcend race and create a post-racial world. While, in my thesis, I discuss how the multiracial body’s fluidity creates some of these complications to colonial categorization, I do not see this as a complete transcendence of race, nor do I believe the multiracial body is an example of heterosis, the “inherent biological superiority of ‘mixed race’”³ individuals in comparison to monoracial individuals. My exploration of multiracial fluidity is meant to serve as a site for the partial deconstruction of racialized colonial structures, not as an exhaustive solution.

² Mahtani, *Mixed Race Amnesia: Resisting the Romanticization of Multiraciality*, pg. 6

³ Parker and Song, *Rethinking Mixed Race*, pg. 9

Multiracial Fluidity

My dreams take place in the rainy season.

– Nina Minya Powles, *Magnolia*

Homi Bhabha's theory on cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* is centered around the concept of the cultural "Third Space". This in-between space operates as "the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference" (56), and its ambivalent nature creates the site for cultural identity formation. The Third Space exists between the strict categorization of colonial racialization, allowing for the merging of cultural differences into an entirely new entity. Bhabha envisioned the Third Space as a mechanism for the blending of cultures into this hybrid entity that would permit us to "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves". By conceptualizing the cultural Third Space, Bhabha rejects the polarization of cultural identity that is rooted in strict racial categorizations, and instead advocates for cultural hybridity as a reconciliatory methodology for the post-colonial subject. The in-between Third Space serves as a fluid, uncontained site of racial identity that begins deconstructing rigid racial boundaries. To Bhabha, hybridity emphasizes an "*international culture*" existing between nations. This hybrid culture moves away from the "exoticism of multiculturalism" that fetishizes the colonized body and is based, not in cultural diversity, but in the merging of cultures into the in-between Third Space. This produces a new site of identity that exists beyond the polarity of culture.

However, Bhabha's theory has been widely criticized by other postcolonial scholars⁴ who believe that his theory of hybridization reinforces the unequal power dynamics at play in the colonial context. These opponents point to the problematic nature of hybridization in reference to

⁴ See Abdullahi Dahiru Umar and Nuhu Lawan's "Critical Review of Postcolonial Theory of Homi Bhabha's Hybridity: A Study of 'The Location of Culture.'"

post-colonial dependence on imperialist power structures that further oppress the colonized subject. The ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and colonized Bhabha creates through his theory of the Third Space, therefore, neglects the realities of colonial violence and power hierarchies. Additionally, hybridization can lead to the romanticization of the multiracial body as a site of post-racialism, which I have discussed previously. Under Bhabha's theories, the multiracial's role as a conqueror of colonial racialization is reinforced, causing the multiracial body to be seen as proof of complete racial transcendence. This neglects the reality that, while the multiracial can exist outside of colonial notions of race and operate within the in-between space, it does not fully transcend all racialization. Rather, it creates *different* racial conceptions that help to deconstruct the older, colonial ones.

While I acknowledge the critiques of Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and the Third Space, for the purposes of this thesis, I utilize his theories as a starting point for my own work on multiracial fluidity by exploring how the Third Space may serve as a liberating site of racial hybridization. In my reading, the Third Space is not a way out of colonial violence, but instead allows for the impossibility to separate race. Colonial segregation creates a myth that race can be restrained into strict categories, but race is always in flux. Hybridization exposes how these restrictions and categories are products of the colonial system, only coming into play in relation to power and hierarchies, and are not discrete units outside colonialism. Therefore, rather than cultural hybridity being a source of ambiguity between colonial subjects, I examine how hybridization may serve as the origination of a racial entity that resists the colonial enforcement of the separations whose purpose is to maintain unequal power hierarchies. The multiracial body is not composed of independent racial parts like the colonial system desires, but is a whole racial entity that is defined by its ability to permeate these racial restrictions. Through my examination,

I depart from Bhabha's original theory by contesting the temporality of the multiracial subject as an entity emerging after and through the monoracial subject. This allows the multiracial body to begin deconstructing the rigid racial categories of the colonial structure.

Powles engages with the conceptual Third Space in *Small Bodies of Water*. She describes her childhood visits to her grandparents' home in Malaysia through the imagery of a swimming pool, deeming it her "first body of water". This marks ten-year old Powles's introduction to the entity of water, which I analyze as a site of multiracial fluidity and as a physical embodiment of Bhabha's Third Space. Powles reveals that, due to her lack of swimming experience, she fears the openness of the pool and the lack of security usually offered by the land:

I slowly lower myself down the cold metal ladder and swim out after [my cousin], kicking up a spray of white waves behind me, until my toes dip down and there is nothing left to catch me. I reach for the edge [of the pool], gasping. I am happier where there's something solid to hold on to, where I can see our splashes making spiral patterns on the hot concrete. (Powles 1)

Powles's inexperience with water leaves her desperate for the solidity and security of the land, which, on the surface, seems like the natural site of stability in comparison to the volatile water that could potentially drown her. When the bottom of the pool becomes too deep for her body to reach, she is unable to support herself through her own ability and requires the edge of the pool to steady herself. I read the water as a site of fluid racial identity that exists within the Third Space and the land as an embodiment of the strict racial categories that define our post-colonial society. Through this reading, I see young Powles as uncertain in her multiracial body, requiring

the stability of socially-accepted racial boundaries as a source of reassurance in her identity. Not only does she depend upon colonial ideas of race to steady herself, she believes these rigid structures make her happier because they provide an illusion of stability. At this point in her life, Powles conforms to the colonial structuring of race, offering little resistance to its immutability. Although she is happier holding on to the stability of the pool's edge, part of this happiness stems from being able to watch her own efforts splash back against the solidity of the land, illustrating how the seeds of contention begin to emerge within her. While she is not ready, at this point, to oppose colonial racial categorization, by splashing water onto the land, Powles begins to use the fluidity of her multiracial identity to resist the rigidity of colonial racialization.

Powles continues with her narrative by describing her racial heritage as both white and Malaysian Chinese, reflecting on her relationship to the concepts of home and belonging. Returning to Powles's framing questions mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the idea of anchoring oneself to a physical location, to become static and immovable, aligns with the concept of colonial racialization as colonialism places racialized bodies into distinct, bounded categories. These categories are fixed into place, or anchored, rendering the racialized subject powerless and immobile. However, Powles's conception of anchoring her own body diverges from this narrative. Rather than being anchored in either too many locations or nowhere at all, Powles's multiracial body occupies an in-between space defined by neither category. She rejects the idea of ownership over a place, as the question "Which body of water is yours?" implies a type of colonial claiming, and instead begins to embrace her racial fluidity. If racial categories are fixed, as colonialism claims, then Powles's multiracial body is an impossibility. Therefore, her existence and occupation of the Third Space as a multiracial subject deconstructs colonial

notions of race by exposing how strict racial categorization does not exist outside the colonial framework.

Powles further contends with this colonial framework as she reflects on how it has created an institution that views her racial body as fractions of a whole. Myra S. Washington discusses this colonial fracturing of the multiracial body in her work *Blasian Invasion: Racially Mixing in the Celebrity Industrial Complex*: “wholeness belongs to monoracially identified people. Racially mixed people, then, are forced to think of themselves in fractions, parts, and pieces” (38). Washington reveals the powerful colonial notion that authenticity is owed only to racially “pure” bodies because racial purity is seen as the highest standard of legitimacy. Anything outside of racial purity, therefore, must be racially tainted and fragmented under the colonial system. Powles grapples with this notion, despairing, “I can feel all the pieces of myself getting smaller and smaller. How do I carry them all?” (70). The colonial institution not only defines Powles’s multiracial body as a fragmented being composed of separate racial entities, it also, in doing so, chips away at each of her identities slowly, diminishing her heritages until they are shadows of their former selves. There is irony in Powles’s questioning of how she is to carry these broken pieces, because, as mere fragments, they should not carry too much physical weight. However, the stripping of her cultures has created a larger burden, one built on loss, that Powles struggles to cope with. How can she be complicit in the very system that has violently deprived her, and many others, of their rightful heritage? How can she reconcile the pieces of her lineages that represent opposing forces: the colonizer and the colonized?

Although Powles admits she does not have all the answers, she attempts to grapple with these questions and her position as a multiracial subject by unravelling what she does know. Reflecting, again, on the migrations of her childhood, she realizes that each movement has

caused her to feel “both more and less at home” (Powles 78). There is constant tension between all the places Powles has attempted to root herself in; there is always a push and pull within her, compelling her to choose which place is truly home, because, in the eyes of the colonial system, multiplicity cannot exist. Powles’s contention with her fragmented identity returns to her original questioning: “Is it that I’ve anchored myself in too many places at once, or nowhere at all?”. The fracturing of her identity, through both physical relocation and her multiraciality, leaves Powles scattered, unable to find solace in any individual identity. Instead, her existence has been spread thin, stretching her personhood to the point of breakage. She has had to carry the shards of her fragmented self throughout her whole life. Powles contemplates this, musing,

What do I know, but pieces, all at once?... Half sun, half moon. Half forest, half fire. A blue lantern, a jade heart, a peach-pink melamine bowl. The shadowy space in me shimmers; I feel its burn and glow. It is a kōwhai forest in a southern hemisphere summer. It is bloodlines, it is threads, it is pieces of cotton hanging up to dry under a coconut palm. (Powles 78-79)

Powles acknowledges that her life has been defined by discrete pieces, but she is not complicit in this fracturing of her identity. She challenges the colonial belief that multiplicity cannot exist by exerting that she experiences her identities simultaneously, “all at once”. At first, she describes herself in terms of halves, splitting herself neatly into defined boxes like the colonial system does to her multiraciality. The multiracial is often defined by the halves, or the “fractions, parts, and pieces” as Washington notes, of its different racial lineages. In Powles’s case, she is viewed as half white, half Asian by the colonial structure. Half sun and half fire are symbolic of her white

heritage, the colonizer heritage that is seen as the imposing force who dominates and consumes the colonized heritage, half moon, half forest. The ordering of Powles's halves is also significant as, "Half sun, half moon. Half forest, half fire", places the colonized halves between the colonizer halves. The colonizer is boxing in the colonized, creating a rigid boundary around the colonized subject who is unable to escape these unyielding confines. By framing herself in the same way the colonial system does, Powles is adhering to the strict classifications of her racial being. Her internalization of colonial values illustrates how the colonial system enforces its rigid categorizations onto the multiracial body so deeply that the colonized subject begins applying the same violent structuring onto itself.

However, while her description of this simultaneous existence starts with the colonial splitting into halves, Powles's perspective shifts via the shadowy, in-between space within her. She begins this transformation by recognizing herself in various cultural objects. These objects are not halves or pieces. They are whole, albeit distinct, complete entities. Powles's identification with these cultural objects – "a blue lantern, a jade heart, a peach-pink melamine bowl" – rather than colonial halves displays her rejection of colonial categorization. She is beginning to define herself as a whole racial entity rather than fragmented pieces. The shadowy space inside her ignites her desire to break free from the rigid structuring of her identity, allowing her to discover herself in moments and memories that have shaped her history. These moments are her bloodlines, the threads of her identity that, when woven together, create the complex, multiplicity of her multiracial body. Powles rejects the colonial categorization of her racial being into discrete units and embraces the fluidity that allows her to exist within multiple spaces at once.

Once again, I would like to return to the initial questioning that has framed Powles's work. This set of questions about belonging and rooting oneself within a specific body of water

parallels Powles's desire to merge her fragmented identities together to form a whole racial being. The final line in this passage, "over time, springing up from the in-between space, new islands form", empowers Powles to forge her own identity through her fluidity rather than allowing colonial structures to dictate this formation for her. As I mentioned in my analysis previously, I interpret the land as an embodiment of colonial racial categorization because it is a solid entity that is clearly separated by bodies of water (the in-between). In this case, however, the islands are newly formed, originating from the in-between space; they represent the multiracial body as a whole, fully-formed racial being. Under the colonial framework, Powles's racialization is defined by the separations between her heritages, the individual elements of her lineages that combine to form her racial being. But, after contending with the colonial framework, Powles utilizes the Third Space as a site of inception to emerge as a whole racial entity. Therefore, not only does the existence of the multiracial body demystify colonial racializations, it also acts as a site of racial inception for the decolonial subject. Powles's emergence as a whole racial being, however, does not mean she transcends race altogether. Rather, the Third Space acts as medium through which Powles can create a new perception of her multiraciality by defying the pre-existing, colonial ideas of race that devalued her identity.

As Powles grapples with these concepts of familial history, migration, and fragmentation, another theme becomes a prominent source of contention and grief throughout both her works: language. Powles mourns the loss of connection she experiences by lacking fluency in her cultures' languages. She describes, in great detail, her struggle to learn Mandarin during her language study in Shanghai and her inability to speak Hakka, the main dialect of her grandparents in Malaysia. Powles's ancestry is rooted in the history of the Hakka people, one riddled with struggle and diaspora. The Hakka, a Chinese ethnic group, historically faced a

multitude of forced relocations due to violent conflicts between local tribes, peasant uprisings, wars, and economic hardships. These mass migrations led to the Hakka being geographically scattered throughout China and the surrounding lands, leaving them without a permanent settlement to call home. Even the naming of the Hakka is indicative of their nomad-like status: “The word ‘Hakka’ in Chinese is ‘客家’, pronounced *kejia* in Mandarin and meaning ‘guest people’. This is opposed to the word *zhu* ‘主’, meaning owner, which was used to identify local or native residents”⁵. Compared to other ethnic groups in China, the Hakka were seen as migrants simply passing through, not settling permanently in any concentrated area for an extended period of time. This history of forced migration has led to the Hakka dialect also being scattered, with different variants of the dialect being spoken across different regions of Hakka communities. Powles’s grandparents speak a variant of Hakka, which Powles is unable to understand due to her never learning the language. Like the concept of home, “fluency is slippery, unstable” (Powles 200) to her. Due to the language barriers between them, Powles and her grandparents struggle to connect on a deeper, emotional level, causing her an acute sense of loss that becomes the center of many poems in *Magnolia*. One such poem is titled “Dialectal”:

This dialect has no written form / only hands feeling for a sound / only wings
 caught in mosquito nets / only hau sit / chau chau she says setting rice bowls on
 the table one in each hand / ngau heh here a handful of chopsticks dropped into
 the middle / I could search for characters resembling this / I could transcribe this /
 but there is only ahm goi / ahm sai echoing through walls / through cups reaching
 towards ba / towards a phone ringing / ba ma high voices melting through heat
 through breadfruit trees / through knuckles tapping on a marble bench saying hau

⁵ See www.asiasociety.org, “Defining Hakka Identity: From History to Culture and Cuisine

sit / towards saying it back / towards letting my teeth rest on the edge of a word /
 not quite crossing over into / what does it taste like / say it back it it / taste of
 banana skin pull / taste of about to rain

In the poem, Powles describes a typical interaction between herself and her grandparents, focusing on how the language between them is felt rather than having strict linguistic form. Powles's hands feel around the language of their dialect, as though she were blind, feeling for the shape of their words, for some semblance of structure to make sense of. But there is no written form for her to grasp. Instead there is only a feeling of being trapped like a mosquito in a net, stuck in her inability to understand Hakka. But despite her lack of their language, Powles's grandparents still invite her to sit with them, to eat with them, to share community with them. The language barrier is not a complete barrier of kinship or love. But, as they all sit down together for a meal, Powles still has an intense desire to transcribe their interaction and find the right characters to record this memory. She seeks language, structured language, as a method of categorization; if she were to transcribe this moment, she would place it into a neat box where meanings are definite and boundaries are concrete. But, despite her desire, she chooses not to do this. Instead, the poem focuses on the sensory details of the scene, concentrating on pure sound rather than language. Powles remembers the phone's sharp ringing, the voices of her grandparents gliding through the summer air, the knocking of her grandmother's knuckles on a bench as an invitation to sit together. All of these sounds reflect moments of connection and human relationships even without the aid of a common, structured language. There is beauty in these moments of pure connection that are unburdened with the responsibility of transcription.

But despite their beauty, Powles still experiences feelings of loss and isolation. Although she can experience these moments of connection with her grandparents, the language barrier always remains between them. Powles is acutely reminded of this sorrowful fact when her grandmother asks her to sit with her and she wishes she could say it back. Specifically, Powles says “*towards* saying it back”, emphasizing a directional relationship where Powles progresses forward in a linear fashion to achieve language fluency. This use of “*towards*” appeared earlier in the poem as well: “*towards* a phone ringing”. In the initial reading of the poem, this line seems to fit into all the other auditory depictions being described to illustrate Powles’s connection with her grandparents despite their language barrier. However, the “*towards*” in this line creates another meaning, one focusing on the linear progression that will end in the phone’s ringing, implying a call and a conversation between Powles and her family in which there is no language barrier. However, the “*towards*” could also be read in a nonlinear, anti-colonial manner because, while Powles is attempting to move linearly to achieve language fluency, she is also attempting to learn a dialect of the past, a dialect considered unworthy by the colonial framework. In attempting to connect to her ancestral roots, she rejects the colonial notion of linear time and progress. Powles, in moving against the colonial notion of progress, rejects language as a closed system⁶, and, instead, embraces Hakka as a dialect unbound by colonial definitions.

The poem then shifts from describing auditory experiences to gustatory ones to illustrate Powles’s persisting desire to connect with her grandparents on a linguistic level. Her teeth touch the edges of the words she wants taste, but she can never quite bite down on them. “What does it taste like?”, she wonders, but will never know. Powles’s understanding that she will never

⁶ In his work on translation, Naoki Sakai discusses the development of what he terms the “modern regime of translation”, demonstrating how, prior to the 18th century, there was no “explicit conceptualization of language as a closed systematic unity” and “no explicit conceptualization of national language”. The concept of language as a closed system originated via the colonial system.

achieve fluency or even proficiency in Hakka leaves her desperate. She pleads to herself to “say it back it it”. “It” becomes a placeholder for all the things Powles wishes to say but can’t, a placeholder for emotional connection and intimacy. The repetition of “it” displays Powles’s frustration as she repeatedly pushes herself to speak, to understand, to communicate, but she can never quite taste the words. What she can taste is “banana skin pull” and “about to rain”, both of which represent phases of almost: the moment before you eat a banana by pulling back its skin, the moment before the downpour begins. But these moments never quite cross over; they stay in this perpetual state of almost, in a state of before. In this way, Powles is also trapped in a constant state of almost due to her lack of fluency. She can almost connect with her grandparents the way she desires, but can never quite cross the language barrier that separates them. For Powles, this is a site of mourning.

The migrations of Powles’s family and the migrations of her childhood under the colonial institution created the condition of possibility for Powles’s loss of language and disconnect from her Hakka roots. Historically, colonialism has caused the mass migration of many groups of people who have had to uproot their lives and lose their culture for the chance of survival. Powles’s existence as a multiracial subject along with her lack of language are byproducts of this historical violence. In the Hakka’s case specifically, Chinese imperialism and the violent power struggles within China caused their forced migration and scattering throughout the country and elsewhere. In Powles’s case, Western colonialism reinforced this scattering as a foundation for the further exploitation of her people and her own cultural identity by denying the Hakka legitimacy via the rigid categorization of both race and language. The colonial system methodically categorizes and isolates the colonized subject as a mechanism of severance in order to render the colonized powerless over their own culture and identity. Loss of language falls into

this methodology. By denying the Hakka dialect legitimacy under its framework, the colonial structure seeks to further isolate its people in order to force them into submission. But often, in the aftermath of colonial violence, the colonized subject seeks to regain its culture and autonomy, and one way of achieving this is through the reclaiming of language. Although the Hakka people were separated from one another due to these migrations caused by violence, they maintained their culture and language to preserve their cultural identity. This is the language Powles's grandparents speak, the language she lacks the access to.

Powles reveals that she grew up believing English and Mandarin were the defining languages of her identity, with Hakka coming second because it is merely a dialect and not a formal language. But, as she comes to unravel the history of her grandparents and the history of the Hakka, Powles undergoes a revelation:

I used to think of dialects as languages without standardized writing systems, rendering them incomplete, less developed. But a dialect is not just a *regional language*. Dialect is family, is blood, is history... I understand now that being Hakka means we don't all come from one place, but rather, from scattered villages and scattered islands. It means we don't all speak one language, but many regional variants of multiple languages. (Powles 201, 246)

Through this realization, Powles understands that her history is founded upon the migrations of the past and that these migrations, while they did geographically scatter the Hakka people, did not create a fragmented community. Although Hakka is a dialect without a formal writing system, its lack of standardized form does not render it incomplete or underdeveloped.

Standardization forces conformity upon its subject, making it a colonial methodology, so Hakka's lack of standardization jeopardizes its validity only within the colonial framework. Outside this framework, Hakka is a rich dialect, reflecting the deep history of the Hakka people. Through this newfound understanding of Hakka and her own heritage, Powles is able to deconstruct the colonial belief of legitimacy only belonging to the "whole" or the formally structured. This act of deconstruction also serves as an act of reclaiming; Powles reclaims her Hakka roots despite colonialism's attempt to fragment her community.

The systematic fracturing of a people and their language mirrors the racial fracturing of the multiracial body I examined earlier. The colonial institution does allow for multiplicity, which both Powles as a multiracial body and the Hakka people as a scattered people embody. Powles utilizes her Hakka roots and experiences with the Hakka dialect to illustrate how the colonial framework works to fragment peoples and cultures in order to maintain power. In separating races and languages through strict categorization, colonialism aims to divide and conquer, but the multiracial body contends with this by demonstrating how these categories can exist simultaneously. The Hakka, too, are able to simultaneously exist although geographically separated, and validity of their culture and identity remains unchanged despite the physical distance between them. In both cases, the cultural components that make up Powles and the Hakka, although divided in a way the colonial system would deem incompatible, come together within the in-between space of the ocean that separates them. The water serves as a holding space for all these seemingly incongruous elements, allowing them to exist all at once.

In *Small Bodies of Water*, Powles reflects on the Chinese water radical and its construction of thousands of characters, including words meaning "to live, to exist, to concentrate, to mix, to strain" (Powles 12). This is the purpose of the in-between space, the

purpose of hybridity: to encompass a multiplicity of concepts, of seemingly contradictory ideas, and merge them together in an ever evolving site of mutability. Powles continues her reflection on Mandarin, specifically focusing on the language of water radicals, realizing, “It’s an inherited language, one I’ve carried inside me all along. It carries no distinction between past and present tense, nor between singular and plural; as a result it contains all the places I call home, as well as all my memories, and all my names” (12). Powles’s reaction to the language of water radicals illustrates her coming to terms with the fluidity of her multiracial body. The water is an innate aspect of her being that she has contained throughout her whole life, although she was not always aware of it. It provides a fluid, hybrid space lacking distinction between past and present, singular and plural, allowing Powles to move freely through her racial identity despite the colonial structures that attempt to enforce rigid classifications. This in-between space has become her home, containing all her experiences and all of her identities. Through this, Powles deconstructs the binaries of the colonial framework and finds solace in the Third Space away from the rigidity of racial categorization. Language, which the colonial system has exploited as a method of separation, becomes a methodology through which Powles can liberate herself from the very system that confines her.

Powles’s transformation from a timid, insecure child who found comfort in the edge of the pool’s illusion of stability, to an assured and confident adult who actively seeks the water’s vastness as a site of liberation, is illustrated in her exploration of the Ladies’s Pond in Hampstead Heath. As she enters the grounds, she feels a sense of sacredness in the waters and the nature surrounding it. In the moment Powles submerges herself within the pond, she gains an acute consciousness of her being:

I become aware of what my body looks like: disappearing, half-swallowed by the deep. Here, there's nothing to push myself off from. I can't touch the bottom, I can't see more than a few inches ahead of me underwater. I am not sure where the shape of me ends and the dark water begins. The only sure thing is my body. I hold my breath and swim out towards the place where the sun touches the surface.

(Powles 9)

As a child, the pool was a site of fear and uncertainty because it lacked the security of the land. In that moment, Powles moved through her multiracial body unsure how to reconcile the parts of herself deemed contradictory and incompatible by the colonial institution. But now, as an adult, Powles has gained consciousness of her condition as a multiracial subject living under colonialism. She watches the edges of her body slowly disappear, merging with the water of the pond and becoming one with its fluid force. Just like the pool from the first scene, there is nothing that will catch her, nothing solid to push off from, no bottom floor to find stability in. Yet, Powles finds certainty within the pond and is finally sure of her own body. She becomes one with the water, embracing her fluid, multiracial identity that is an impossibility within the colonial framework. She dives even deeper into the abyss of the pond, unafraid of where the water will take her. In this way, Powles rejects the strict racial categorization enforced by the colonial system, and, instead, accepts her multiracial fluidity as the site of her racial autonomy.

Multiracial Malleability

Once a guy told me mixed girls are the most beautiful / because
they aren't really white / but they aren't really Asian either

– Nina Mingya Powles, *Magnolia*

Through my utilization of and departure from Bhabha's theory of the Third Space, I have examined how Powles's fluidity within the in-between liberates her from the colonial institution while also deconstructing the strict racial categorization that previously bound her. However, the mutability of Powles's multiracial body also leaves her vulnerable to racial molding from the same colonial institution she seeks liberation from. Being racially malleable makes it easier for external forces to shape Powles's racial identity in exploitative ways that reinforce colonial power hierarchies and harmful racial stereotypes. In the above quote from *Magnolia*, Powles reveals how her multiraciality is fetishized by a romantic prospect who believes multiracial individuals are more desirable than monoracial individuals because they do not fit neatly into racial categories. His description of her as not "really white" and not "really Asian" reveals how he sees Powles as racial fragments rather than a whole racial entity. The framing of her body as fragmented is reflective of the colonial institution's view of the multiracial body, which Powles contended with earlier in this work. But her fragmentation is perceived as desirable in this instance because her racial ambiguity allows her romantic partner to inject his own racializations onto her body. Because she is neither truly white or Asian in his eyes, she is not confined to strict racial categorization, so he can manipulate her racial identity to best serve his interests.

This racial manipulation occurs in other lines within this poem, the opening poem of *Magnolia* titled "Girl Warrior, or: Watching *Mulan* (1998) in Chinese with English Subtitles". In the poem, Powles describes her childhood experience of watching *Mulan*, focusing on Mulan's

“boyfriend with the big American arms” and “how the villain has skin as dark as coal / and such small eyes / he has no irises” (4). Even as a child, Powles is picking up on how the colonial institution utilizes racialization to create harmful stereotypes and reinforce the racial hierarchy. The male protagonist of the film, Li Shang, has “American arms” to emphasize his heroism whereas the villain, Shan Yu, has dark skin and small eyes, characteristics of racial minorities that have historically been caricatured and deemed inferior. The anti-Black nature of the colonial framework posits whiteness as heroic and deserving of sympathy whereas blackness is associated with villainy and deserving of hostility. This Orientalist⁷ methodology of othering non-Western cultures is not unique to *Mulan*. It is prevalent within the entirety of the colonial institution: in media, in entertainment, in politics, in the very fabric of the colonial framework. The colonial institution employs this method of racial molding, specifically anti-Black molding, to create controlled narratives that keep rigid power structures in place and maintain white superiority. While the monoracial subject is also subjugated to this colonial molding, the multiracial subject is even more vulnerable to this exploitation because of its racial ambiguity. Existing within the in-between space exposes the multiracial body to a higher degree of forceful racial malleability via oppressive structures because it lacks a rigid, concretely defined racial identity. Returning to the first quote, Powles’s partner finds her multiracial body more desirable because he can manipulate her racial identity to align with his personal desires. He can cherry pick the racial qualities from either her white lineage or her Asian lineage to mold her identity into who he wants her to be. Therefore, Powles’s multiracial malleability is at the root of her multiracial fetishization and exploitation.

Washington explores this racial manipulation of the multiracial body through an examination of Tiger Woods’s public image before and after his infidelity scandal. Woods, born

⁷ See Edward W. Said’s *Orientalism*

to a Black father and Thai mother, has undergone a variety of what Washington terms “racial brandings”, which theorizes that racial labels are given legibility and value through cultural and social transformation. Branding is a capitalistic concept because it creates “identit[ies] with currency (albeit different levels of currency)” (Washington 16) that are then commodified by capitalistic colonial structures and exploited. Pre-scandal, Woods’s multiraciality was perceived as an emblem of post-raciality, upholding the myth of racial transcendence. Corporations capitalized on his multiracial brand by marketing him as the symbol of diversity and creating a “sanitized racialized narrative” (Washington 72) that distanced him from his Blackness in order to be more palatable to a white audience. In this way, Woods’s multiraciality was being fetishized and racially molded to suit the monetary interests of these corporations. Post-scandal Woods, however, underwent a radically different racial transformation in the eyes of the media:

His affairs made it impossible to distance him from both Blackness, via the hypersexuality of Black masculinity, and Asianness through narratives of sexual ineptitude. The multiple ways in which Blackness and Asianness were used to make sense of Woods simultaneously reifies and resists hegemonic racial constructions. (Washington 70)

Once Woods’s infidelity was revealed to the public, his multiracial identity was manipulated to reinforce colonial racial stereotypes. The media emphasized his Blackness to accuse him of hypersexuality, sexual immorality, and criminality, which have historically been associated with Black males. By leaning into Woods’s Black lineage as an explanation for his infidelity, the media molded his racial identity in order to vilify and attack Blackness, reifying colonial

constructions of racial categories. The press also manipulated Woods's Asian heritage by utilizing it as a site for his sexual emasculation. Many comedy sketches about the scandal involved jokes linking Woods's Asianness to his inability to attract women pre-fame or feminizing his communication with his mistresses⁸. In both cases, the public manipulated Woods's multiracial identity to fit into racial narratives that, as Washington notes, both reify and resist hegemonic racial constructions. The malleable nature of multiraciality, therefore, leaves both Woods and Powles vulnerable to racial exploitation.

Powles illustrates this exploitative racial molding in *Small Bodies of Water* by depicting her recurring nightmares about tsunamis and trapped whales. Growing up in New Zealand right along the Wellington Fault provided her an intimate relationship with earthquakes, which serves as the foundation for much of her fear and anxiety surrounding the volatility of water. Powles reveals that, throughout much of her adult life, she has recurring dreams where she is "always stuck still, unable to move" (14) as a storm brews and the ocean begins to rise up over her. She also frequently dreams of whales in various forms, sometimes beaching themselves against the shore, sometimes stuck, like her, unable to return to the sea:

[The sea] is so flat and still that if I touched my palm to the surface it might feel like solid glass... The tide begins pulling at my ankles, peeling back towards the island, all the way out. I can just make out a black wave on the horizon rising up out of the sea. It begins to take shape: a column of black water so tall it touches the sky, coming closer to me, and I can't move... In another dream, the sea has flooded our garden and a pod of orca have swum right up through the gate – but the water is too shallow for them to swim back out. I watch them begin to flail. In

⁸ See Washington's *Blasian Invasion : Racial Mixing in the Celebrity Industrial Complex*, pg. 81

another, I am visiting some kind of run-down urban zoo, where an orca is being kept in a narrow blue tank only partially filled with water. Panic doesn't hit during the dream itself, but after waking. (Powles 13, 18)

I read the water similarly to my discussion on multiracial fluidity: as a sight of racial mutability where the multiracial's identity is in constant flux. However, in this case, this mutability is wielded against the multiracial by acting as an oppressive power that forcefully manipulates the multiracial's identity. Powles's dream opens up with her description of the ocean's surface as "solid glass", illustrating how the water's fluidity, which once served as a site of her racial liberation, has been transformed into a different entity: a solid force with a defined physical shape that mirrors the solidity of colonialism's strict racial categories. Then, the tide begins pulling at her feet, trying to drag her body towards its gathering mass, towards the island in the distance, which I previously read as an embodiment of rigid racial stratification. In its attempt to drag Powles towards the land, the water has become an agent of the colonial institution. It continues to lose its fluidity by forming into a column of water, taking concrete shape as it approaches the immobile Powles. This nightmare is the antithesis of multiracial fluidity; both Powles and the in-between space are no longer mutable and have been forced into the rigidity of the colonial system.

Powles's dreams about the trapped whales further embodies her experience of multiracial malleability by continuing to depict the water as a confining, malevolent force. In the first dream about whales, the orca have swam up onto the land via the flood but are unable to return to the ocean due to the shallowness of the water. I read the whales as an embodiment of Powles herself and, by extension, the multiracial body. In my reading of this dream, the water is initially a site

of racial fluidity that overcomes the colonial structure of the land through the flood imagery. The whales swim freely over the land via the flood, symbolizing Powles's liberation from rigid colonial racial categories through her multiracial fluidity. But then, the water turns against both the whales and Powles, as its shallowness obstructs the passage to the open ocean. The whales are still within the water, so there is still an element of mutability, however, the shallowness prevents full fluidity as the whales are now confined to swimming only in the shallow space above the land. Now, the multiracial fluidity, which initially overcame the physicality of the island, transforms into multiracial malleability. There is still an element of plasticity present, but there is a defined shape the water is being modeled into, embodying how external sources mold the multiracial's fluidity into a confined form. Like her tsunami dream, Powles is immobile, only able to watch helplessly as the whales struggle to return to the sea. She, too, is being bound by the rigidity of the colonial institution.

In the second whale dream, Powles finds herself in an abandoned zoo where she witnesses the entrapment of a singular orca whale. This whale is enclosed in a narrow, confining tank only partially filled with water, mirroring the shallowness of the water the whales from her first dream were swimming in. In both dreams, the whales, and therefore Powles by extension, are stuck in this malleable state where they lack access to enough fluidity to free themselves from their enclosure. But this second whale dream has some significant differences from the first. This time, there is only a singular whale in the tank compared to the pod of orca. Because of its seclusion, this whale is even more isolated and confined than the pod, who at least are together in their confinement. The solitary whale is at the final stage of colonial separation: it is enclosed within the strict boundaries of its restrictive tank, fully severed from any other entity.

This whale is also being held in the middle of a city, an unnatural habitat for an ocean animal, illustrating the abnormality of its entrapment. Specifically, it is enclosed within a zoo, where animals are typically confined for entertainment purposes and spectacle. The whale's forced enclosure and exploitation, therefore, is a source of profit for its oppressor. The water's role as a passage through which racialized exploitation, specifically racialized exploitation of labor, occurs mirrors the role of the Atlantic Ocean in the Middle Passage. In both cases, the victims of racialized oppression and commodification are carried through a body of water that becomes a symbol of their exploitation. The water, then, becomes a malevolent force, an anti-Black capitalistic force, that serves as a medium of racialized violence. Powles has a personal connection to water's malevolence through her Hakka heritage. The Hakka, similar to the enslaved Africans who underwent the Middle Passage, faced mass displacement and forced migration throughout various points in history. The Hakka, the enslaved Africans, and the orca all experience a solidarity through colonial history, a solidarity with Black history and the anti-Black narratives perpetrated by the legacies of colonial violence. The orca itself is also black and white in coloring, a symbol of multiraciality, further demonstrating how Powles's dreams of trapped orcas symbolizes her contention with anti-Black colonial histories and multiracial malleability.

The progression of Powles's dreams illustrates how the colonial system slowly contaminates multiracial fluidity and transforms it into malleability. First, Powles is immobile while the water begins taking physical form and attempts to pull her towards the land. Then, the scene shifts to depict whales trapped on the land in the shallow aftermath of a flood, stuck but still in ocean water. Finally, there is a solitary whale enclosed within a zoo, a man-made construction of nature, entombed within an artificial body of water and cut off completely from

the ocean. In all three dreams, Powles is immobile, a helpless observer of this subjugation, but, as she notes, “panic doesn't hit during the dream itself, but after waking”. Because the colonial system is woven into the very fabric of our society, it is seen as the standard, often the unquestionable standard, of how our society functions. The dream, then, illustrates the restrictive and controlling reality of the colonial framework that Powles is unaware of until she awakens from the illusion of colonial normalcy and innateness. Once she realizes these limiting frameworks are not inherent to the human condition, panic sets in because she discovers how she has been restrained and molded by the colonial system.

Powles further contends with this notion of multiracial malleability and the limitations imposed on her by the colonial framework by reflecting on how the very structure of the pool is one of strict boundaries and standards:

The public pool is governed by rigid structures of gender, class, whiteness, the various shapes of our bodies. As Ellena Savage writes, ‘In the history of pool rules, there have been and remain, rules of non-admission, rules of active discrimination. Not to let Aboriginal people in. Not to let female people in. Not to let trans people in. Not to let people in who can’t afford to pay.’ (Powles 110)

Powles acknowledges that the public pool, a body of water that has previously granted her feelings of multiracial fluidity and liberation, is also a site of colonial power. The pool’s very invention was built upon strict enforcements of power and exclusion, preying upon those the colonial structure deemed inferior. The regulations of the public pool, therefore, mirror the beliefs and standards of the society that created it. These restrictions are not limited purely to

race, although racial restrictions have indeed been a major element of public pool rules; the restrictions pertain to all categories of oppressed peoples on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. These “rules of non-admission” embody the rigid power hierarchies enforced by the colonial framework and illustrate how these hierarchies are infused in every area of life, even in recreational structures. I would like to return to the first scene in *Small Bodies of Water* where Powles is learning how to swim. Here, as I’ve analyzed previously, young Powles is uncertain in her multiracial body and clings to the edge of the pool as a stabilizer. The land’s solidity is still reflective of the boundaries of the colonial framework, but now, through Powles’s reflections on the public pool as an adult, we see just how rigid the pool’s edge is. Not only is Powles clinging to the familiarity of the colonial structure, she is also, unbeknownst to her at the time, being “governed by rigid structures of gender, class, whiteness”. She is controlled by the structure she seeks refuge from and, through her compliance, submits to the hierarchy. Although the pool does eventually become a site of fluidity and deconstruction for adult Powles, *Small Bodies of Water* opens with this scene to illustrate how the public pool’s purpose is to restrict and reinforce the colonial framework. Powles’s later utilization of it for her racial liberation deconstructs the colonial foundation that served as the inception site for the public pool.

The Multiracial Mythic

Half ghost, half girl. The river is visible through her skin.

– Nina Mingya Powles, *Small Bodies of Water*

In contending with the simultaneous nature of her multiracial fluidity and malleability, Powles both deconstructs the colonial notions of racial categorization through her multiracial body while also revealing how her multiraciality is implemented against her via the same oppressive structures she attempts to deconstruct. I propose that this site of simultaneous existence is demonstrated through the multiracial mythic. In my development of this theory, I have been inspired by the theories presented in Anne Cheng's *Ornamentality*. Cheng theorizes that the Asian woman is viewed as ornamental in Western culture: a decorative piece, a style, an ornament. Through this theory, Cheng coins the term "perihumanity", in which the Asian woman is on the periphery of humanness, teetering on the edge between human and object, living and nonliving. In this way, the Asian woman is fetishized for her physicality and aesthetic while being reduced to a mere object: "she circles but is excluded from humanity. She represents feminine values but is often not considered a woman at all" (Cheng 2-3). Cheng draws inspiration for her work from Monique Allewaert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics*, in which Allewaert theorizes the African body as "parahuman", existing on the same plane as both humanness and animalness. Allewaert's parahuman contends with the dehumanization of the African body via colonialism's imposition of animalistic qualities onto these bodies in the same way Cheng's perihuman contends with the objectification of the Asian body via Western fetishization. Both theories work through the in-between space that exists outside the boundaries of concrete entities (humanness, animalness,

and objectness) in the same way the multiracial occupies the in-between Third Space that exists beyond the discrete units of race. Through this occupation, I theorize that what the Asian body is to objects and what the African body is to animals is what the multiracial body is to the mythic. In my reading, the mythic represents the border between fantasy and reality, the embodiment of mythological creatures who exhibit elements of humanity without being fully human. This simultaneous occupation of both fantasy and reality is the medium through which the multiracial's fluidity and malleability operates.

Powles explores her own identity as a multiracial mythic in both *Small Bodies of Water* and *Magnolia*. In the former, she discusses her childhood friend group during her language study in Shanghai and how they find refuge in swimming:

We were thirteen, almost fourteen, but underwater we pretended we were something other than human. Or maybe we weren't pretending at all. Underwater everything was different, bathed in holy silence... We felt the way our limbs moved, lithe and strong and brand new. We pushed off from the edge into the blue again and again, diving deeper and deeper each time. (Powles 4)

At this tumultuous and uncertain age, Powles and her friends find reassurance in pretending they are something they are not. The water provides them a medium through which the borders of fantasy and reality are blurred, a site of ambivalence where the boundaries of their humanity merge with the fluidity of the water. There is uncertainty as to whether or not their pretending is real; perhaps the water is a site through which Powles and her friends are able to reveal their true selves, or perhaps it is all imaginary. The ambiguity in this scene illustrates how the mythic

operates within Powles's multiraciality. She exists simultaneously as human and not human. She is both living and nonliving. The water acts as a fluid entity she can merge into, allowing her to step into the space of the multiracial mythic. Here, Powles's identity lacks clear definition, and she can exist freely as her true form without the restricting rules of the colonial world. There is something sacred and spiritual about this experience as she describes her group being "bathed in holy silence", transcending the boundaries of their physical form to enter into the Third Space. Through this transformation, Powles and her friends undergo a rebirth into new entities, stronger forms of themselves who move through their bodies differently than before. They use this new physical form to push away from the edge of the pool, away from the rigidity of the colonial framework, deeper and deeper into the in-between. In this sacred space, they exist freely and ambiguously, unrestrained from concrete classifications or strict boundaries.

As Powles grows older, she begins to search for "myths of women who are neither human nor fish, but both" (Powles 9-10), finding a wealth of Asian folklore revolving around these mermaid-like creatures. She describes the dugongs of Malaysia and Indonesia, the underwater silk-weavers of China, the ningyo of Japan, all of which are mythical half human, half fish creatures⁹. The variety of mermaid folklore scattered throughout these distinct cultures points to the prevalence of the mythic throughout history and how the border between fantasy and reality is not newly contested. But Powles's research on these creatures does not end with myth. Instead, she uncovers these mythical creatures embodied in real histories and real women: the Ama, Japanese sea women who dove for pearls in their bare skin, and the Haenyeo, Korean free divers often portrayed as "figures from a forgotten past"⁹. These real, historical women embody the boundary between fantasy and reality. They blur the line between what it means to be human and what it means to be mythical. Powles's reflection on both these histories and

⁹ See *Small Bodies of Water*, pg. 10

mythologies illustrates her own contention with and occupation of this boundary. Her multiraciality grants her the fluidity to permeate borders such as this one, to occupy multiple spaces simultaneously despite perceived contradictions.

However, even in her occupation of the mythic, the colonial system still attempts to enforce its rigidity of categorization onto Powles. She remembers swimming with her cousin, holding her legs together to imitate a powerful mermaid's tail, but still feeling uncertain in her embodiment: "We spent hours pretending to be mermaids. But I thought of myself less as a mermaid and more like some kind of ungraceful water creature, since I didn't have very long hair and wasn't such a good swimmer. Perhaps half orca, half girl" (Powles 3). Even though Powles is occupying the space of the mythic through her multiraciality, she remains uncertain in openly claiming this occupation. Rather than believing herself a mermaid, like the various diver women Powles explored earlier, she sees herself as an "ungraceful water creature" because she lacks the visual aesthetics and abilities of a stereotypical mermaid. This illustrates the colonial framework's attempt to enforce its strict classification onto Powles as she initially rejects the mythic because she feels she does not fit into the requirements a mermaid is supposed to fulfill. These requirements are not based on folklore, as the inclusivity and breadth of the term mermaid is clearly seen in the vast variety of cultural depictions, rather, they are restrictions based on discrete categorization via colonial power. Because Powles believes, at this point, that she must fulfill these arbitrary requirements in order to qualify as a mermaid, she initially rejects the mythicity of her multiracial body. However, this is not a complete rejection because Powles concedes that she does view herself, not as a mermaid, but as "half orca, half girl" instead. In doing so, Powles still occupies the state of the mythic since she embraces the ambiguity of her multiracial body and straddles the line between human and nonhuman. Her identification with

the orca, specifically, is also symbolic as, in my previous analysis of multiracial malleability, the orcas in Powles's dreams represent herself and her multiraciality. This further identification with the orca strengthens their symbolic relationship, making them one and the same.

In the chapter of *Small Bodies of Water* titled "The Plum Rains", Powles explores her relationship to the multiracial mythic further by examining the characterization of female heroines in Hayao Miyazaki's films and the medium of animation as a site of deconstruction. Through Miyazaki's movies, animation serves as an alternate reality, a fantastical reality, where the challenging of colonial ideologies is more clearly visible. Powles's reflection on these films contrasts her reflection on *Mulan*: whereas, in *Mulan*, animation is utilized to reinforce stereotypical ideas of race, in Miyazaki's films, animation becomes a site of transformation and deconstruction of traditional views. This dual use of animation parallels the duality of the multiracial mythic, who embodies both multiracial fluidity and malleability simultaneously. The fantastical element of animation can be used to either enforce strict categories or defy them, just as the multiracial mythic can be used to reinforce racialization or deconstruct it. This chapter alternates between Powles's reflection on different Miyazaki heroines and her own lived experience in Shanghai during the plum rain season, a period of heavy rainfall in eastern China. Powles's analysis of both Miyazaki's characters and her own life in Shanghai utilize water as a site of transformation and as a medium through which borders are blurred. Specifically, in Miyazaki's films, "water becomes a boundary between the real world and the spirit world" (Powles 91), allowing his heroines to flow between each domain with ease, constantly in flux. In the film *Spirited Away*, the main protagonist Chihiro enters the spirit world after a wall of water blocks her attempted escape. Once trapped in the spirit realm, "her body begins to lose its solid form; she is slowly turning transparent. Half ghost, half girl. The river is visible through her

skin” (Powles 91). As Chihiro crosses the border between the living world and the spirit world, she becomes transparent, lacking the defined physicality her original body possessed. She enters an ambiguous state, neither fully living or dead; she is “half ghost, half girl”, defying the boundaries of the real world. The river can be seen within her, illustrating how the water acts as a transformative force in Miyazaki’s films that allows his heroines to traverse boundaries previously thought to be impenetrable.

This use of water as a medium of transformation appears in Miyazaki’s other film, *Princess Mononoke*, where the main heroine, San, blurs the boundary between human and animal. In the film, San first appears riding on a giant white wolf through heavy mist and clouds. She emerges from this mist to meet the main character of the movie, and it quickly becomes apparent that San is not an ordinary human. As Powles describes her, “she is not wolf, but nor does she see herself as fully human” (95). San occupies both humanness and animalness through her nature and actions; rather than claiming one discrete category of identity, she claims both, defying concrete boundaries just as Chihiro did. Powles explores San’s characterization further in *Magnolia* with a poem titled “Wolfgirl”. This poem delves deeper into Powles’s imagining of San outside of what is depicted in *Princess Mononoke*. Powles envisions San doing simple tasks, such as making supper or planting bulbs in her garden, but, despite the appearance of simplicity, San’s actions in the poem are conscious acts of connection with the forest. As she makes supper, “the forest comes closer / and waits”; as she plants bulbs, the names of each plant “repeat inside her / like an incantation” (Powles 36-37). Although San’s actions are distinctly human in appearance, they also serve to strengthen her connection to the nature around her, reinforcing her animal-like nature. She is neither fully human nor animal. In the fantasy realm of film, she occupies both identities simultaneously, rejecting the rigid classifications of the real world.

Powles sees herself in both Chihiro and San, as she views their transformations and rejection of borders through her own multiracial experience. By alternating between each heroine and her own experience, Powles reflects on how the plum rains in her life act as a similar force compared to the water in Miyazaki's films. The plum rains, to Powles, serve as an almost fantastical force of nature, one that quickly transforms the landscape from an ordinary, realistic one to one "where reality feels altered" (Powles 94). Through the plum rains, Powles's reality shifts, blurring the lines between what is real and what is fantasy, just as the water in Miyazaki's films blurs the lines between living and nonliving, human and animal. By comparing her own life to these films, Powles applies the same transformation of Chihiro and San to herself. She, too, defies the discrete boundaries of identity. Her multiraciality takes on this mythical form, one that is in constant flux, and allows her to reject the rigid classifications of colonial racialization.

By working through the cultural histories of the past, the mythic deconstructs colonial notions of race by blurring the boundaries between human and animal, living and nonliving. But it does not stop there. The mythic also occupies a futuristic space, one based on blurring the lines between human and machine. This futuristic occupation is seen in Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, which presents the cyborg as a medium through which traditional social boundaries are critiqued and rejected. I read the cyborg as a manifestation of the mythic. The cyborg represents the deconstruction of these binaries by revealing that they are merely social constructions reinforced via the colonial framework to maintain power:

A cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle

is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters. (Haraway 154)

The cyborg embodies a new reality where bodies can simultaneously occupy multiple, seemingly contradictory spaces. The definition of identity and what it means to be human is therefore redefined, making room for this joint occupation. These “permanently partial identities” are not constructed via socially manufacturing; they are not cleanly cut and neatly packaged. Rather, they are contradictory and complex, overlapping one another and tangling each other’s borders with their own. Haraway emphasizes the need for these blurred identities by revealing how a single perspective is illusionary and limiting. From one viewpoint, one cannot understand the multiplicity of identity nor the complexity of humanity. Therefore, the cyborg, and by extension, the mythic, unveils the necessity to occupy multiple spaces and obscure the defined lines that delineate categories. Without this demystification, we have single vision, which “produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters”, meaning that our perception of reality is so limited we perceive illusions rather than truth. The cyborg serves as a medium through which bodies can merge into joint identities and, therefore, broaden our perspective to include the unimaginable possibilities of other vantage points.

Powles utilizes the cyborg in her own work to further illustrate the multiracial mythic. In the chapter “Crushed Little Stars”, she reflects on a collection of memories revolving around her multiraciality. Each memory is a piece of herself, merging together to construct Powles’s view of her multiracial body. In one memory, she recalls seeing one of the *X-Men* movies and being

drawn to multiracial actress Olivia Munn, who plays a mutant character who can shoot purple light from her palms. With these supernatural abilities, Munn's character is an embodiment of the mythical and the cyborgian, distinguishing her from normal human beings. She is humanoid, not fully human. In the fantastical medium of film, Munn is beyond the category human, beyond the confines of identity. During her bike ride home, Powles finds pieces of herself in Munn as she reflects on the movie: "Speeding on my bike down the empty street was at that time the closest feeling I could find to swimming. With the wind in my hair and light rain beginning to sprinkle my skin, I felt like I was full of purple light, spreading outwards from the middle of my body" (Powles 69). Even though Powles is not currently occupying a body of water, the fluidity of water is still present in this scene as Powles identifies her bike ride as an adequate substitute for swimming. This substitute serves as the in-between space, and the rain that begins to lightly fall on Powles reinforces the water imagery. Powles is entering a transformative space, one closely connected to Munn's embodiment of the cyborg and multiracial mythic. She transforms into purple light, mirroring the mutant's ability to shoot purple rays from her palms. She occupies a humanoid space between the borders of fantasy and reality. Similar to the previous shadowy space that burned deep inside her, mending her fragmented identity into a whole one, the purple light is spreading from the center of Powles's body, allowing her to embrace her mythicity. The space inside her is innate, not socially constructed or colonially constructed, revealing how the previous categories she transgressed are not natural but man-made by colonial powers.

Powles continues this exploration of and identification with the multiracial mythic in her *Magnolia* poem "In the end we are humanlike: *Blade Runner 2049*". This poem, inspired by the film *Blade Runner 2049*, examines what it would be like to be one of the movie's replicant characters. In the film, replicants are artificially constructed humanoid machines designed for

labor purposes. They are bioengineered “humans” with enhanced abilities and visually indistinguishable from real human beings. The emergence of replicants as a viable source of labor in the film raises questions about the definitions of humanity and the blurring of boundaries between man and machine. Powles plays with these themes in her poem, breaking it down into three sections. The first two sections of the poem read as follows:

1)

I am what they call your cloud girl of the city of your dreams
invisible music-box girl no one sees

we play dress-up in the dark unhungering
untouchingly I smile the right way with my mouth
I dance the right way with the spinning light fields
of my hips undreaming things you asked me to erase

you see blue eyes & unpinned hair but while you sleep
I am pure blue light nuclear
reflective particles & halogen glints
hypersensitive asymmetric opaque waves
slowly unwanting unlinking myself
from your pulse into air

2)

a giant ballerina pirouettes by night across the skyline
 her semi-transparence shines through dirt and smog...
 when faint music swells and her curved arms
 reach up to hold a dying sun and hybrid moon
 they whisper things about the man who cast her into light
 they mimic her in secret inside halls of rippling gold
 they tiptoe up to breathe in something of her glow

To begin my analysis, I would like to foreground the second section of the poem, focusing mainly on the ending lines. In this section, Powles describes a giant projected ballerina that dances through the streets of the film, contrasting the darkness of the city. This ballerina is semi-transparent, a hologram rather than a physical human being. Her tangible form is not concretely defined, emphasizing her *humanlike* appearance. She is vaguely human, but does not completely fit into the true definition of one. In the last four lines of this section, Powles describes the ballerina as reaching towards “a dying sun and hybrid moon”. In my previous analysis, I analyzed the sun as a symbol of colonial power and of Powles’s white heritage, her colonizer heritage. I continue this analysis here: the “dying sun” symbolizes the end of the colonial framework’s dictating of identity construction while the “hybrid moon” illustrates the beginning of hybridity as the accepted form of expression. The ballerina, in her humanoid state, is upholding this transition; she is the cyborg in action, a representation of the multiracial mythic deconstructing colonial racializations. However, this process is only beginning and not yet close to completion as the last three lines of the poem emphasize the ballerina’s fetishization and

oppression rather than her liberation. These last lines all begin with “they”, symbolizing the external forces at play and placing significance on how these forces are imposing upon the ballerina. The ballerina has been displaced to the object of the sentence rather than the subject; the “they” become more important, more powerful than her. Although the ballerina is upholding the “hybrid moon”, they ignore this and “whisper things about the man who cast her into light”, caring more about her origin and the man that played a role in her being than her actions. However, while these forces deem the ballerina inferior, they still “mimic her in secret” and desire to “breathe in something of her glow”, illustrating how the ballerina is valued, not for herself or her abilities, but for her aesthetic. This connects back to Cheng’s theory of ornamentation: the ballerina is a subject of objectification and fetishization. If she represents the cyborg and the multiracial mythic, then both these entities, too, are subject to fetishization and oppression via categorization despite their efforts to denounce these colonial powers.

Returning to the first section of the poem, Powles uses the image of the ballerina as an extension of herself and her own experiences as “humanlike”. Throughout this section, she delineates clear pronouns in order to position her identity relative to the colonial identity. The first line is “I am what they call your cloud girl”, focusing on “I” as Powles and her relationship to the “you” in the poem, which symbolizes the colonial framework and its control over Powles’s racial identity. Powles is “your cloud girl”, the colonial framework’s cloud girl; she belongs to the colonial framework. This idea of possession and ownership is furthered when Powles claims she is the girl “of your dreams”, reinforcing the colonial imaginary’s claim over her and positioning her as a desirable subject. The use of cloud as a descriptor also aligns Powles with the ballerina as both the ballerina and the imagery of a “cloud girl” lack defined physical form. Powles further identifies with the ballerina in the next line, calling herself an “invisible

music-box girl”, again emphasizing her lack of solidarity and, by extension, lack of agency. In the second stanza, Powles repeatedly demonstrates her detachment from the human form by doing basic human actions “the right way”: “I smile the right way with my mouth”, “I dance the right way”. The prefacing that there is a “right way” to smile or to dance reveals Powles’s distance from humanness; she must consciously think about how to do basic human functions correctly, which an average human being would not have to think about. The break in the first line further emphasizes Powles’s distance from humanness and her alignment with a replicant, or a machine, because the long pause reveals that she must think about which body part is associated with smiling before she does it. As if her programming needs to run before she can complete the action. To reinforce this concept, Powles uses the prefix “un-” multiple times, creating non-existent words like “unhungering”, “untouchingly”, “undreaming”. The root of each of these words is an action typically associated with human behavior: to hunger, to touch, to dream. Adding the prefix “un-” indicates a reversal of these actions, which are not typically reversed. In reversing these normal human behaviors, Powles is positioning herself within the border between human and machine. She is a representation of the cyborg, of the mythic. The final stanza in this section begins, again, with the external entity, the “you”. The “you” sees Powles as “blue eyes” and “unpinned hair”, defining her purely on physical, aesthetic value, but Powles rejects this. The next line begins with “I”: “I am pure blue light”. This light is uncontaminated; it does not have a concrete physical form. It is “nuclear”, “reflective”, “hypersensitive asymmetric”, “opaque”, terms associated with science and machinery, with the cyborg. Through this identification with the cyborg, Powles “unwants”, “unlinks” from the colonial system’s “pulse”, releasing herself into the air. By embracing the cyborg and the mythic as parts of her identity, she frees herself from the fetishization of the colonial imaginary.

Conclusion

As the Aotearoa writer K. Emma Ng asks: “How can we belong here, become ‘from here’, without re-enacting the violence that is historically embedded in the gesture of trying to belong?” It begins somewhere in acknowledging that both my whiteness and my Chineseness are immigrant identities. It begins with understanding what it means to put down roots on stolen land, and doing so with intention, with care and respect. It means collective responsibility, and working towards a better world for indigenous and displaced people... But being tauiwī (non-indigenous) doesn’t mean I’m drifting, rootless, untethered to an ancestral homeland. It means tracing the threads back to the roots of my history, my colonial history, and holding all the pieces in my hands. It means always looking for the sea.

– Nina Mingya Powles, *Small Bodies of Water*

Throughout both *Small Bodies of Water* and *Magnolia*, Powles contends with what it means to belong in a space not intended for her multiracial body. The contradictory nature of her multiraciality, her colonizer and colonized identities, becomes a site of uncertainty, of guilt. She has a desire to belong, but does not wish to continue the acts of colonial violence that have historically imposed forced belonging. In the last chapter of *Small Bodies of Water*, Powles begins discovering how to achieve both goals, coming to terms with her conflicting identities by acknowledging both sides of her history simultaneously and choosing to see both heritages as immigrant identities. In doing so, Powles begins deconstructing the notion of whiteness as a natural distinguisher. White European history, too, is fraught with violence and displacement. Powles’s acknowledgement of her joint lineages thus creates solidarity between them, slowly unraveling the rigid borders that once separated her racializations. While this solidarity cannot, and should not, excuse or justify the long histories of colonial violence, it does create a “collective responsibility” to one another to fight towards a future where those who were once displaced can reclaim their histories and cultures. Our collective responsibility is to begin

dismantling the racial boundaries that have been weaponized against us by the colonial framework in order to maintain control.

Powles's acknowledgement of her identities' solidarity mends the divide between them, furthering her emergence as a whole racial being rather than a fragmented one. But there is still the question of occupying what New Zealanders term "tauiwi" or non-indigenous. Even if Powles is able to mend her racial identities, what does it mean to plant roots in a place where she has no ancestral ties? How can she feel true belonging without these historical roots? Powles returns to her Hakka heritage to answer these questions, reflecting, once again, on how the Hakka are a "guest people" without a clearly defined homeland. To Powles, being "tauiwi", or non-indigenous, does not indicate a lack of belonging or a lack of ancestral identity. Even without the physical homeland, Powles can still trace her lineage back "to the roots of [her] history, [her] colonial history". She is not drifting aimlessly without history or culture; she is rooted deeply in her Hakka heritage, scattered throughout the world but not fragmented or forgotten. She can hold "all the pieces in [her] hands", existing all at once, together. In the beginning, Powles struggled to hold the pieces of herself, feeling unable to carry the fragments of her identity that kept getting smaller and smaller. But now, through the fusion of her racial identities and her embracing of her multiraciality, the pieces fit within her grasp and are a site of reassurance in her identity. Being non-indigenous, to Powles, means "always looking for the sea" because the water embodies the histories of her heritages. It serves as a connector between lands, a fluid in-between that allows for simultaneous existence, deconstructing the violent legacies of colonial power. The boundaries of discrete categorization become blurred, merging together into the Third Space, into multiracial fluidity. Powles is the water; the water is home.

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