

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

“Nowhere If Not Here”: The Ethics of Queer Experimentation in the Global Novel Form

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by

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Chair

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It seems that if you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics, because the ethical realm exists nowhere if not here: in the consequences of human actions as they unfold in time, and the multiple interpretive possibility of those actions. Narrative itself is the performance of that very procedure.

- Zadie Smith

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Nowhere If Not Here”: The Ethics of Queer Experimentation in the Global Novel Form

by

Mary Reid

Doctor of Philosophy in Literature

Professor Rosemary George, Chair

This dissertation analyzes a selection of novels by four postcolonial authors, Ama Ata Aidoo, Arundhati Roy, Shani Mootoo, and Zadie Smith, and theorizes “queering” as an ethical literary procedure in which experimentation with narrative form challenges the norms of narrative that uphold heteronormative and liberal individualist models of the human. Each author’s experimental engagement with the novel form effects a transformation in the form and function of the novel itself, thus reinventing the ethical potential of the novel and revising understandings of the human. In these novels, the literary practice of queering challenges the norms of narrative realism, including its limited construction of the human as the heteronormative liberal individual subject, so as to articulate an ethical stance in narrative and reinvent the form of the global novel in

English in the contemporary world. Contextualizing my theoretical approach with recent work in postcolonial studies, this dissertation engages in current debates about the purpose and aims of postcolonial literary studies in the contemporary, globalized world. Drawing upon the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Aamir Mufti, Paul Jay, Sankaran Krishna, and Sanjay Krishnan, as well as Martha Nussbaum and Nancy Armstrong, this study argues for the value and significance of the ethical potential of the literary. My intervention suggests that queer experimental practice in narrative challenges normative ways of understanding and being in the world, including the values upheld by narratives of globalization, consumer capitalism, progress, and development. While the novel has, since the eighteenth century, been one of the primary forms for consolidating the liberal individual subject as the dominant model of the human, the novels in this study imagine the human as inherently interconnected, a shift in understanding that aligns with the current planetary realities of climate change. In light of planetary shifts caused by global warming, the science of climate change, and the recognition of human beings as a geological force, the ethics of queer experimentation in the global novel form offers a site in which to imagine the human otherwise—as planetary, futural, and connected.

Introduction: Literary Reading and the Postcolonial Novel: Ethics and Experiment in the Literatures of Global English

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

- Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*

Queering the Novel Form

As scholars of the novel have recognized, the novel has, since its beginnings in the eighteenth century, been the primary literary form for the construction the liberal individual subject. This study suggests that narrative itself is also structured by and shores up the heteronormative. The novel form is not only the site in which the liberal individual is created, but also the site in which heteronormativity is reproduced through narrative. As Susan Lanser has suggested about the eighteenth-century novel, “one underpinning of the ‘rising’ novel is precisely its investment in consolidating a heterosexual subjectivity” (497). In this dissertation, I analyze a selection of postcolonial novels by four authors, and theorize a literary procedure that I call “queering” as an ethical practice in which experimental literary strategies challenge, and effectively queer, the norms of narrative that support dominant, and heteronormative, ways of understanding human being. Recognizing that narratives of capitalist development, progress, and globalization simultaneously structure and are structured by the values of liberal individualism, I demonstrate how the work of each author queers and destabilizes the primacy of the liberal individual subject, as well as the heteronormativity that structures dominant thought about what it means to be human. Each author’s engagement with the novel form, through experimentation with narrative, challenges the assumptions

of liberal individualism and heteronormativity so as to effect a transformation in the form and function of the novel itself. In my analysis of novels by Ama Ata Aidoo, Arundhati Roy, Shani Mootoo, and Zadie Smith, I theorize the way in which the queer experimental strategies of these authors simultaneously challenge the heteronormativity of narrative and engage in an ethical literary practice of queering so as to revise the norms of narrative. The queer writing practice of these authors not only challenges the heteronormative structures of nation and narrative, but also, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, articulates the ethical potential of the novel form. Through my analysis, I argue for the ethical value of the literary and theorize the experimental literary practice of queering as an ethical challenge to narrative norms. Rather than shoring up the normative values of liberal individualism that underlie dominant narratives of globalization, consumer capitalism, progress, and development, queer experimentation in the novel form challenges those values so as to articulate alternative possibilities for being human. The queer literary practice of these novels challenges the norms of narrative realism, including its limited construction of the human as the heteronormative liberal individual subject, so as to articulate an ethical stance in narrative and reinvent the form of the global novel in English in the contemporary world.

Postcolonialism and Globalization

In recent years, criticism and theory in postcolonial studies and postcolonial literary studies have been concerned with issues of transnationalism and globalization, and, more specifically, with the intersections, connections, and conflicts between postcolonialism and globalization. Initiating a line of questioning that continues into the

present, the 2005 collection edited by Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzl, and Antoinette Burton, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, posed the question of what, in an era of accelerated globalization, the purpose and aims of postcolonial studies should be. The editors acknowledged that it was the predominance of globalization studies that prompted the book's reassessment of the purpose and goals of postcolonial studies, and they reaffirmed the unique significance of the field of postcolonial studies, posing the following question: "what visions of a postcolonial world can we as humanists offer that will interrogate, perhaps even interrupt, the forms of globalization now dictated by politicians, military strategists, captains of finance and industry, fundamentalist preachers and theologians, terrorists of the body and the spirit, in short, by the masters of our contemporary universe?" (16). Their stated aim was to "separate facile or tendentious visions of a neoliberal world-without-borders from genuine or progressive forms of transnationalism," and to "separate the abstract brand of freedom implied by market liberalization across the globe from the internationalist vision of freedom encapsulated in something like Fanon's rhetoric of liberation" (20). The emphasis in such a project for postcolonial studies is explicitly one of critique, as it is a call for a critical response within the humanities to the economic and political inequities of globalization that drives these stated goals for work in postcolonial studies. My project expands upon the critical imperative of postcolonial studies by arguing for an ethical imperative in postcolonial literary studies, one that recognizes the ethical function of the literary. I demonstrate that queer experimental practice in narrative challenges normative ways of thinking and being in the world, including the stories upheld by "the masters of our contemporary universe." In doing so, queering the novel form is an ethical practice that challenges the normative

values of liberal individualism that underlie “the abstract brand of freedom” promoted by the narratives of globalization, consumer capitalism, progress, and development.

Several critics and theorists have taken up the call of Loomba et al. and recent books have explored the intersecting issues of postcolonialism and globalization. The 2008 collection *The Postcolonial and the Global*, edited by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley, offers a selection of essays by critics in postcolonial studies and globalization theory as an occasion for the two disciplines “to seek common cause” (29). Asserting that “the two fields have developed relatively apart and maintained quite different disciplinary affiliations even when their historical or geopolitical points of reference have converged,” with postcolonialism evolving “mainly in the humanities, whereas globalization theory evolved mainly in the social sciences” (2), the collection poses a series of questions and establishes a set of thematic frameworks to interrogate the commonalities and potential or existing conflicts between the two discursive formations. Among these questions are two that frame many of the debates about globalization within the field of postcolonial studies: “Is globalization theory [...] just a strategically recast version of postmodernism—one that effectively blunts the critical edge of postcolonialism through a spatiotemporal leveling of difference? And if it is, can postcolonial studies survive its rapid assimilation into globalization theory and still manage to stake out a separate, meaningful future for itself?” (3). While critics such as Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996) argue that globalization allows for creative and empowering opportunities for postcolonial subjects to negotiate modernity on their own terms, others are more tentative in extolling the benefits of globalized culture, as it is inextricably linked to the inequities of globalized economic systems.

Gayatri Spivak, for instance, notes: “The general culture of Euro-US capitalism in globalization and economic restructuring has conspicuously destroyed the possibility of capital being redistributive and socially productive in a broad-based way” (*Other Asias* 30). For postcolonial critics who recognize the ways in which economic and political inequalities are shored up or exacerbated by globalization, a postcolonial standpoint offers a critical perspective from which to imagine ethical relations in a globalized world.

While some see globalization as a contemporary phenomenon, the logical result of the expansion of capitalism throughout the twentieth century, many critics argue that globalization has actually been occurring for centuries, and covers the historical ground of imperialism, colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonialism. Thus, while the temporal relationship between postcolonialism and globalization differs in these two narratives, both views see postcolonialism and globalization as operating within the same historical framework. Sankaran Krishna’s 2009 *Globalization and Postcolonialism: Hegemony and Resistance in the Twenty-first century* examines what he describes as “two competing stories that seek to explain or make sense of [the] historical development” (2) in which the space of the Third World was “transformed in the imagination of the world from one of unsurpassed wealth to degrading squalor” (1), creating “the narratives of modernization and underdevelopment” (2). Krishna argues “that neoliberal globalization is the latest intellectual heir of the first story, namely, modernization, and postcolonialism is the child of the second story, that of underdevelopment and of resistance to the story of modernization” (2). By investigating the interconnections between the historical and contemporary processes of globalization

and postcolonialism, Krishna sees the two to differ in significant ways, arguing as follows:

[...] although globalization is a movement that is suffusing the entire world with a form of production based on free-market capitalism and an attendant ideology of individualist consumerism, postcolonialism articulates a politics of resistance to the inequalities, exploitation of humans and the environment, and the diminution of political and ethical choices that come in the wake of globalization. If neoliberal globalization is the attempt at naturalizing and depoliticizing the logic of the market, or the logic of the economy, postcolonialism is the effort to politicize and denaturalize that logic and demonstrate the choices and agency inherent in our own lives. [...] if globalization is the reigning or hegemonic ideology in the world today, postcolonialism, at its best, constitutes one of its main adversaries or forms of resistance to its sway. (2)

The purpose of Krishna's book is therefore to argue for the ways in which postcolonial studies is not only useful, but also essential for resistance and ethical engagement in the contemporary context of globalization. What is of particular interest for this project is Krishna's description of modernization and underdevelopment as "two competing *stories*" (my emphasis), historical narratives that have an actual effect on "the imagination of the world." Krishna's language here highlights a significant aspect of my project, which is the argument that narrative, or stories, influence and create our ways of seeing, understanding and being in the world. And, as I will argue, since one of the functions of narrative is to create and sustain the stories by which we live and imagine the world, experimentation with narrative in literary texts has the ability to challenge, affect and transform the narratives through which we inhabit and understand the world and our selves.

Describing the purpose and role of postcolonial studies further, Krishna argues that "the ideas and insights of postcolonialism constitute an inseparable part of the

movements against war and neoliberal globalization, and more generally, against the commodification of humans and nature that seems intrinsic to modernity” (171-72). It is through its most influential ideas and insights, Krishna suggests, that postcolonial studies effects and affects resistance to globalization, including in the following ways:

by its relentless focus on understanding economic development and the production of wealth and inequality as worldwide, rather than nation-state specific, processes; through its continuous expansion of who gets to be counted within the provenance of ‘human’; through its exposure of the Orientalism that underlies the contemporary war on ‘terror’; in its critique of the very idea of nation-states as territorial enclosures of essences; and through its realization that colonialism is not just political imposition and economic exploitation but a form of violent planetary consciousness that afflicts us all collectively. (172)

The critical work of postcolonial studies that Krishna outlines here relates to my project’s emphasis on the ethical work of narrative experimentation in postcolonial literature and its challenge to the normative stories of the dominant. Narrative experimentation, through the ethical practice that I call queering, functions to critique the dominant narratives of modernity and modernization, including “the commodification of humans and nature” that underlies narratives of progress and development, as well as the liberal individualist values upon which these narratives are based. Articulating an ethics that imagines the human in more expansive ways, the queering of narrative norms begins to dismantle the narratives of capitalist modernity so as to reconfigure planetary relations, among humans and with nature, in ethical and sustainable ways.

While arguing for the necessity of postcolonial critique as a counter to the insidious forms of globalization, Krishna also describes the postcolonial stance as one that recognizes “that its ideas come neither with a guarantee of political success nor intellectual certitude,” a position that simultaneously “promotes an unrelenting insistence

on the need for informed participation in the politics of our times” and “instills a sense of humility about the open-ended nature of the very future we seek to attain.” In this way, it is “[t]his seemingly contradictory combination of struggling for a better tomorrow without predetermining its content” that “captures the essence of the postcolonial standpoint.” Therefore, Krishna argues: “As the tethered shadow to globalization in its multiple forms over the past few centuries, the vocation of postcolonialism remains that of an endless and yet ethical critique operating with neither intellectual guarantee nor political piety” (172). Krishna’s description of postcolonialism as “an endless and yet ethical critique,” which also aligns with the arguments of Loomba et al., is a useful starting point for considering the ethical commitments of literary texts that are situated in and engage with the convergences and contradictions between postcolonialism and globalization. And, as my project will demonstrate, the literary is a site in which the ethical, creative imagining of “a better tomorrow” can occur.

Sanjay Krishnan has also recently engaged with the work of reasserting the purpose and aims of postcolonial studies, arguing that “the animating question of postcolonial studies” is “whether it is possible for formerly colonized or underdeveloped peoples to articulate a creative, that is, textured, response to the institutions of modernity” (265). Distinguishing between the terms “postcolonial” and “anticolonial,” Krishnan argues:

Anticolonial thought refers to forms of ideology critique that expose as false the colonizer’s claim that colonial values are properly enlightened or universal. Postcolonial thought is a reflection on the categories and reflexes through which anticolonial resistance takes place. Postcolonial thought asserts that anticolonial resistance tacitly reproduces the culture and values of imperialism [for instance, in elite anticolonial nationalism,

in which native elites reproduce] colonial norms and schemata to articulate their political and economic goals. (265)

The difference between postcolonial and anticolonial thought, as Krishnan describes it, is that “anticolonial thought is the ideology critique of colonialism, whereas postcolonial thought signals a critique of the anticolonial conformism to the *culture* of imperialism (its premises, norms, styles of valuation, schemas, and categories). Postcolonial thought,” he continues, “therefore scrutinizes the dominant rules of representation set in motion by knowledge production in academia and beyond” (266). Significantly, Krishnan notes: “If the colonial and anticolonial subject has been trained to produce truth effects within a particular regime of truth, it is tacitly understood that *other ways of seeing and saying must now be imagined*, not the least of which is to infiltrate and recode the received terms of disciplinary knowledge” (266; my italics). Krishnan’s definition of these two terms usefully delineates a distinction present in some of the literary works with which this study engages, in their postcolonial critique of the binary norms of both colonialist and anticolonial nationalist thought, as well as articulates an ethical call for the imagining of “other ways of seeing and saying” in postcolonial literary studies. My argument demonstrates the ways in which the queering of narrative in the novels I examine functions to challenge the premises, norms, and categories of heteronormativity and liberal individualism that underlie not only the culture of imperialism, but also the cultures of capitalist modernity and globalization.

As we have seen so far, much of the discussion among critics and theorists of postcolonial and globalization studies seeks to interrogate and articulate the potential and purpose of postcolonial critique for ethical engagement with the inequities of the

globalized world. And while the assumptions that Krishna outlines about the difference between globalization and postcolonialism (specifically that globalization is an insidious force of economic and political inequality, while postcolonialism is a resistant critical counter to globalization) underlie many critical works in postcolonial literary studies, few critics—aside from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s ongoing defense of and call for the unique significance and abilities of reading and teaching in the humanities—adequately address the debates about postcolonialism and globalization within the context of literary studies so as to articulate theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical approaches to literature produced in an increasingly transnational and globalized cultural sphere. Paul Jay’s 2010 *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* offers an insightful and compelling engagement with the broader debates in postcolonial and globalization studies, as well as places what he calls “the transnational turn” in literary studies within the current context of these debates, examining a range of literary texts that exemplify the issues at stake. As Jay suggests, since emphasis “on the nation and with commonality” in literary studies “has given way for good to an interest in difference, so that ‘somewhere else’ and ‘strangeness’ will remain our focus for some time to come,” it is important to recognize “that our approaches both to literatures historically linked to the nation and newer, emergent fiction [...] require theoretical frameworks and methodologies adequate to tracing the transnational character of their construction and dissemination, as well as to the subject matters they explore” (199).¹ Moreover, Jay

¹ Jay argues that the transnational turn in literary studies is not simply a response to globalization, but rather the effect of broad changes both outside of and within the academy over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, including:

the breakdown of a late nineteenth-century Arnoldian model of literary study grounded in an aestheticized, ahistorical, liberal-humanist set of assumptions about the nature and value of

argues that in attending to difference in literary texts, “it is imperative that our work not reproduce new but uncomplicated narratives about history, identity, and belonging, narratives that simply reverse more traditional ones” (199) and that we avoid “creating absolutist categories of difference based on narrow notions of ethnic belonging” (200). Part of the potential offered by literary texts, as Jay notes, is the way in which the literary offers a site in which “to work past such reductive categories” and, rather than “provid[ing] simple answers to complex questions about identity, culture, and belonging,” they instead “productively trouble the way we think about those questions,” and, in doing so, “they present a model for the critical work we do, for the very act of reading and understanding them” (200).

My project attends to the unique ability of the literary to produce alternative ways of seeing, understanding and being in the world, offering a model for engaging in the world and with others in ways that differ from and creatively challenge dominant modes of being. My argument proposes that narrative, as it has developed in literature in English, particularly in the novel form, not only functions to shore up the values of liberal individualism that underlie capitalist narratives of progress and development, but is also fundamentally heteronormative. Therefore, the experimentation with narrative that I analyze in the work of a group of postcolonial novels by women writers functions to queer the norms of narrative so as to challenge and work toward a creative reimagining of

literature and culture; the development outside the academy of social and political movements, including the anti-Vietnam War movement, the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the gay rights movement, and the rise of theoretical and critical practices within the academy dominated by a sustained and critical attention to difference (deconstruction; feminist and gender studies; work on race, class, and sexual orientation; and minority, multicultural, and postcolonial literatures). (17)

These are thus the historical contexts of the twentieth century in which the transformation to transnational approaches in literature and literary studies has occurred, a transformation that has led to the current form of global literary studies in English.

the heteronormative and liberal individualist values upon which dominant narratives are based. In doing so, these novels teach us, literary critics, something about the work that we are doing in the world, effectively reminding us of the value and importance of literary study in the contemporary world. If literary criticism participates in reading and mythologizing the world in particular ways, then literary critics are responsible for the ways in which we imagine the world through our analysis of literary texts. To attend to the specificities of the literary is an ethical act in which we might learn other ways of seeing, understanding, and being in the world. The novels with which I engage in this project demonstrate a literary procedure that I call queering as an ethical practice that challenges the narratives of liberal individualism and heteronormativity so as to imagine our selves and the world otherwise.

Postcolonial Literary Study and Global English

As the critical discussion outlined above suggests, one aspect of recent criticism in postcolonial studies has been a sort of taking stock of the past of the discipline so as to consider the purpose of postcolonial critique in the present and for the future. The mode of such criticism has been a consideration and revaluation of the history of postcolonial studies and the works of its greatest theorists as a way of looking at where we have come from so as to move forward in the present. Much of this criticism is either explicitly or implicitly affected or prompted by the death of Edward Said, one of the greatest and most beloved, as well as controversial, theorists of postcolonial studies. Krishnaswamy and Hawley, for instance, dedicate their collection to Said and, in the spirit of his life's work, "to the cause of greater justice in the distribution of the world's freedoms and bounty"

(29), while Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom have edited a 2010 collection entitled *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, in which a range of critics reassert the value and significance of Said's work for critical projects in various areas of inquiry in the present. In a similar spirit of summing up the past of postcolonialism, Sankaran Krishna's genealogy of postcolonial studies addresses the significance of the work of Said, the Subaltern Studies group (including Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty), Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Sanjay Krishnan's 2009 article, "The Place of India in Postcolonial Studies: Chatterjee, Chakrabarty, Spivak," also argues for the usefulness of the work of these three theorists in theorizing not only India, but also other spaces in the postcolonial, globalized world. My project engages in these discussions by considering the work of postcolonial literary studies in the present, and arguing for the particular value of the literary in creating ways of thinking about and being in the world that are not in service to dominant narratives of capitalist development that have led to the present precarious planetary situation, but rather take the interconnectedness of human beings—with each other and the planet—seriously so as to imagine possibilities for a better tomorrow.

In a parallel, but not quite overlapping trend, the question of "world literature" has, in the last decade, been reconsidered as a model for mapping the terrain of the literary across the globe. Sparked by Franco Moretti's 2000 essay, "Conjectures on World Literature," and followed by books such as David Damrosch's 2003 *What is World Literature?* and the English translation of Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* in 2004, recent rethinking of the formulation "world literature" has, oddly, as Aamir Mufti notes in his 2010 *Critical Inquiry* essay, "Orientalism and the Institution of

World Literature,” remained primarily Eurocentrist in its organization and theorization. Casanova’s much-cited argument, for instance, is structured by the binary of center/periphery and is based on a model of competition in what she calls “the world republic of letters.” She argues that “the special perceptiveness of contestants on the periphery enables them to detect affinities among emerging literary (and political) spaces,” and “their shared destitution leads them to take each other as models and historical points of reference, to compare their literary situations, and to apply common strategies based on the logic of prior experience.” Therefore, she suggests, “small nations—or rather the international writers of small literatures—could act in concert to challenge their domination by the centers” (247-48). While Casanova here seems to be articulating an empowering stance of resistance for “contestants” in the so-called peripheries, her logic is sustained by a Eurocentrist framework that upholds, rather than challenges, the binaries of center versus periphery, and domination versus resistance. Whether the view is of world literature “as a conceptual organization rather than a body of literary texts,” as in Moretti’s view, or, as in Damrosch’s perspective, “as a special kind of literature, that which circulates beyond its ‘culture of origin’” (Mufti 465), what is missing from “the current revival of the concept of world literature” is, Mufti argues, “the question of Orientalism” (458). Noting that although Said’s *Orientalism* is “a sort of foundational text for concern with cultural relations on a planetary scale, that book’s conceptual armature or the archive with which it engages do not seem to play a significant role in this renewed discussion and intensification of interest in the effort to comprehend literature as a planet wide reality” (458). While Casanova reasserts the stories of modernization and underdevelopment described by Krishna, in which Western

capitalist development is constructed as the master narrative of progress in contrast to the narrative of underdevelopment in the so-called Third World, a postcolonial critical perspective that attends to “cultural relations on a planetary scale” and “literature as a planet wide reality” reminds us that these dominant narratives are indeed constructions, stories that have framed our ways of thinking about and being in the world. And, as this project will suggest, such binary ways of understanding human relations no longer serve us, and must be revised so as to attend to the reality of the planetary—the interconnection among all beings on the planet and the ways in which how we choose to live affects the lives of others, in the present and future.

It is significant that in order to reconceptualize our interconnection with others as a planetary connection, our very understanding of history has also to be reimagined. Mufti effectively demonstrates how the historical construction of world literature functioned to organize world cultures in various ways, creating the categories through which national and world literatures are understood. While for Casanova, “non-Western literatures make their first effective appearance in world literary space in the era of decolonization in the middle of the twentieth century,” Mufti traces the “initial charting of non-Western traditions of writing on the emerging map of the literary world” back to the “philological revolution” of the late eighteenth century (460). As “Oriental exempla” were assimilated and structured in this early transformation of the space of world literature, this “moment,” Mufti argues, is not, as Casanova suggests, “a redrawing of the internal cultural map of Europe,” but is rather “a reorganization that is planetary in nature” (Mufti 459). Tracing the ways in which European study of the languages of India led to the organization of Hindi as the “national” language of India and Hinduism as its

national religion, thus displacing and effectively marginalizing Urdu and Islam, Mufti demonstrates the ways in which European interventions created the linguistic and ethnic organization through which Indian literature as a national category continues to be understood. Mufti's intervention thus challenges the binary conceptions of center and periphery, European and non-European traditions, which structure many of the current discussions about "world literature," as well as of globalization, showing that "the deep encounter between the English and the other Western languages and the languages of the global periphery as media of literary expression did not take place for the first time in the postcolonial era, let alone in the supposedly transnational transactions of the period of high globalization but, especially, at the dawn of the modern era itself and fundamentally transformed both cultural formations involved in the encounter" (460-61). Such a challenge to the underlying binaries that structure discussion of literary texts in nationalist and comparative frameworks is a necessary aspect of the critical project of literary studies in global English, as it destabilizes notions of authenticity that shore up certain essentialisms about identity, culture, and tradition. As my project asserts, notions of cultural or ethnic "authenticity" that often underlie critical analysis of postcolonial literary texts are based on constructed understandings of cultural difference that were, as Mufti demonstrates, created alongside the dominant narratives of modernity.

The challenge to historical narratives of cultural difference and modernity is also connected to what in my project is a challenge to narratives of liberal individualism that support capitalist understandings of progress and development. Discussing Said's critical project in *Orientalism*, Mufti reminds us of the "anti-identitarian imperative" in Said's work, the critique of the "naturalized supernaturalism" of Orientalism's "remapping of

humanity” and “the cultural logic of (Western) bourgeois society in its global or outward orientation, in its encounter with and reorganization of human societies on a planetary scale” (463). The project Said conceived of in *Orientalism* was thus a “classically *secular* critical task, concerned with the here and now, attentive to the dense and ultimately unassimilable fabric of society” (Mufti 463). The figure of the exile, Mufti notes, “is an exemplary figure for secular criticism in Said’s terms precisely because, as a figure of displacement and dispossession, it marks a certain distance and fissure from the transcendentalization of cultural authority, forms of reckoning cultural transmission and descent that are based, as it were, on the ‘quasi-religious authority of being comfortably at home among one’s people’” (463). Mufti’s consideration of the ways in which religious and secular traditions in India were the result of “the Orientalist conjuncture” thus acknowledges “the significance of historical Orientalism for the fabrication, in non-Western societies in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of forms of cultural authority tied to the claim to authenticity of (religious, cultural, and national) ‘tradition’” (464). Mufti’s intervention is useful for its challenge to current Eurocentrist understandings of “world literature” as a contemporary phenomenon, and, by extension, to the binary divisions that underlie conceptualizations of difference in globalization—particularly those of local versus global, and tradition versus modernity in discussions of postcolonialism and globalization.

Importantly, Mufti acknowledges what current articulations of the concept of world literature fail to note: “the enormous role played by the institution of literature in the emergence of the hierarchies and identities that structure relations between societies in the modern world” (465). In a further rejection of the binary distinction between local

and global, a distinction that shores up the notion of the nation as the site from which culture arises, Mufti argues:

The concept and practices of world literature, far from representing the superseding of national forms of identification of language, literature, and culture, thus emerged for the first time precisely alongside the forms of thinking in the contemporary Western world that elsewhere I have referred to as nation-thinking—that is, those emergent modes of thinking in the West that are associated with the nationalization of social and cultural life and point toward the nation-state as the horizon of culture and society. (465-66)

Mufti's article therefore traces the history of Orientalism in India in the nineteenth century to demonstrate how modern notions of national tradition were constructed through an Orientalist flattening of difference so as to create a coherent national narrative and "tradition," thus showing that Indian nationalist notions of "tradition" are a Western colonialist construction. The usefulness of Mufti's intervention for this project is therefore also in its critique of national notions of tradition that presume a ground of authenticity that was constructed through, as Mufti shows, the Orientalist creation of modern narratives of nationalism and tradition, and of the notion of "the indigenous." It is significant, my project asserts, that *literature* is the primary site in which national narratives of tradition are constructed and reproduced. Just as literature was a primary site in which narratives of national tradition and cultural difference were created, based on and shoring up the narratives of capitalist modernity, the literary is also a primary site in which narrative can create ways of thinking about and being in the world that challenge and revise the dominant stories of capitalist modernity and the liberal individualist values upon which these stories are based. Specifically, as this project asserts, experimentation with narrative form can productively challenge dominant narratives so as to creatively

envision ways of being that are aligned with an ethical project of imagining a better tomorrow.

While debates about world literature remain mired in Eurocentrist, nation-based notions of comparativity—a comparatist perspective, which Spivak has argued, in 2003's *Death of a Discipline*, must be transformed—and are thus not a useful framework for the purposes of this study, which is specifically located in the critical sphere of postcolonial literary studies in English, Jay's inquiry into what he calls "the transnational turn in literary studies" offers a more productive model for thinking about literary texts in the context of contemporary globalization from a postcolonial perspective. While the work of other critics in defining and articulating the goals of postcolonial studies, including the recent works of Mufti, Krishna, and Krishnan outlined above, have been useful in my conceptualization of the term "postcolonial" for the purposes of this study, the literary focus of Jay's project offers a compelling critical discussion that aligns with my use and understanding of, as well as my inquiry into another important aspect of this study, which is "global English." While Jay does not use the term "global English," many aspects of his analysis are in line with the characteristics of what I understand to be a mode of transnational, postcolonial inquiry in literary studies and literary texts in English that make up what has been referred to, in the work of Rosemary George, among others, as "global English." For instance, Jay argues that "two intersecting forces are transforming the discipline of English, one operating within academia, the other outside of it," and characterizes the transformation as follows:

Within academia, work in virtually every major field in literary studies is becoming transnationalized in its theories, practices, and methodologies. This new work is collectively engaged in a sophisticated and multifaceted

exploration of how literature across historical periods reflects—and reflects on—a multiplicity of differences grounded in personal, cultural, and political identities across locations where the boundary lines between cultures, races, genders, classes, and sexualities are much more porous than were heretofore acknowledged. Outside of academia, meanwhile, English literature (particularly the novel) is being produced by an increasingly transnational, multicultural group of writers, working in disparate parts of the world, whose work explores the intersecting effects of colonialism, decolonization, migration, and economic and cultural globalization. (91)

Jay acknowledges that “[s]ome of this writing might be categorized as postcolonial, but much of it is being produced by what the Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid has called a ‘post-postcolonial’ generation of writers whose experiences grow out of the postcolonial condition but are informed even more by the forces of globalization” (91-92). This simultaneous negotiation of issues of postcolonialism and globalization is perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the writing that I address under the rubric of global English. A further characteristic of this literature, Jay notes, is that it “is either situated in the metropolitan West or involves characters whose experience shifts back and forth between the Western metropole and the formerly colonized countries from which their families came” (92). Distinct from a “world literature” perspective, which is decidedly Eurocentrist in its literary categorization, global English includes texts produced by writers from, or with ancestry from, the former British empire and articulates either a postcolonial or “post-postcolonial” perspective. In my analysis of the work of Ama Ata Aidoo, Arundhati Roy, Shani Mootoo, and Zadie Smith, I address the ways in which all four writers are, in their consideration of the transnational, global effects of “colonialism, decolonization, migration, and economic and cultural globalization,” postcolonial and, to varying degrees, “post-postcolonial” writers of global English. Works of global English,

as I understand it in this project, include “literary texts that exemplify the transnational character of this new body of literature, novels that at once transform the nature of the national literatures to which they belong *and* push beyond national boundaries to engage the global character of modern experience, contemporary culture, and the identities they produce” (Jay 92).² The novels of the four authors whose work I address here not only creatively engage with and challenge national narratives, but also challenge and destabilize narratives of the supposedly liberating experiences and effects of globalization, revealing the ways in which national and global narratives are based on notions of progress and development that are inextricably linked to the values of liberal individualism and capitalist modernity, values that, these novels suggest, are not in service to the imagining of a better tomorrow.

As my study suggests, literature offers a site in which to explore and radically reimagine conventional understandings of local and global, which have tended to structure not only nation-based literary study, but also resistance-based models of postcolonialism. Unlike certain understandings of globalization and postcolonialism that privilege the local as a site of resistance in opposition to the supposedly “Westernizing” influences and effects of globalization, the novels in this study demonstrate the ways in which local and global have been constructed in relation to each other to create frequently

² Jay also acknowledges what he calls “the danger” in “globalizing literary studies” in English: that “we may replicate the same oppressive structures and practices many critics associate with the homogenizing effects of cultural globalization (or the colonizing practices of institutionalized economic globalization), structures and practices that further the dominance of expansionist cultures at the expense of local ones.” Thus, Jay argues: “It is crucial, then, that we find a way to supplement the traditionally nationalist orientation of ‘English’ with a transnational one without seeming to colonize the study of global literature within English departments. For [...] we will not have got anywhere if we end up reconstructing the paradigm of English as the privileged center of a transnational approach to literary studies” (67).

false oppositions that fail to recognize the inherent interconnectedness of being—an interconnectedness that, these novels suggest, is at the heart of ethical ways of understanding and being in the world. It is, furthermore, not only the notion of the local that is suspect in its essentialist construction of authenticity, but also the notion of the global that is brought under scrutiny and shown to be in service to the narratives of capitalist modernity and development, and shored up by the supposedly liberating ideals of liberal individualism. Describing the interrelationship between local and global, Jay argues as follows:

by its very nature globalization complicates the distinction between the indigenous or local, on the one hand, and the transnational or global, on the other. Certainly we can isolate specific, local, cultural practices, commodity forms, economic and political systems, and the like, but [...] almost always those practices, forms, and systems are not indigenous in any traditional sense of the word but the product of cross-cultural contact, appropriation, and transformation. [...] So the whole category of the 'local' or 'particular' is suspect at the outset. The same holds for the category of the 'global,' for there are no global forms that are not made up of particulars from this culture and that. (70)

Without denying the need for transformation and resistance, Jay argues, in agreement with Appadurai's understanding of the transformative, creative, and resistant possibilities of globalization, that "in our efforts to deal with literature and its production in a transnational context," we need to look at "local cultures outside the West, not as the passive recipients of mass culture, but as sites of transformation and active resistance," which "does not mean simply reasserting the autonomy of the local over and against the global" so as to avoid shoring up "a simple-minded binarism that facilely and uncritically celebrates the local as pure culture opposed to rapacious and homogenizing

westernization” (71).³ Thus, while a critical interrogation of nation-based models of literary study and resistance is at stake, Jay also notes that “[i]n advocating an aggressive approach to developing theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary structures for studying literature and culture in a transnational framework linked to the history of globalization, I am *not* insisting that we abandon older national models, but that they be supplemented, complicated, and challenged by newer approaches. These newer approaches must be based in part on reimagining and reconstructing the locations we study” (73). Referring to Appadurai’s “insistence on the role the imagination plays in appropriating and transforming globalized cultural forms in the context of remaking personal and cultural identities” (75), Jay acknowledges the way in which the literary, as an imaginative production, is a significant site in which this creative, transformative process occurs; a site, furthermore, in which to explore, negotiate, destabilize, and challenge conventional distinctions between local and global, the West and non-West. The recognition of the value and significance of the literary as a site of imaginative creation and reconstruction is one of the most important aspects of my project, as I argue for the ways in which literary experimentation, specifically in narrative, offers a queering of dominant narratives so as to reimagine and reinvent ethical ways of being in the world.

³ The problem with binary ways of thinking, Jay argues, is that “they run the risk of rigidifying the distinction between the privileged core and the marginalized periphery by insisting on the power and the autonomy, even the privilege, of the local.” Furthermore, Jay cautions:

There is a danger in any discussion of the relation between dominant and dominated cultures of characterizing the local as a pure (or gendered) space in need of protection, as if local cultures were not already contaminated in the sense Appiah has in mind. The danger of ceding dominant economic and/or cultural power to the core societies of the West may be matched by the danger of making a fetish of the local in its resistance to global cultures and treating that resistance as more important than the detrimental effect it might have on the inhabitants of the so-called periphery. (69)

My analysis of the work of the authors in this study also attends to the ways in which gendered assumptions underlie binary constructions of the local and global, and are always at work in the discourses of nationalism, postcolonialism, and globalization. In his discussion of the problematic distinction between local and global, Jay cites feminist critics Louise Yelin and Carla Freeman, whose work challenges what Yelin calls “the nostalgic mystification of the ‘local’ as antidote and site of resistance to the processes of globalization” (qtd in Jay 69). Against the common binary that has “construed the global as masculine and local as feminine terrains and practices’,” Freeman insists “that the local and the global are ‘mutually constitutive, and bound up in modes of gender at all levels’.” Thus, Freeman’s view “challenge[s] the portrayal of the local as contained within, and thus defined fundamentally by, the global,” and dismantles “the link that has fused gender with the local and left the macropicture of globalization as bereft of gender as a constitutive force” (qtd in Jay 70). Each of the writers whose work I engage in this study challenges the binaries by which gender has been understood in the contexts of both nationalism and globalization, offering instead nuanced perspectives of the ways in which normative notions of gender and sexuality underlie constructions of place and selfhood in narrative.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is one of the most important theorists whose work has not only consistently engaged in challenging simplistic binary understandings of the world, including within the discipline of postcolonial studies itself, but also articulated the unique abilities and significance of the literary in understanding the world. In 2003’s *Death of a Discipline*, an argument for the need to transform the discipline of comparative literature, Spivak addressed the way in which emphasis on nationalism in

analysis of postcolonial literature is problematic for its adherence to a binary construction typical of the early form of postcolonialism, in which its discourse and politics “remained caught in mere nationalism over against colonialism” (81). Against this model of postcolonialism, Spivak argues: “Today it is planetarity that we are called to imagine—to displace this historical alibi, again and again,” and calls for the necessity of “this utopian idea as a task for thinking ground because otherwise a ‘reformed’ comparative literary vision may remain caught within varieties of cultural relativism, specular alterity, and cyber-benevolence” (81). Spivak’s notion of planetarity is thus an argument for reinventing the discipline of comparative literary studies in the context of the transnational globalized world. Without new ways of thinking, literary studies in a transnational context risk continuing to reinforce old, essentialist frameworks, including those of cultural relativism, multiculturalism, and “development.” And while the “old postcolonial model,” which Spivak defines as “very much ‘India’ plus the Sartrean ‘Fanon’” (85), will no longer suffice, nor will “metropolitan multiculturalism—the latter phase of dominant postcolonialism” (82). The problem with “metropolitan multiculturalism”—which shores up the values of liberal individualism and ideals of diversity—is that it “precomprehends U.S. manifest destiny as transformed asylum for the rest of the world” and thus views “the United States as the final and hospitable home of cultural rights” (82). This position is therefore inadequate for a project that is committed to “the necessary impossibility of a ‘grounding’ in planetarity” (82). While Spivak acknowledges that her vision of planetarity is incomplete, stating: “there are connections to be made that I cannot make yet” (92), it is her description of the ethical

potential of the textual that suggests how we might, in literary study, engage the planet as a ground for inquiry:

In this era of global capital triumphant, to keep responsibility alive in the reading and teaching of the textual is at first sight impractical. It is, however, the right of the textual to be so responsible, responsive, answerable. The ‘planet’ is, here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right. Its alterity, determining experience, is mysterious and discontinuous—an experience of the impossible. (101-102)

In light of Spivak’s notion of planetarity, then, my analysis of the novels in this study seeks to demonstrate the ways in which experimentation with narrative in literary texts of global English allows for the imagining of such “necessary impossibility” by showing the limits of the present and the need for alternative possibilities for the future—where we, in the present, encounter the impossible, literature examines the limits of the possible and creates new possibilities to imagine further.

At stake in such considerations of postcolonial literature and literary studies is also the fundamental question of the role of literature in shaping the world as we inhabit and experience it. If language and images are central to how we experience reality and engage in the world, the literary production of images and literary experimentation with language are a significant site in which our experience and understanding of the world can be constructed, challenged, and revised. In a lecture given at the University of California, San Diego in 2008, Ngugi wa Thiong’o addressed the question of how literature is relevant to life, and reframed it by arguing that there is in fact no question of whether literature is relevant to life, and that rather literature is essential to life. Against the persistence of the idea that literature is somehow detached from life—an idea that, as

Spivak has noted, structures dominant ideology about literary study⁴—Ngugi argues that literary texts are engaged in a struggle over representation, a struggle over shaping the images that nourish the imagination. Furthermore, he argues, the material and the spiritual are not possible without the realm of the imagination and the imagination thus has a direct effect on the material world. The question of representation, then, is also a question of power, particularly, it might be argued, in the world of late-stage consumer capitalism in which images, as Jean Baudrillard has argued, are often more real than reality itself.⁵ The dominant ideology about literature—that it is detached from and therefore not relevant to life—is a disempowering belief that, I argue, functions to neutralize the creative and ethical potential of the literary. This neutralized idea of literature tends to be associated with modernist notions of “high art” as detached from the mundane realities of everyday life, and has created an understanding of experimental texts in particular as existing in a realm of literariness that is somehow free and separate from engagement in the world.

The specificity of the literary, and literature’s ability to address political and ethical issues in a way that differs from how these issues are addressed in the realms of politics and the social sciences is a also question of fundamental importance for literary studies. In contrast to the notion of literature as detached from life, the dominant ideology about literary studies, as characterized by Spivak in “Reading the World,” has led to a forgetting of the specificity of the literary in favor of a kind of criticism that seeks to

⁴ See 1987’s “Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties.”

⁵ See *Simulacra and Simulation*.

justify the literary by focusing only on its function as social or political critique, thus de-emphasizing, or even ignoring entirely, the literariness of literary texts. Ngugi argues for the significance of the literary by suggesting that art is not only necessary for nourishing and nurturing the imagination, it is also important in shaping how we see reality, life, and human relations. The art of literary representation, therefore, cannot be “detached” from life, and the issue for a politically engaged writer, Ngugi argues, is thus how to approach political questions without resorting to political analysis. This, I believe, is also a question for criticism—how to read the meaning of a literary text without reducing its engagement in the world to conventional understandings of politics. The issue for criticism is therefore how to approach a literary text’s meaning by attending to its specificities as a work of literature, and respecting, in turn, the ability of literature to teach us something about the world—and, possibly, to offer alternative ways of seeing, thinking about, and being in the world. Criticism—particularly, in the case of this study, of postcolonial texts—can too often fall into the trap of reading a literary text as simply reflecting a given social and political reality, on the one hand, or, on the other, of applying a particular political or literary theory (frequently, in the case of postcolonial literature, some version of Marxist theory) to a text and thus reducing the text’s meaning to the conventions of that political or critical framework.⁶ It is therefore necessary to

⁶ This is also an issue, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued, in applying Western feminist political theory to the experience of Third World women. The problem of the application of political theory to experience is related, I believe, to the problem of the application of critical theory to a literary text—just as applying a set of assumptions to experience risks failing to address the specificities of the experience itself, the application of a set of assumptions to a text risks failing to attend to the specificities of what the text itself suggests and can teach us about the world.

attend to a text's specificity in order to adequately grasp the particular way in which it imagines—and invites us as readers to imagine—the world.

The question of power in relation to the literary is not only an issue of representation through the creation of images, but is also related to the use of the language of the former colonizers in writing by postcolonial authors. How postcolonial writers negotiate, appropriate, and revise the English language has been a significant issue for debate in postcolonial theory and criticism. However, the globalization of the English language, particularly in the late-twentieth century, complicates these issues in ways that differ from conventional postcolonial models of appropriation and “writing back,” and thus postcolonial texts in English written in the late-twentieth century require different ways of thinking about the role and uses of the English language. While Ngugi argues that monolingualism is a “prison” that takes away from human empowerment, my analysis of the novels in this study argues that postcolonial writing in English offers possibilities for revising the linguistic and symbolic modes of dominant, global consumer capitalism—as well as destabilizes binaries of resistant versus dominant, center versus periphery—through the use of literary strategies that are potentially empowering. The creative work in which literary texts are engaged is not only a question of representation at the level of the image and of language, it is also an ethical question of how to creatively engage linguistic and symbolic norms so as to reimagine ways of being in the world.

Ngugi argues that ultimately, one of the possibilities offered by literature is the way in which it can bring into view connections—rather than similarities (and this distinction between connections and similarities is significant)—among locations and

places in the world that make us reflect differently on “home.” This question is relevant to the teaching of postcolonial and transnational literature, as it raises the important issue of not, on the one hand, resorting to a cultural relativist mode of analysis by which all differences are tolerated, but no agency is actually granted to those whose lifestyles and ways of being in the world differ from the supposed norms of dominant culture and, on the other, falling into the liberal humanist perspective in which similarities can subsume difference under a homogenizing notion of sameness.⁷ As Krishnan argues in his discussion of the significance of Said’s insights about representation in *Orientalism*, “the enabling rules of representation need to be inhabited in a critical and ‘unhomely’ manner” and it is now necessary for postcolonial studies “not to generate more empirically based descriptions and explanations of native societies but to look at how truth is produced and to see how new rules of description and practice are made possible by learning to *read* knowledge production—whether history, economics, anthropology, sociology, literature, political theory—critically, in the sense of inhabiting its weave and revaluing its aims” (267). Krishnan proposes the necessity for inhabiting “the enabling rules of representation” in an “unhomely” way, thus learning to see how truth is produced in critical work and to reconsider new possibilities for reading, engaging with, and understanding texts.

As Spivak notes, the point of critical reading is not about “questioning the individual good will of author or critic” (“Reading the World” 97-98), but rather “to see

⁷ Both of these tendencies are characteristic problems of the liberal discourse of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” that I will discuss in Chapter 4, although these ways of thinking about difference continue to structure liberal thought. Such modes of thinking demonstrate the limits of—and, in my opinion, the failure of—liberal humanism, and the need for alternative ways of thinking about the world and others.

in and through them something like their ‘age,’ to take into account how we are ourselves caught in a time and place, and then to imagine acting within such an awareness” (98-99). Critical reading is therefore an ethical act in which we as literary scholars are engaged, and through which, in our research, writing, and teaching, we engage with the world. More importantly perhaps, it is an ethical stance that “goes toward the other” (*Death* 84); rejecting identity politics, which Spivak characterizes as “neither smart nor good,” it is rather an ethics that arises from what Spivak calls “literary reading,” which she defines as an act of “suspending oneself into the text of the other” (23). Thus, one aspect of the ethics of “literary reading” is to desituate the very notion of “home” and to challenge the reader and critic to engage in the world, like Said’s figure of the exile, “liberate[d] from the sentimental attachments to and the apologetic worship of any form of ideology or belonging” (Iskandar and Rustom 8). Spivak’s notion of the ethics of literary reading is thus similar to Said’s “critical nomadism,” in which, as Iskandar and Rustom note, “Said’s ‘home’ obviated filiation, walling no one and nothing in or out; it was a permeable space with no distinct boundaries. Hence,” they continue, “one could not speak of the other. By deterritorializing the home, Said ‘de-othered the other,’ making ‘otherness’ obsolete” and ultimately, “suggesting that in exile one never arrives at a destination, thereby rendering the nomadic ontological” (6). By destabilizing the binaries of local and global, home and other, the literary texts of global English analyzed in this study suggest an ethics of responsibility in which “the entire world is a foreign land.”⁸

⁸ This is taken from the quote: “He is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land,” by a twelfth-century Saxon monk, which appears in Iskandar and Rustom’s introduction to *Edward Said: A Legacy of Representation and Emancipation*.

In contrast to what Said referred to as the “quasi-religious authority of being comfortably at home among one’s people” (qtd in Mufti 463), critical nomadism is an ethical stance in which the critic, or writer, is positioned in such a way to recognize the inherent interconnectedness of all beings—an ethical position in which, as Iskandar and Rustom note, “otherness” is made “obsolete.” Such a critical perspective is in direct opposition to the kind of critical cosmopolitanism inhabited by theorists such as Frederic Jameson and Franco Moretti, whose point of view is one in which they see themselves as being “at home” everywhere in the world. Rather than “de-othering” the other, however, a cosmopolitan perspective is one that maintains otherness in place, so that the viewpoint of the cosmopolitan subject is privileged as an authoritative position of objective observation. At stake in these competing notions of critical nomadism and critical cosmopolitanism is also, implicitly and fundamentally, the role of liberal individualist values in sustaining dominant and normative narratives about selfhood and being in the world. The novels with which this study engages queer the norms of narrative so as to productively challenge the values of liberal individualism and imagine alternative, ethical ways of seeing, thinking about, and being in the world.

Reinventing the Novel: Ethics and Literary Experiment in Global Women’s Writing

At stake in this study is the question of the role of the novel in the present, and the ethical potential of what Spivak calls “literary reading.” The novel has long been the characteristic literary form of nation-writing, associated not only with the rise of middle-class consciousness and nation- and empire-building in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, but also with construction of the postcolonial nation, particularly in the

era of decolonization and anticolonial nationalism. In my examination of postcolonial novels at different moments in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century—including the early era of anticolonial nationalism, the rise and height of postcolonial studies in academia, and the convergence of postcolonialism, postmodernism, and globalization in the early twenty-first century—one of the questions I consider is how, in an increasingly digital, virtual, and globalized world, might the novel, through its content and form, enable readers to engage with the function of narrative in everyday life. Inspired by Spivak’s notion of the ethics of literary reading, as well as by Martha Nussbaum’s arguments for the importance of the literary imagination in shaping responsible, moral, world citizens, I argue for the novel’s continued ethical significance, and for its unique potential as an innovative and continually evolving literary form.

Like Gayatri Spivak, Martha Nussbaum has consistently engaged with the work of articulating and arguing for the ethical significance and social necessity of literature and the humanities in the contemporary world. In 1996’s *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Nussbaum makes a claim for “the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own” (xvi). Nussbaum argues that since “an ethics of impartial respect for human dignity will fail to engage real human beings unless they are made capable of entering imaginatively into the lives of distant others and to have emotions related to that participation” (xvi), the literary imagination provides a powerful site in which to engage this ethical capacity. In 2010’s *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Nussbaum argues for the necessity of the unique ability of the humanities to cultivate ethical world citizens in

the current crisis in which modern societies “feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect.” Nussbaum calls for insistence on “the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts” because of their ability to “make a world that is worth living in, people who are able to see other human beings as full people, with thoughts and feelings of their own that deserve respect and empathy, and nations that are able to overcome fear and suspicion in favor of sympathetic and reasoned debate” (143). While the globalized present of late capitalism tends to be characterized as information-saturated, fast-paced, and attention-deficient, shifting and devaluing human relations from actual lived experience to virtual interaction, the novels under examination in this study offer a view of human relations that foregrounds the importance of narrative in shaping our ways of thinking and being, and the ethical, aesthetic function of literature in enabling reflection upon the fundamental questions of how we live and engage in the world. One of the most significant aspects of the experimental strategies in these novels is the way in which experimental queering of narrative norms produces the necessity for reflection, for it is only by attending to the significance of the formal innovation and narrative experimentation that the ethical significance of the text becomes clear. In this way, the time these texts require, or allow, for reflection is an ethical function of the literary and, particularly in this project, of literary experimentation with narrative in the novel form. And it is through reflection that the literary offers the contemplative space in which readers are allowed “to see other human beings as full people” and invited to participate in the imagining of “a world that is worth living in.”

At issue in this study, then, is also the form of the realist novel and its ethical potential, particularly as it relates to the ethics described by Spivak in the concept of “literary reading” and by Nussbaum as the ability of “the literary imagination.” The literary experimentation of each of the novels in this study, I argue, functions not only as experimentation with narrative, but also with the genre of the realist novel itself. If character development and affect are essential aspects of the realist novel, this study considers how experimentation with narrative voice and structure within the novel form functions to revise the norms of characterization that are based on liberal individualist notions of selfhood while creating an ethical perspective that asserts connection as the ground for humanity. The reinvention of the novel for the twenty-first century, I will argue, is an ethical literary project that complements critical projects such as Spivak’s and Nussbaum’s in asserting and enacting the ethical importance of the literary in the contemporary, globalized world.

In my consideration of a selection of novels by women writers from the English postcolonial world, this study also addresses the way in which the novel as a cultural form closely associated with national traditions and liberal individualism is a site in which normative notions of selfhood, gender, nation, and tradition are frequently shored up. The literary project in which these novels are engaged, I argue, is an ethical one of queering narrative norms so as to challenge, destabilize, and reimagine ways of being in the world. Just as the novel is frequently associated with writing the nation, it is also, I assert, the primary literary form for writing the liberal individual subject. In challenging narrative norms, these novels not only challenge the normativity of notions of “authenticity” associated with conventional ways of reading realism in women’s writing,

but also challenge the liberal individualist values that shore up dominant narratives of capitalist development. My analysis addresses the way in which “women’s writing” is frequently read through essentialist notions of the authenticity of “women’s experience,” just as the postcolonial or “minority” novel is often read for the supposed authenticity of its expression of the reality of a given ethnic community and tradition. Each of the writers in this study either implicitly or explicitly challenges or refutes the notion of the “ethnic” or “Third World” woman writer as a representative of her sex and/or culture, exposing the fundamentally flawed essentialism of such notions of authenticity. And although the trends of distribution and reception of postcolonial novels may align with reductive, essentialist, capitalist notions of liberal individualist selfhood, the novel itself, this study argues, is a site in which an ethical challenge to capitalist normativity can be engaged. Just as the association between novel and nation is destabilized and revised in the novels of this study, so the association between the novel and the construction of the coherent, liberal individual subject is reconfigured.

The primary intervention of this study is my assertion that the novels I examine participate in an ethical and experimental literary project of queering, which functions to challenge the underlying heteronormativity of narrative, nationalism, and notions of selfhood. I argue that heteronormativity is a fundamental aspect of narrative, as are liberal individualist conceptions of coherent selfhood. Thus queer experimentation in these novels lies not only in explorations of queer sexuality, but rather, more significantly, in the engagement with and destabilization of the heteronormative ground of narrative. In other words, while queer sexuality is present in the work of all the authors to varying degrees, the ethical project of queering in these texts is a function of their

literary experimentation with the novel form. I am therefore connecting the terms “queer” and “experimental” and expanding their meaning to propose and theorize the way in which literary experimentation with narrative functions as an ethical project of queering, in the sense of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s definition of queer as a project of “resistance to the regimes of the normal” (Warner 16). If the liberal individual subject—the subject of both nation and narrative—is implicitly or explicitly heterosexual, the experimental challenge in narrative to this supposedly coherent subject is therefore fundamentally queer, and, in turn, these texts demonstrate how the very coherence of the liberal individual subject and of narrative is based on heteronormativity.

In attending to narrative form in the novel, my study proposes that the experimental project of queering be read not simply in relation to feminist and queer critiques of heteronormativity, but as a queer literary practice that is fundamentally an ethical project. The connections that I establish among experimental practice, the ethics of the literary, feminist critiques of heteropatriarchy, and queer critiques of heteronormativity have not been widely theorized in the context of postcolonial women’s writing. Critiques of writing as a (hetero)normalizing practice are well known in the work of French feminist poststructuralist theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, whose work in the 1970s influenced the work of experimental writers such as Erin Mouré and Lisa Robertson in later decades of the twentieth century.⁹ The poststructuralist and deconstructive foundation of these feminist critiques has been influential in its critique of what I call the heteronorming function of narrative, as well as in its recognition of the

⁹ See, for instance: Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974); Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?” (1976); Mouré, *Furious* (1988); Robertson, *Debbie: An Epic* (1997).

ethics of the textual, and my consideration of experimental practice in postcolonial works of global English is engaged with a queer critique that not only destabilizes the norming function of narrative, but also takes up the ethical call articulated by postcolonial critics such as Spivak. Influenced by Spivak's feminism, my queer, feminist method is also one that views "gender as a general critical instrument rather than something to be factored in in special cases" (*Death* 74). This study thus considers the experimental aspects of each text to be integral to a non-normative writing practice that is attentive to gender as "a critical instrument" and challenges the heterosexual imperative upon which narratives—whether national, colonial, capitalist, or literary—are based. If "queer" is understood as "resistance to the regimes of the normal," this study suggests that it can also be understood not only as resistance to gendered and sexual definitions of normal, but also as a broader challenge to what has been constructed as normal in the dominant narratives of capitalist modernity, including liberal individualist notions of selfhood.

Queer Narrative Form: Challenging Liberal Individualism, Reinventing the Human

Organized chronologically in alignment with the development of the main currents in postcolonial thought throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, beginning in Chapter 1 with Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 *Our Sister Killjoy*, through Arundhati Roy's 1997 *The God of Small Things* in Chapter 2 and Shani Mootoo's 1996 *Cereus Blooms at Night* in Chapter 3, and ending with Zadie Smith's three novels in Chapter 4 (*White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, and *On Beauty*, published in 2000, 2002, and 2005, respectively), the chapters also demonstrate thematic progression and interconnection. Each of the novels, to varying degrees, have been situated in criticism

within the concerns of postcolonialism, as well as within contemporary debates about globalization and multiculturalism, and, more recently, within the context of the issues of global English. These distinctions, however, are only surface distinctions, and while Roy's and Smith's texts continue to be commercially successful and popular in academic inquiries about globalization and multiculturalism, the works of all four authors address the long history of globalization, destabilizing the binaries of local and global, the West and the Third World, and demonstrating the ways in which globalization has always already been at work in the periods of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonialism. Similarly, the issue of English as a "global" language is at stake in all four texts—from Aidoo's interrogation of the usefulness, possibility, and limits of English in the era of national independence in Africa, as well as her radical experimentation with the novel form, to Roy's, Mootoo's and Smith's consciously literary engagement with the English language and narrative form. Each author, I argue, engages the novel beyond its traditional nationalist content and form, shifting the novel from its designation as a national form to an innovative form of global writing in English.

In chapter 1, I argue that Aidoo's queer experimental strategy exposes the heteronormativity that underwrites not only colonialism, but also anti-colonial nationalism, thus exposing the heterosexist limits of the postcolonial nation. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo's experimentation with the novel form functions to show how narrative itself is structured by and shores up the heteronormative. The writing of the relationship between the novel's protagonist, Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman abroad on a scholarship program, and Marija, a young German housewife, not only explores queer desire between women in a transnational context, but also destabilizes notions of local

and global, Western and non-Western, particularly as they are organized along the lines of gender and sexuality. Aidoo's queer experimentation is also a critical consideration of global English, in its interrogation of the usefulness, possibilities, and limits of "this language" in the context of postcolonial national independence movements in Africa.

In Chapter 2, I consider Arundhati Roy's 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*, and address the queering of the novel as the writing of the queer relationship between the novel's protagonists, Estha and Rahel, and as a queer experiment with imagery, fragmentation, and the teleology of the novel form that challenges the heteronormativity of narrative and liberal individualism. Addressing the immediate and enduring popularity of Roy's novel in both mainstream and academic spheres, I note the way in which the novel also marks a transition from postcolonial to transnational writing in English, and performs a simultaneous critique of the anticolonial nation and of transnational globalization. In this simultaneous critique, the novel refuses the notion that cosmopolitan displacement liberates the subject, and the queer relationship between Estha and Rahel challenges the norms of liberal individualism that underwrite both nationalism and transnational globalization.

Chapter 3 examines Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and argues that its queer narration challenges the heteronormativity of narrative and articulates an ethical stance of writing the other. I argue that Tyler's narration of Mala's story, as well as his own, suggests a way of understanding the other and the self that is based on an ethic of care, and that the writing of the relationships among the characters in this novel—specifically Mala, Tyler, Hector, Ambrose, and Otoh—is a creative articulation of queer kinship and queer affiliation that challenges the heteronormative structures of nation and

narrative. The queer experimentation of the novel also moves beyond the notion of queer that is aligned with identity politics, so as to imagine queering as an ethical stance that aligns with the ethical acceptance of self and others.

Chapter 4 examines the novels of Zadie Smith—2000’s *White Teeth*, 2002’s *The Autograph Man*, and 2005’s *On Beauty*—and addresses the ethical question of the novel as experiment. Reading Smith’s work as an experiment with the multicultural, global, realist English novel, I argue for the way in which experimentation in her novels demonstrates and functions as a literary ethics of acceptance. Rather than the mainstream notion of “tolerance,” one of the buzzwords of multiculturalism, Smith’s work articulates an ethical stance of acceptance by writing the flaws and failures of her characters as an experimental, ethical, and queer challenge to the conventional moral imperative of the novel to create coherent liberal individual subjects. Furthermore, it is her writing of the failed, flawed relationships among her characters that mounts a queer challenge to the teleological heteronormativity of narrative and multicultural globalization. Smith’s experimentation with the conventions of the realist novel and with comic characterization create an ethical and innovative expansion of the novel form, and it is through this experimentation that her novels queer the norms of realism and narrative, and reinvent the form of the postcolonial, global novel in English for the twenty-first century.

Toward Imagining the Present as Future

At stake in current critical discussions of the purpose and aims of postcolonial studies in the contemporary era of globalization is the question of how to build a better future. In light of the science of global warming, there is recognition that the question of

imagining and building a better future has become a planetary one, shared by all individuals and societies in the present, and that the future of human life on this planet will be a result of global actions in the present. In a compelling 2009 essay in *Critical Inquiry*, entitled “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” Dipesh Chakrabarty offered a unique intervention into current re-examinations of the purpose and goals of postcolonial studies, as he considers the shift effected in our understanding of human history and, by extension, of our present and future, by the science of global warming. Aligning the processes of globalization and global warming, Chakrabarty notes the way in which the possibility of a future “without us” shifts our understanding of history, as our conceptions of human history are always based on an understanding of past, present, and future “through the assumption of there being an element of continuity to human experience” (220). Our increasing awareness of the very real possibility of a future “without us” facilitates a shift in consciousness from the self-serving developmental narratives of consumer capitalism and liberal individualism to a more expansive point of view that recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of being on the planet.

Chakrabarty’s theses outline how the collapse of the distinction between human and natural history, and the recognition of humans as a geological force in the Anthropocene epoch,¹⁰ not only challenges assumptions about the liberal individualist humanist subject, but also complicates humanist histories of modernity and globalization.

¹⁰ As Chakrabarty notes, the proposal of the term “Anthropocene” to describe the current geological epoch, “one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet” (209), was first made in 2000 by the Nobel-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen and a marine science specialist Eugene F. Stoermer, in the following statement: “Considering ... [the] major and still growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch” (qtd. in Chakrabarty 209).

Arguing that the issue of “[h]ow to combine human cultural and historical diversity with human freedom has formed one of the key underlying questions of human histories written of the period from 1750 to the years of present-day globalization” (207), Chakrabarty acknowledges that in these discussions of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment, there was never “any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom” (208). While discussions of freedom were “concerned with how humans would escape the injustice, oppression, inequality, or even uniformity foisted on them by other humans or human-made systems,” so that geological time and human histories were thought of as “unrelated,” this same period is the one now being called Anthropocene, the period that has led to the contemporary global situation in which “[t]he mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use” (208). While the Anthropocene might therefore seem to offer “a critique of the narratives of freedom,” Chakrabarty also acknowledges: “the relation between Enlightenment themes of freedom and the collapsing of human and geological chronologies seems more complicated and contradictory than a simple binary would allow” (210). While the Anthropocene “has been an unintended consequence of human choices,” Chakrabarty argues, “it is also clear that for humans any thought of the way out of our current predicament cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in our global, collective life” (210). Noting the limits of the usefulness of reason while “politics in the age of the masses and in a world already complicated by sharp inequalities between and inside nations” means that we cannot reliably predict human futures, it is therefore “not surprising then that the crisis of climate change should produce anxieties precisely around

futures that we cannot visualize” (211). While scientists “hope that reason will guide us out of the present predicament,” Chakrabarty argues, “the very science of global warming produces the necessity of political imperatives” (211). However, while nations and governments continue to fail to produce adequate, collaborative, national and global political imperatives for reducing human impact on the planet, my study articulates the value of the literary in producing ethical alternatives for being in the world. The ethical work of queering the novel form enables a revision of the dominant narratives of human history, liberal individualism, modernity, capitalism, and globalization that have structured our ways of being in the world since the Enlightenment.

Articulating the necessity of shifting our understanding of human history toward a view that grasps the interconnection of human and natural histories, Chakrabarty notes that critiques of capitalist globalization, while continuing to be necessary, “do not give us an adequate hold on human history” because “[t]he problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management” (212). Since “the current crisis has brought into view certain other conditions for the existence of life in the human form that have no intrinsic connection to the logics of capitalist, nationalist, or socialist identities” (217), it stands to reason that “a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged” (212). Chakrabarty therefore argues for a long view of history and humanity, one that draws together “intellectual formations that are somewhat in tension with each other: the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital” (213). This shift in understanding enables a recognition of how conditions for life on the planet, including our own, are not

related to limited human notions of history, but “are connected rather to the history of life on this planet, the way different life-forms connect to one another, and the way the mass extinction of one species could spell danger for another. Without such a history of life,” Chakrabarty continues, “the crisis of climate change has no human ‘meaning’” (217). It is therefore necessary that we acknowledge the ways in which human life on the planet is inextricably interconnected with all life on the planet, and such recognition, my project argues, requires a shift in consciousness away from liberal individualist models of selfhood toward an ethical understanding of the inherent interconnectedness of being.

To think simultaneously about the chronologies of capital and species history, is therefore a critical shift that expands “the very idea of historical understanding” (220), as well as our ability to conceptualize collectivity. “Humanist histories,” Chakrabarty argues, “produce meaning through an appeal to our capacity not only to reconstruct but [...] to reenact in our own minds the experience of the past” (220). Therefore:

climate change poses for us a question of human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. (222)

While acknowledging the need for collective thinking on a planetary scale so as to prevent further and, if possible, reverse the current devastation of the environment, Chakrabarty raises the necessary question, “How do we relate to a universal history of life—to universal thought, that is—while retaining what is of obvious value in our postcolonial suspicion of the universal?” (219-20). My study suggests that while political approaches fail to reach adequate ways of understanding human being and collectivity,

literature offers a site in which conventional understandings of the human, based on liberal individual and national notions of identity, are destabilized so as to reimagine the human as planetary. In doing so, these novels emphasize the significance of *relationships* as a central aspect of the ethical project of queering narrative norms. In each novel, queering functions as an ethical practice of challenging the norms of narrative and heteronormativity that underlie dominant understandings of human being in the world. Simultaneous with this formal experimentation is a queering of liberal individualist values through the writing of relationships as a challenge to normative understandings of individual and collective being on the planet. These narrative acts of queering not only produce a challenge to dominant understandings of human being, but also engage in the ethical imagining of human life as interconnected and, in doing so, write the human as planetary.

Chapter 1: “Like Fresh Honey on the Tongue”: Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*

Born in 1942 into a royal Fante¹¹ household, Ama Ata Aidoo is a Ghanaian author and playwright whose first play, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, written in 1964, was published by Longman the following year. Writing in English, Aidoo has published several novels, short stories, books of poetry, plays, and children’s books, as well as essays in which she addresses many of the concerns highlighted in her literary writing, including, primarily, the position of African women in “postcolonial” Africa.¹² Writing in the context of post-Independence Ghana, Aidoo draws upon her matrilineal culture to create an explicitly feminist, Africanist standpoint, from which her work critiques the sexist ideologies upon which colonialism and neocolonialism are based, as well as the way in which colonialist gender ideologies have been taken up by nationalist discourse. While her 1991 novel *Changes* was critically acclaimed and won the 1992 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Africa), her first novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*, written in 1967, but published a decade later in 1977, was not always well-received and, as the gap between its completion and publication indicates, was not recognized by the literary establishment to be of value in the first decade of Ghanaian Independence.¹³ In her critical writing, Aidoo argues against the violence with which African women writers are ignored in the literary

¹¹ The Fante are an Akan people and mostly reside in the southwestern coastal region of Ghana. As with most Akan peoples, inheritance and succession to public office among the Fante are determined by matrilineal descent.

¹² I use quotes to highlight Aidoo’s rejection of the term postcolonial. In reference to the term, in a 1991 interview with Rosemary George and Helen Scott, Aidoo states: “Post what? because it has not gone yet” (George and Scott 308).

¹³ Aidoo herself has discussed the way in which women’s writing has been virtually ignored by African male literary critics and writers. In her 1981 essay “Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves,” Aidoo notes what she calls the “unreception” (16) of *Our Sister Killjoy* by her male colleagues and friends.

establishment, and connects this violence to the representation of female characters in the fiction of male African writers. Aidoo's fictional work tends to focus on female characters, and gender relations are a central focus of her work's critique of colonialist and nationalist ideologies. In the essay "Literature, feminism and the African woman today," Aidoo connects her feminism with an Africanist project of self-definition:

Feminism is an essential tool in women's struggles everywhere and that includes African women. Every woman, as well as every man, should be a feminist. We Africans should take charge of our land and its wealth, and our own lives and the burden of our reconstruction from colonialism and slavery. If Africa is to develop, then first African women must get the best that the environment can offer for their well-being and development [. . .].
(163)

Aidoo's feminism, like her Africanist and nationalist politics, is central to her writing, and her work is therefore read in the different but overlapping contexts of African literature, African women's literature, and Third World women's literature—contexts that I will address in this chapter as simultaneously enabling and limiting understandings of the political stakes of her work.

Written in a mix of prose and poetry, and structured into four sections, *Our Sister Killjoy* focuses on the young Ghanaian protagonist Sissie's trip to Europe on a scholarship program. Sissie's journey begins in Germany, where she spends time in Bavaria and befriends a young German housewife named Marija, with whom she experiences reciprocal queer desire. Sissie then travels to London, where she is confronted with the poverty of many Africans living in England, as well as with the educated class of diasporic Africans who choose to remain in Europe. The novel concludes with Sissie's return flight to Africa, in which she writes a letter to a male African lover she has left in England, explaining why she cannot stay with him.

Throughout the novel, Sissie's experiences are focalized through a third-person narrator, whose lens provides a reflection on Sissie's naivete and inexperience, which is contrasted to "knowledge gained since." While Sissie's perspective is aligned with the anti-colonial, Pan-Africanist vision of Kwame Nkrumah's government,¹⁴ the writing of Sissie's relationship with Marija and the experimentation of the narrative destabilize a simplistic alignment of Aidoo's perspective with dominant nationalism, as they challenge the heteronormativity that underlies both colonialism and postcolonial nationalism.

While most readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* tend to focus on its nationalist politics, arguing that Sissie represents an Africanist, feminist, nationalist position in opposition to Western forms of imperialism and universalism, a position that is also grounded by Aidoo's own feminist, nationalist, and Africanist politics,¹⁵ my queer reading attends to the critique of heteronormativity that is central to the experimental and extensive consideration and critique of the limits of normative gender and sexual ideologies. My analysis of the novel engages primarily with "The Plums," the second and longest section of the novel, which focuses on Sissie's stay at a youth hostel in Bavaria and her relationship with Marija, a young, lower-middle class German housewife. In this section, the extended consideration of colonial histories in Africa and the critique of the continued

¹⁴ In 1957, Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence, and Kwame Nkrumah became the country's first Prime Minister, then President. Nkrumah was the first African leader to promote Pan-Africanism, a vision which was influenced by Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, as well as the ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois. Nkrumah's government was overthrown by a military coup, believed to have been backed by the CIA, in February 1966.

¹⁵ Aidoo has expressed her nationalist politics in a 1990 interview with Adeola James, in response to a question regarding her commitment as a third world woman writer. Aidoo states: "I don't deny that we belong to a larger non-northern world and the dynamics that operate in a situation like that, but find my commitment as an African, the need for me to be an African nationalist, to be a little more pressing. It seems that there are things relating to our world, as African people, which are of a more throbbing nature in an immediate sense" (James 14-15).

functioning of colonial ideology and its attendant forms of sexism and racism are interwoven with the development of the relationship between these two women. My analysis examines how Aidoo's writing of the relationship between Marija and Sissie not only explores queer desire and sexuality between women of radically different backgrounds, but also queers the norms of narrative so as to examine the limits of language and narrative as they regulate, structure, and sustain sexual norms. As I will demonstrate, Aidoo's experimentation is a queer practice through which the limits of the heteronormative are confronted.

My analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* expands upon readings of the feminist, nationalist, and anti-imperialist politics represented in the novel by analyzing the queer aspects of the text as integral to the questions that are raised about African nationalist politics in the era of neocolonialism. Sexuality, I argue, is not merely tangential to the political questions regarding gender and nationalism in the text—questions that have been well examined by several critics of Aidoo's work—rather, sexuality is a necessary aspect of debates about national identities, an aspect that is too often overlooked by critics, as it complicates certain assumptions about the relationship between gender and nationalism. I argue that a queer critique of heteronormativity is a central feature of *Our Sister Killjoy* and thus my analysis of the queerness of the text reads against the standard feminist interpretive frameworks through which texts by Third World women writers are often read. In the essay “Calling Kamala Das Queer,”¹⁶ Rosemary George explains the way in which “feminist guidelines for postcolonial studies” (736) have frequently limited

¹⁶ This essay by Rosemary George has been highly influential for the way in which I use the term “queer” in this chapter, and I am grateful to her for drawing my attention to it.

interpretations of the work of Third World women writers, and argues that “heterosexist logic” (735) structures many readings of postcolonial women writers’ texts. Such readings are concerned with what Gayatri Spivak calls the “supposedly indigenous” cultural context of the text (qtd. in George 736), and thus fail to attend “to heterosexuality from the vantage point of the non-heteronormative.” Thus the injunction of postcolonial feminist literary criticism, “to read Third World women writers with due emphasis given to the local context of their reception” (736), can serve to “unintentionally fall into the service of the state by striving to make heterosexual and reproductive roles (that are so necessary to the state and to citizenship) more amenable to women” (734). In contrast, as George argues, queer reading practices lend interpretative tools through which the non-heteronormative aspects of a text can be read.

The queer reading practices that are especially useful, and from which my own understanding and usage of “queer” derives, include Berlant and Warner’s work on queer theory, and Judith Halberstam’s queer methodology.¹⁷ Berlant and Warner theorize the practice of “queer commentary” as belonging to queer social practices that seek to “unsettle the garbled but powerful norms supporting [heterosexual] privilege—including the project of normalization that has made heterosexuality hegemonic” (“Sex in Public” 548). They also argue that “queer” does not have a single “stable referential content and pragmatic force” (“What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?” 344): rather, “no particular project is metonymic of queer commentary” and thus the usefulness of the term

¹⁷ While my work in queer analysis has been inspired by Berlant and Warner’s work in queer theory since my days as an undergraduate, George’s essay alerted me to the usefulness of Halberstam’s notion of queer methodology, and presents a clear outline of the way in which the work of all these theorists facilitates queer readings of Third World texts—an outline that helped clarify my own queer reading strategy.

“queer” is its “wrenching sense of recontextualization,” through which queer commentary is able “to sustain awareness of diverse context boundaries” (345). Rather than attempting to impose a “stable” theoretical framework on *Our Sister Killjoy*, I hope to show how my queer commentary allows certain particularities of the text to become legible; particularities that are obscured in readings of it as a feminist argument for nationalism. Judith Halberstam’s notion of a queer methodology, defined by Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*, as a “scavenger methodology,” which brings to light what has been “deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies” and “attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other,” as well as “refuses the academic compulsion to work toward disciplinary coherence” (13) may be, as George notes, particularly useful for queer readings of texts by Third World women writers. George argues, in her discussion of the usefulness of Halberstam’s queer methodology for her reading of “the non-heteronormative protests and pleasures” of Kamala Das’s work (“Calling Kamala Das Queer” 733), a queer reading also “has to refuse the academic compulsions to follow a set literary guide map for venturing into Third World texts—even maps drawn by progressive feminist, postcolonial cartographers” (740).¹⁸

¹⁸ In her queer reading of Kamala Das’s *My Story*, George addresses the question that will inevitably be raised in readings that utilize the tools of contemporary queer theory to analyze Third World texts. George refers to Mary John and Janaki Nair’s contestation of the distinction between “West” and “non-West” in response to the question, “‘Why bring up western theories [of sexuality] at all?’” in their introduction to *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economics of Modern India*. They write: “our response would be that ‘the West’ is at once a particular geographical place, and a *relation*. [. . .] the very conception of the other of the West as being something to which western concepts do not apply (or only as an act of violation from which one must be redeemed) is itself a western legacy. Such constructions of cultural difference leave the West firmly in command” (qtd. in George 739). John and Nair’s discussion of the way in which “the West” circulates globally supports George’s understanding of what she calls “global literary studies in English,” which she describes as “a situation that requires a radical rethinking of the claims we have become accustomed to making when we produce literary scholarship” (731-732). More specifically, her project articulates “the ways in which literary-critical ideas and terms already circulate in a global framework albeit with different inflections in different locations” (739) and addresses “the pitfalls as well as the

While feminist analyses of Aidoo's work have praised her strong female characters, her critique of polygamy and marital rape, and her feminist critique of nationalism, such analyses fail to take into account her critique of heterosexuality itself. My queer reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* focuses on what has been excluded from traditional readings; specifically, I focus on the text's critique of heterosexuality and the way in which the norms of heterosexuality structure and delimit narrative itself. Jacqui Alexander has noted that although feminist theorizing is aware of the way in which gender and sexuality are central to colonial and national institutions and regimes of power, further work remains to be done "on elaborating the processes of heterosexualization at work within the state apparatus" (65). My analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* addresses its critique of "the processes of heterosexualization" within national and imperial structures, as well as within the "apparatus" of literature itself.

(Re)Reading the Nation and Experimentation

Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have pointed out the ways in which women are related to and participate in ethnic and national processes and state practices. Most significant for my argument is their identification of two ways in which women function to support nationalist ideologies: firstly, "as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture"; and secondly, "as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories"

necessity of negotiating between locations as diverse as those of different academic disciplines, different literary lists, geographic locations, queer and national temporalities, languages, understandings of 'queer,' feminisms, and sexual practices" (756).

(7). While women function to uphold and sustain the cultural traditions of particular groups, they also “constitute their actual symbolic figuration” (9). In other words, nationalist discourse often positions women as the symbol of the nation, and in this way, women come to represent the cultural values, traditions, and practices that nationalism seeks to uphold. Analyses of *Our Sister Killjoy* that position Sissie, and, in turn, Aidoo, as “representatives” of the nation perform the same problematic move as nationalist discourses that reduce women to the status of icon, nationalisms in which women function “as symbolic bearers of the nation” (McClintock 90). Such readings fail to attend to the queerness of the text as they are limited by the heterosexist logic that simultaneously frames understandings of the nation, as well as feminist critiques of the nation and nationalism.

Fanon’s analysis of nationalism in post-Independence African nations provides a useful critique of the process by which the national elite assumes power and promotes a form of national consciousness based of nativist notions of race or tribe. This regionalist national consciousness, Fanon argues, functions to maintain colonialist ideologies by creating religious and racial tensions so as to foreclose any revolutionary possibility offered by the ideal of African unity. In his analysis of the processes through which the nationalist middle class maintains its economic, political, and ideological position, Fanon describes how this class “[does] nothing more than take over unchanged the legacy of the economy, the thought, and the institutions left by the colonialists” (176). The analyses of nationalism offered by Anne McClintock and Jacqui Alexander extend Fanon’s analysis by articulating the ways in which nationalisms are always based on and maintained by specific ideologies of gender and sex. McClintock argues that nationalisms are gendered

male and, further, that “male *national* power depends on the prior construction of *gender* difference” (89). McClintock’s critique of nationalist discourse attends to the way in which “nations are symbolically figured as domestic genealogies,” so that, in the process of national identity formation, the family came to function as a metaphor for the nation and, at the same time, “the subordination of woman to man and child to adult was deemed a natural fact” (91). McClintock analyzes the way in which this social hierarchy is also constructed upon a connection between time and gender. She argues:

Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic body of national tradition (inert, backward-looking, and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity. Nationalism’s anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender. (92)

While McClintock specifically describes the processes through which the British national narrative was configured, if we take Fanon’s argument into consideration—that post-Independence African nationalisms reproduced colonialist ideology—then it becomes clear that the figuring of national progress as masculine and the positioning of women as representative of tradition and stasis, also forms part of the elite nationalist ideology Aidoo critiques.¹⁹

¹⁹ Elizabeth Willey usefully describes how the discourse of Ghanaian nationalism, based on Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism, was gendered in similar ways. See: “National Identities, Tradition, and Feminism: The Novels of Ama Ata Aidoo Read in the Context of the Works of Kwame Nkrumah” in *Interventions: Feminist Dialogues on Third World Women’s Literature and Film*. Eds. Bishnupriya Ghosh and Brinda Rose. New York and London: Garland, 1997. 3-30. Aidoo has also considered this gendering of nationalist ideology in terms of women’s appearance as a key site of contestation. She argues: “Clothes for example, are part of the minutia of culturalization; they can symbolize cultural loss and cultural gain. Such things are pointedly illustrated in terms of women: women are the ones who wear the traditional clothes, the saris in India, the slits in Ghana. [. . .] We women have to wear the clothes, keep our hair. I focus on wigs in *No Sweetness Here* because the way the cultural question is worked out in terms of hair is very much to do with women” (George and Scott 302).

In “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization,” Jacqui Alexander analyzes the ways in which nationalism after independence reinscribes heterosexuality as the norm. She argues that “the nation has always been conceived in heterosexuality” (84) and, further, that the function of nationalism is “to socialize citizens into heterosexuality and not into self-determination” (97). Alexander suggests that heteropatriarchal nationalism has reinscribed “the major epistemic fictions” (97) of colonialism, including those about women and sexuality, and that decolonization must therefore be “imagined simultaneously as political, economic, psychic, discursive, *and* sexual” (100). While the critique of the elite and gendered nationalism described by Fanon and McClintock is explicit in Aidoo’s work, as well as in interviews with her, and has thus been examined in analyses of her work, the critique of the heterosexual injunction that underlies nationalist ideology, while implicit in her work, particularly in *Our Sister Killjoy*, has not been sufficiently analyzed.

My intervention seeks to rethink the relationship between women, sexuality, and the national, as it is presented in *Our Sister Killjoy*, as well as to rethink the experimental qualities of the text. In doing so, I consider how we might think through the experimentation of the text outside the binaries of Western versus African cultural forms. The experimental qualities of the text have been read, variously, as a challenge to the conventional form of the modern Western novel (Needham, Wilentz), as a revision or reversal of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Hoeller, Innes), and as an intervention of traditional Akan orature into the novel form (Odamtten, Elder).²⁰ My analysis considers

²⁰ See Works Cited for Needham, Wilentz, and Odamtten. For sources not cited in this dissertation, see: Hoeller, Hildegard. “Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Heart of Darkness*.” *Research in African Literatures* 35.1 (Spring

how it is possible to read the experimental aspects of the novel not simply as a response to European literary forms, nor as an insertion of Akan oral tradition into the Western novel, as each of these ways of reading the experimentation of the text maintains a framework in which postcolonial or Third World writing necessarily exists in an oppositional relationship to the West and is specifically about preserving “native” traditions. Such a framework excludes the possibility of a queer reading of postcolonial texts, by positing a ground of national or local traditions that are predicated on heteronormativity. My queer reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* attends to the way in which narrative form is bound up with the imperatives of heterosexuality, and I suggest that in order to read the queer aspects of the text, it is also necessary to attend to its formal experimentation.

In my examination of the experimental strategies of the novel, I take into account the difference between the narrative voice and Sissie’s perspective in relation to the politics of sexuality, nationalism and anti-imperialism. More specifically, my analysis considers the formal experimentation of the text in relation to its treatment of sexuality, particularly in the context of the relationship between Sissie and Marija. While several critics acknowledge that the narrative voice differs from Sissie’s perspective, most critics conflate Aidoo’s perspective with Sissie’s. I suggest that a reading of the experimental strategies in the novel demonstrates points of conflict between Sissie’s perspective and the narrator’s, thus calling into question a simple conflation of Sissie’s perspective with

2004): 130-147; Innes, C.L. “Reversal and Return in Fiction by Bessie Head and Ama Ata Aidoo.” *“Return” in Post-Colonial Writing: A Cultural Labyrinth*. Ed. Vera Mikhailovich-Dickman. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994. 69-75; Elder, Arlene. “Ama Ata Aidoo and the Oral Tradition: A Paradox of Form and Substance.” *Women in African Literature Today*. Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. London: James Currey, 1987. 109-118.

Aidoo's. Such a reading also enables a more complex understanding of the sexual politics at issue in the text. By analyzing the narrative voice as distinct from Sissie's, I also challenge the idea that Aidoo represents or privileges "traditional" (by which critics mean heteronormative) family life—the idea upon which some critics base their reading of Sissie's rejection of Marija's advances.²¹

My analysis of the experimental strategies of the text focuses primarily on shifts in narrative voice, shifts from prose to poetry, and the attendant shifts from the plot of the story to the critique of colonialism, nationalism, and neo-colonial globalization. It is in these shifts that the queerness of the text emerges. In what follows, I examine certain experimental techniques in a passage from the novel's third section, "From Our Sister Killjoy," to give a sense of the textual strategies I read as experimental. This section

²¹ My reading does not attempt to tease out Aidoo's authorial intention, nor suggest that Aidoo herself identifies as queer. Interviews with Aidoo, as well as essays written by her, tend to focus on her feminism and her Africanist and nationalist politics. In her essay, "Literature, Feminism and the African Woman Today," however, Aidoo briefly considers the relationship between feminism and lesbianism, and the way in which the two are often conflated. She not only critiques the way in which feminism has been dismissed, presumably by African men, "as a foreign ideology, imported into Africa with crusading zeal to ruin good African women and stultify intellectual debate" (163), but also articulates a position through which feminism is defined as distinct from lesbianism. She writes:

feminism as a contemporary ideology carries other meanings and concepts of life and living – including, and especially, lesbianism. However, equating feminism with lesbianism is contentious. The latter is a sexual preference. Feminism on the other hand is an ideology, a world view, a specific notion of how life should be organized and lived by half of the entire humanity here on earth. Like all other ideologies, feminism carries its own imperatives and particular commitments. (164)

Further, Aidoo argues that due to "a considerable lack of clarity over the significance of what it means to be a lesbian," a concern exists that "the thought of women independently providing a construct to challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of *all* human society has enormous subversive implications" and, to "such people, it is easy to equate feminism with lesbianism, and to raise lesbianism itself to a moral issue" (164). Aidoo refers specifically to African male critics who have criticized (and misread) *Our Sister Killjoy* as naively suggesting that women can live independently of men. Aidoo notes that many queer writers would counter this view, and refers to the work of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich "[f]or a discussion of lesbianism as an ideological stance and the connections between feminism and lesbianism" (173). Aidoo's frank critique of the way in which feminism and lesbianism are misunderstood implicitly challenges the heterosexual injunction of African nationalist discourse, opening up a framework for understanding African women's writing outside the heterosexist logic of standard analyses of African literature.

focuses on Sissie's trip to England, "her colonial home" (85), where she encounters what the narrator calls "the recipients of the leftovers of imperial handouts" and describes as follows in a typical shift from plot to critique and prose to poetry:

Post-graduate awards.
 Graduate awards.
 It doesn't matter
 What you call it.

But did I hear you say
 Awards?
 Awards?
 Awards?

What
 Dainty name to describe
 This
 Most merciless
 Most formalised

Open
 Thorough,
 Spy system of all time:

For a few pennies now and a
 Doctoral degree later,
 Tell us about
 Your people
 Your history
 Your mind.
 Your mind.
 Your mind. (86-87)

This passage is exemplary not only for the shift from plot and prose to critique and poetic form, but also for the way in which the narrative voice, in these poetic, critical passages, utilizes repetition and mimicry to expose and critique the continued functioning of racist, imperial structures and ideologies in the neo-colonial context of globalization. The prose narrative in this section also demonstrates the difference between Sissie's perspective and

the narrator's, and the way in which these two perspectives are aligned in many ways, yet, on careful reading, show significant differences. Similarly, in the following passage, Sissie's distress at seeing African women in London, poorly dressed for the cold of that city, is connected, through the narrative voice, to the continued functioning of imperial ideology and to the patterns of migration that characterize globalization. The narrator describes how Sissie, thinking of the poverty of Africans in Europe, "became sad. So sad she wanted to cry. And sometimes she went to the little room she had taken for her short stay and wept." The narrator continues:

But that period lasted only a short time. Very soon, she started getting angry. Then she became very angry. At whatever drives our people to leave their warm homes to stay for long periods, and sometimes even permanently, in such chilly places. Winter in. Winter out.

Our poor sister. So fresh. So touchingly naïve then. She was to come to understand that such migrations are part of the general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for themselves. Running very fast just to remain where they are.

She wondered why they never told the truth of their travels at home.

Not knowing that if they were to keep on being something in their own eyes, then they could not tell the truth to their own selves or to anyone else. (89)

Further, the narrative shifts to poetic form to explain:

They lied.
They lied.
They lied.
The Been-tos lied.

And another generation got itself ready to rush out. (90)

This passage demonstrates that the difference between Sissie's perspective and the narrative voice is one primarily based on the kind of knowledge that grounds their respective world-views. The suggestion is repeatedly made that Sissie's knowledge is as-yet undeveloped, and the narrative voice thus provides the lens for the critique of

colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, and, as I will show, heteronormativity, whereas Sissie's view remains focused on ideals about Africa—a view that might be characterized as “nationalist”—which ground her confusion about why Africans abroad don't simply return “home.” The subtle, yet significant difference, created by experimentation with narrative voice and structure, demonstrates that Aidoo's novel is not simply an argument for nationalism that is grounded in a critique of globalization. Rather, the differences and overlaps between Sissie's views and the narrator's knowledge, prose and poetry, plot and critique, suggest the need for a more complex, anti-foundational, Pan-African vision of possible futures for Africa and Africans, and particularly for African women.

Feminist Criticism and African Women's Writing

African women's writing has, in the past several decades, been re-evaluated in feminist critical projects that have sought to challenge the androcentric bias of the African literary canon in English²², established in the “post”-colonial era of the 1960s and 1970s, through which African literature was defined as the sphere of male writers and critics. Several anthologies published in the 1980s sought to address the twofold problem of the absence of women's writing in the African literary canon, and the absence of criticism on the representation of women in African literature. Notable among these anthologies are the 1986 *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, and the 1987 *Women in African Literature Today*, edited by Eldred Durosimi Jones. These anthologies sought to correct

²² This project of re-evaluation and theorization of African women's writing has also occurred in the African French literary world, though I do not engage with postcolonial literature in French here.

the exclusion of women from the African literary tradition. Jones explains the current (in 1987) critical attention to literature by African women, explaining in his editorial note that the current issue of *African Literature Today* focuses on “African women writers and the presentation of women in African literature” for two reasons: “first, that African women writers [. . .] have been neglected in the largely male-authored journals, critical studies and critical anthologies and, secondly, that the last ten years or so have seen a tremendous blossoming of highly accomplished works by African women writers and it would have been inexcusable to continue to ignore them” (1). Jones suggests, further, that the absence of African women’s writing up to the end of the 1960s was likely due to the difference of gender roles in “traditional” African culture, arguing that “the education of women in Africa lagged far behind that of men” and that “men probably had more leisure to devote to activities like writing, since women had to cope with the enormous tasks of childbearing and childrearing and caring for their men.” Thus, he argues, “[t]he dearth of African women writers, up till the very recent past, is therefore probably in itself a consequence of traditional African attitudes towards women” (1). While Jones attempts to address certain material realities that may influence women’s literary output, a feminist critique of the process of canonization, however, would suggest that such material realities extend to the “traditional” way in which women’s writing is excluded from literary canons.

Florence Stratton, in her 1994 *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, provides an excellent analysis of the exclusionary practices through which “women writers have been written out of the African literary tradition” (1), as well as attempts “to write women’s writing back into the African literary tradition” (176).

Stratton identifies the ways in which the publishing industry contributes significantly to the exclusion of women writers from the African literary canon. Outlining the history of the Heinemann African Writers Series, which published major African novels from 1958 to 1986, Stratton notes that the first book in the series by a woman, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, was published in 1966, and is the twenty-sixth title of the series. Eight years and twenty-five titles separate the publication of the first book in the series, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, and the publication of the first title by a woman writer. Furthermore, the next title by a woman, *Idu*, was also written by Nwapa and appeared in 1970, "thirty male-authored texts later" (80). The gaps in publication highlight what Stratton identifies as not simply a reflection of the lack of equality in education that Jones notes, but rather the persistence of "[c]ritical devaluation of women's writing": she notes, for example, that Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, both published in 1966, received "mainly hostile" critical attention (80).²³ Stratton also outlines the process of canonization by which women's writing was excluded from critical anthologies of African literature: Eustace Palmer's 1972 *An Introduction to the African Novel* and 1979 *The Growth of the African Novel*, David Cook's 1977 *African Literature: A Critical View*, and Gerald Moore's 1980 *Twelve African Writers*, all exclusively examine male writers as representative of African literature.

²³ It is to this kind of "hostile" critical attention, as well as the absolute lack of attention to women's writing that Aidoo refers in "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves." Aidoo critiques the ideology in which "the criteria for measuring and judging human accomplishments [. . .] are exclusively masculine" and exposes the misogyny of this idea, arguing that if this is true, "then only men are human beings." In such a worldview, "[w]omen are not human" and "[w]hat is completely bewildering though is that having been reduced to non-persons, our genuine efforts to prove ourselves human by entering genuine fields of human endeavor should go so totally unappreciated. In fact, much worse than that, our attempts to do well in these fields almost inevitably provoke resentments, both overt and covert" (15). Not only is women's writing resented, it is also often ignored or simply not published. *Our Sister Killjoy*, as noted, was written around 1966, but did not get published until 1977.

However, in the early eighties two book-length studies of African women's writing appeared: Lloyd Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981) and Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984). Perhaps due to Taiwo's "trite" and "ill-informed" (Stratton 2) discussion of women writers, studies of women writers began to emerge which dealt with representations of women in male writing as well as with the works of specific women writers. As Carole Boyce Davies notes in her introduction to *Ngambika*, the study of African women's literature has "moved from the early identification of biases in male writers to an exploration of the works of women writers who have remained outside of the purview of literary criticism" (6). Davies identifies the following characteristics, which I will quote extensively because of their influence on critical readings of Aidoo's work, of what she identifies as "[a] genuine African feminism":

Firstly, it recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation.

(8)

Secondly, [. . .] it recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. As such, it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies.

Thirdly, it recognizes that African societies are ancient societies, so logically, African women must have addressed the problems of women's position in society historically. [. . .]

Fourthly, African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women's agendas. (9)

And, as fifth, sixth, and final characteristics, Davies argues that an African feminist approach "respects African women's self-reliance and the penchant to cooperative work and social organization," "has to look objectively at women's situation in societies which

have undergone a war of national liberation and socialist reconstruction,” and “looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women” (10). Davies connects the characteristics of African feminism with an African feminist critical approach, which she categorizes as engaging in the following critical activities: “1) Developing the canon of African women writers; 2) Examining stereotypical images of women in African literature; 3) Studying African women writers and the development of an African female aesthetic; and 4) Examining women in oral traditional literature” (13-14). The outline Davies provides of African feminism and African feminist literary criticism is a useful overview of how African women writers have been read and positioned in global literary studies as simultaneously working alongside and against the understandings of women provided by African male writers and by Western feminists: in other words, African feminism has not only been theorized as a corrective to African male discourse, but also to Western feminist discourse.²⁴

Similarly to Davies’s definition of the functions and goals of African feminism and feminist literary criticism, Molaria Ogunidipe-Leslie’s much-cited essay, “The Female Writer and Her Commitment” (originally published in *The Guardian* [Lagos] in 1983), provides a formulation of what African women’s writing should do. Like Davies, who

²⁴ Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” provides a relevant critique of the way in which Western feminism often works from colonialist biases, and therefore is not appropriate in theorizing the situation of women in third world locations. Aidoo has also discussed the ways in which Western feminist and African male discourses have silenced African women. In a panel discussion on African literature and African women writers, Aidoo describes how she and the other African women writers had to explain to the Western feminists and the African men present “that, strange as it may seem, we African women are perfectly capable of making up our own minds and speaking for ourselves” (Untitled essay in *Critical Fictions* 154). African feminism is to be understood not simply as a version of Western feminism, nor as simply a response to African male representations of women, but as a contestation to the colonialist and patriarchal ideologies through which African women’s lives and African women themselves have been understood.

argues that the works of African women writers “provide truthful assessments of women’s lives,” so as to create a “positive image” of African women “that is in tune with African historical realities and does not stereotype or limit women into postures of dependence or submergence,” but rather, “searches for more accurate portrayals” of African women (15), Ogundipe-Leslie argues: “One of the commitments of the female writer should be to the correction of these false images of the woman in Africa” (8). In order to do so, the woman writer “must know the reality of the African woman, must know the truth about African women and womanhood” (8). The truth-claims upon which these definitions of African women’s writing are based is related to an assumption about women’s knowledge of their “biological,” gendered reality. In perhaps the most well-known and frequently-cited formula for African women’s writing, Ogundipe-Leslie claims: “The female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three” (10). Ultimately, she also argues that African women writers must locate the social concerns of their writing “within the larger global context of imperialism and neo-colonialism” (11-12). In this way, Ogundipe-Leslie simultaneously grounds African women’s writing in their “biological womanhood” while also suggesting that their portrayal of Africa women’s realities must be contextualized by “global” concerns. This formula for African women’s writing has been influential in providing critics with a map through which to navigate the terrain this writing should cover, and has implicitly structured many of the critical analyses of Aidoo’s feminist, nationalist and anti-imperial concerns in *Our Sister Killjoy*. Such formulations explicitly argue for a specific kind of “realism” in Third World women’s writing, positing that the function of Third World

women's writing must be to "accurately" represent the "realities" of women's lives. The assumption that women's writing, and specifically writing by "Third World" or "ethnic" women, "represents" the diverse realities of women's lives is an assumption that is challenged by each of the writers in this study. Beginning in this chapter with Aidoo, I show how each of these writers challenges the normative categories through which realist novels by postcolonial, global women writers tend to be understood.

Our Sister Killjoy and the Critics

Representing a range of concerns that are conventionally understood as "postcolonial," *Our Sister Killjoy* addresses the continued functioning of colonial ideology and its attendant forms of sexism and racism, and critiques the processes of decolonization and independence, as characterized by Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which an elite nationalism maintains colonial forms of rule virtually unchanged. The novel also critiques the "post"-colonial situation in which the intellectual classes participate in an African diaspora that forms part of the patterns of migration characteristic of the neocolonial era of globalization. By analyzing its critique of the African diaspora and the neocolonial processes that enable and necessitate this diaspora, readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* tend to focus on the nationalist politics of the novel, arguing, as I have noted, that Aidoo and Sissie represent a nationalist position in opposition to Western imperialism and universalism. Criticism of *Our Sister Killjoy* thus tends to focus on what Vincent Odamtten calls the "oppositional" discourse of the text and what Anuradha Dingwaney Needham identifies as a strategic process of inversion or reversal of the colonial travel narrative and colonialist discourse, as well as the binaries

upon which such discourse is based. This process of inversion is read as a strategy of resistance through which African nationalism, based on an essentialist understanding of race, is opposed to Western forms of imperialism and neocolonialism. While identifying the complex uses of nationalist discourse in the text, readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* that focus on oppositional strategies of reversal or inversion tend to reduce the treatment of processes of colonialism and globalization in the text to a simple binary between essentialist African nationalism and universalist Western neocolonialism.

It is in this context that critics focus their readings of the novel on the extended argument directed at the African men who have chosen to stay in Europe. Critical analyses of the text therefore focus on the sections “From Our Sister Killjoy” and “A Love Letter”: the former, which I have described briefly in my introduction to the experimental strategies of the text, includes Sissie’s journey to England to visit a friend, and her encounter with Kunle, an African in London, “practically a Londoner” (95), whose excitement over the transplant of the heart of a young black man to a “Dying White Man” (95), leads to an extended consideration of processes of globalization that sustain racist structures of colonialism and imperialism. While Kunle is thrilled by this “most wonderful piece of news” (96), Sissie and her friend are horrified by the implications of the uses of black bodies in the name of “Science” and “Progress.” The politics of gender that are eclipsed by the discourses of science, progress, development, and modernization are made explicit in this section through Sissie’s reaction to Kunle’s excitement and the narrator’s exposure of processes of globalization in which black bodies are disposable means to the ends of “progress”:

Confused, yet dying to ask Kunle

Why?
How?

Admonishing herself to tread
Softly –
We are in the region of
SCIENCE!

Little
Village
Girls
 who
Dream
Do not
Cannot
Ever
Understand
These things
- it matters not what else they claim -

Besides, the pathways of
History
Are littered with the bones of
Those who dared doubt
Progress and . . . (96)

In this passage, the narrator exposes the sexism of dominant African male discourses by ironically positioning Sissie as belonging to a group categorized as “Little / Village / Girls”—a category that limits girls and women to a sphere outside of politics, history, science (and, presumably by extension, education) and “progress”—thus also denying women’s voices to be considered in arguments for Africa’s future. Women’s views are not only excluded from the male public sphere, but are also, even more violently, denied altogether: Sissie’s perspective—which upholds an idealist vision of hope for Africa’s future—is reduced to a “Dream” and Sissie herself, in this dominant view of “Little African Girls,” does not even have the capacity to “Understand.” The experimental qualities of this passage are significant for the way in which the

capitalization functions to parody the dominant, violently sexist view that Aidoo critiques, while the line “ – it matters not what else they claim – ” typographically demonstrates, through the lower-case letters and the framing of the line by dashes, that while African women do have claims to make, these claims are marginalized and eclipsed by dominant sexist ideology. Aidoo not only critiques dominant nationalist ideology as sexist, but also critiques the underlying conflation of all women to a single position, a move that does not simply marginalize women, but rather dehumanizes them by denying them the ability to make claims as individuals. In this way, Aidoo also challenges the critical conflation of Sissie’s perspective with a “representative” African female perspective, showing that the very notion of a representative women’s perspective is based on this fundamentally dehumanizing ideological assumption. Kunle’s belief that “it is the / type of development that can / solve the question of apartheid / and rid us, ‘African negroes / and all other negroes’ of the / Colour Problem. The whole of the / Colour Problem” (96) is criticized through the questioning of Sissie’s friend about “whose hearts, donor and receiver, might have been used in the earlier stages of what they were sure could only have been a fairly long series of trials [. . .]” and about the first publicly announced donor, the “poor ghostly female whose / Identity has / Faded, / Already, / So completely” (97). The supposedly equalizing processes of globalization are exposed to be continuous with racist, exploitative colonial processes in which “Black people still / Die / So / Uselessly!” (108), while this section demonstrates the narrator’s ironic critique of the way in which women are silenced by dominant narratives of “progress”—not only in the context of imperialism and neocolonial globalization, but also in nationalist and diasporic relations among African men and women.

“A Love Letter,” the final section of the novel that follows “From Our Sister Killjoy,” includes a letter, written in the first person, from Sissie to her male lover, who she has left to return to Africa. The subject of this section is Sissie’s argument against those African men who choose to stay in Europe, and it is this section that critics tend to privilege in their readings of the novel. The critical focus on this section, however, does not acknowledge how it differs, formally and structurally, from the other sections of the novel and what the significance of this difference might be. Furthermore, to focus on this section as containing the main argument of the novel—an argument from Sissie, as a representative of “the African female,” directed at African men, which includes the injunction to “come home”—reinscribes the heteronormative project of nationalism, and thus fails to acknowledge the ways in which heteronormativity is undercut and challenged throughout the novel. Such readings also fail to note the shift from third- to first-person narration, a formal shift that I believe is significant for analyzing the difference between Sissie’s perspective and the narrator’s. While the other sections of the novel are written in the third person, and thus privilege the narrator’s perspective, “A Love Letter,” as I have noted, is written in the first person, from Sissie’s perspective. This shift is significant for the way in which it draws attention to the difference between these two perspectives and the refusal of the text to fix either as representative of the dominant ideology of the text. Sissie’s nationalist argument, in other words, is undercut and challenged throughout the novel by the critique mounted by the narrative voice in the poetry passages. However, the extended critique of neocolonial structures of globalization provided by the narrator also demonstrates that an argument is being made for change in Africa. Examining the differences created by the textual shifts allows for

analysis of the experimental qualities of the novel as strategies through which dominant, heteronormative understandings of nationalism and Pan-Africanism are challenged, subverted, and extended, to include a broader set of concerns.

Our Sister Killjoy, as I have suggested, tends to be read as Aidoo's call for nationalism, based on an essentialist idea of African identity. Needham, for instance, argues that Aidoo's nationalism is based on "the belief in a singular, essentialist, national identity and identification ('African,' in Aidoo's case), with [a] more or less organic connection to the territory designated as one's nation/home" (75). While Needham acknowledges that Aidoo's essentialism is strategic, and therefore "politically progressive," she also concedes that "[i]t is sometimes impossible not to read Aidoo's deployment of these essentialisms as ambiguously situated between an awareness of these as necessary but invented constructs and her 'visceral attachment' to their truth or reality" (90). Similarly to the reading of most critics, Needham's reading of the nationalist politics of the text is based on a conflation of Aidoo's perspective with Sissie's: the ambiguity Needham identifies is instead, I would argue, a function of the distinction between Sissie's perspective and the narrative voice, neither of which, I suggest, necessarily represent the author's own perspective.

This conflation of Sissie's perspective with Aidoo's also warrants critical readings that analyze the connection between the text's focus on female characters and its engagement with nationalist politics as one in which women function as representatives of the nation, or of "genuine," resistant, nationalist politics. For instance, Needham argues that "Aidoo's female characters [. . .] function as the carriers and voices of a genuine nationalism" (86), and that therefore, in Aidoo's view, "the essential attributes

likely to produce a genuinely resistant subject” are: “African, black, female, with a staunchly anti-Western stance and sensibility, where Western is conceived as coterminous with imperialism” (88). Furthermore, Needham argues that these characteristics are, in Aidoo’s perspective, the “fundamental determinants of genuine resistance” (89), a resistance that “is always framed by the context of neo-colonialism and thus by her need to rid Africa of its continuing stranglehold” (89). “Genuine resistance” to Western imperialism and universalism, in other words, is only possible when enacted from the subject position of “African, black, female.” Ranu Samantrai’s reading of the novel furthers Needham’s argument by suggesting that “Sissie’s position of subjective centrality” functions not only to challenge Western notions of universality, but also “undermines race as an appropriate measure of identity and difference” (143). Samantrai’s reading of the novel focuses on the ways in which gender and class intersect with race so as to argue, that “the nationalism [Aidoo] proposes, though particular to black Africans, is not built on the simple proclamation of a racial essence. On the contrary, race as a foundational identity is undermined by the equally compelling categories of gender and class” (142). While Needham and Samantrai interpret Aidoo’s nationalism differently, their claims about the nationalism of the text are based on the assumption that Sissie represents Aidoo’s views.

Implicit to such arguments is also the assumption that Aidoo in turn represents the views of “*the African female*” (Nwankwo 157, my emphasis). Gay Wilentz, for instance, reads Sissie, variously, as “the eye of her community” (164), the “representative” of the women of the community “who have been left behind” by the African men who chose to go abroad (165), as “the messenger of the people” (173), and ultimately, as representative

of “Mother Africa.” Problematically, readings such as Nwankwo’s and Wilentz’s not only conflate Sissie’s position with Aidoo’s, they also see this position as representative of an essential, African woman’s position, which relies upon a notion of “duty” to race and nation. Such interpretations fall into the same trap as nationalist discourse that positions women as symbols or icons of the nation, and thus deny the possibility of any position that subverts or challenges the norms upon which nationalist discourse is based. Against such essentialist readings of the text’s engagement with nationalist ideology, I argue that it is the heteronormativity of nationalism that is brought under scrutiny and called into question through the novel’s experimentation. Readings that focus on the nationalism of the text also tend to position Aidoo in agreement with nationalism’s heteronormative project, and these readings ground their claims by interpreting Sissie’s rejection of Marija as Aidoo’s condemnation of queer desire as a Western “perversion.” Wilentz, for instance, argues that “it is evident that Aidoo—however sympathetically—sees [Marija’s] attempt at a lesbian relationship as a perversion of woman love and part of the degeneration of European family life” (167), and that Marija’s situation is presented “as an example of the West’s societal degeneration—the breakdown of the family” (166). In this reading, Sissie’s actions are assumed to represent Aidoo’s views, and Sissie’s rejection of Marija is assumed to represent Aidoo’s privileging of “traditional” (i.e. heteronormative) family life. Similarly, regarding Sissie’s rejection of Marija, Nwankwo argues: “Sissie’s act is probably in keeping with Aidoo’s. It symbolizes the gap between the European female and the African female’s response” (157). The essentialism of such perspectives relies upon certain assumptions about gender, sexuality, national and cultural identification that also warrant these arguments:

both critics seem to assume, first, that queer sexuality is antithetical to national identification and belonging. Both also assume the impossibility of queer desire for an African woman: lesbian desire is seen as possible only for European women, and, furthermore, as a “perversion” or “degeneration” of the traditional, heteronormative family structure. Finally, this perspective also assumes that Sissie and Aidoo represent a nationalist perspective based on the notion of a woman’s “duty” to her home and nation, a duty that is implicitly synonymous with heteronormative values and reproductive relations. While most critics thus align the text’s treatment of nationalism with a heteronormative project, I argue that the discourse of heteronormative nationalism is challenged by the queerness of the text, and, moreover, it is only by taking the experimental qualities of the novel seriously that a queer reading of the novel becomes possible. In the next section, I offer a queer textual analysis that challenges normative critical understandings of sexuality, nationalism, and postcolonial global relations in the novel.

Many critics refer to the experimentation in the novel in relation to their broader argument, without considering the ways in which formal experimentation functions to complicate many aspects of the novel’s content.²⁵ Needham, for instance, notes that the novel is composed of “a mix of genres” and “a mix of affective registers” that perform “a series of brutal debunkings” of Western ideologies (84). She also argues that “Sissie’s (and Aidoo’s) argument is, virtually by definition, a closed (pro-return-to-Africa, anti-

²⁵ While I primarily discuss Needham, Nwankwo, and Odamtten here, several other critics refer to the experimental aspects of the text. See, for instance, Caroline Rooney, “‘Dangerous Knowledge’ and the Poetics of Survival: A Reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* and *A Question of Power*,” and C.L. Innes, “Mothers or Sisters? Identity, Discourse and Audience in the Writing of Ama Ata Aidoo and Mariama Ba,” both in Susheila Nasta, ed. *Motherlands: Black Women’s Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1992.

migration-to-the-West) argument, which exists in an uneasy, even contradictory relationship with *OSK*'s formal 'openness' [. . .] and fragmentation, when, for example, prose-poetry disrupts the linear logic of Sissie's narrative" (85). Needham acknowledges that the experimental aspects of the text might contradict her reading of Sissie's argument (which she reads as representative of Aidoo's), without actually exploring the implications of this suggestion. In an analysis of the feminist politics of the novel, Nwankwo argues that the "various narrative voices in shifting perspectives" forces the reader to "accept the author as a detached and neutral observer" rather than "being a solicitor for any special interests" (152). The "special interests" with which Nwankwo is specifically concerned are the interests of African women: he argues that the novel's "success" relies upon Aidoo's ability to lend all social problems equal weight, rather than focusing on feminist concerns (155). Further, Nwankwo argues that the mix of prose and poetry in the text is "a defiant artistic form" that represents Aidoo's rejection of traditional structures, "when such structures are used for inhibiting people or artistic expression" (155). Like Needham, Nwankwo presents the fact of experimentation in the text without fully exploring its implications. In Vincent Odamtten's book about Aidoo's work, in which he reads her writing in the context of Ghanaian culture and history specifically, and postcolonial African literature in the era of neocolonialism in general, Odamtten suggests that the experimentation is part of "an overall strategy of resistance" (12) in which "[Aidoo's] innovative use of structural and thematic elements gleaned from Ghana's orature radically transforms the Western literary genres in which she appears to be working" (12-13). Significantly, Odamtten is one of few critics who note the difference between Sissie's perspective and the narrative voice (119). His analysis,

however, does not go so far as to examine the “disruptive formal and rhetorical elements” (11) outside the binary framework of Ghanaian versus Western cultural forms.

The Plums: Reading Sexuality in *Our Sister Killjoy*

My queer reading of the novel engages primarily with “The Plums,” the section that focuses on the relationship between Sissie and Marija. My reading considers the queerness of the text as integral to its feminist, nationalist and Africanist politics, and, as I have suggested, this reading challenges critical assumptions about the heteronormative nationalist politics of the text, and demonstrates the ways in which the text, specifically through its experimentation, critiques the heteronormative basis of nationalism, as well as the (hetero)norming function of narrative.²⁶ In my analysis of the following passages, I

²⁶ Most criticism, as I have noted, focuses on Aidoo’s feminist critique of colonialist and nationalist ideologies, and their attendant forms of racism and sexism. Sexuality, if brought into the discussion at all, is analyzed as part of the feminist critique of patriarchy, which remains framed by heterosexist logic. Readings of “The Plums” tend to get around the queer relationship at the heart of this section by, first of all, focusing on the critique of imperialism and colonialism that is interspersed with the story of Sissie and Marija’s relationship, and, secondly, by dismissing their relationship in readings of Sissie’s rejection of Marija as a rejection of the “perversion” of the West and thus as a privileging of “traditional” African values. For instance, Vincent Odamtten argues that this section is about the development of Sissie’s knowledge and that “[u]ltimately [. . .] the plums [. . .] are about the nature and abuse of power in a world that seems to prevent and overdetermine the realization of meaningful human relationships” (125). Odamtten reads the relationship between Sissie and Marija as a stage in the development of her knowledge, and concludes that “[h]er experience in Germany has given the once naïve Sissie a more sagacious perspective on life” (126). Odamtten also argues that “Sissie’s nascent lesbian relationship” exposes not only “the power dynamics of a sexist heterosexual relationship” (125), but also “the sexist dichotomies and paternalism that obviated any meaningful relationship between Sissie and Marija and that figuratively characterize the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor under colonialism and neocolonialism” (131). While this reading provides insight into the complex connections between knowledge, sexuality, power, and colonial relations of domination, it also contextualizes and frames Sissie and Marija’s relationship by heterosexuality and ignores the queer eroticism of the plums.

Angeletta Gouridine’s analysis of the relationship between Sissie and Marija, like Odamtten’s, focuses specifically on Sissie’s rejection of Marija. She argues that “Sissie’s anguish [is] related to notions of race and family” and that “her response [is] an attempt to reconcile the role of nationalist women with their identities as female homosexuals” (97). Gouridine reads Sissie’s “desire for maleness” as part of “the struggle to create a space within which female homosexual desire can be articulated,” and suggests that this “struggle” is also a “recognition” of the way in which queerness is delimited by heterosexuality (97-98). Sally McWilliams argues: “Aidoo’s inclusion of this relationship between Marija and Sissie allows us to

examine the ways in which the discourse of normalcy that maintains heterosexuality as the dominant is exposed through parodic repetitions of the language and phrases that sustain that discourse. In these passages, the use of capital letters and the experimental poetic style suggest the parodic repetition of the kind of anxiety and intolerance that regulates and enforces heterosexuality as what is “normal” and pathologizes queer relationships as “perverse.” Furthermore, the kind of intolerance that regulates sexuality is also connected to the regulation of interracial relations. In the passage below, the capitalization of the line “IT CANNOT BE NORMAL” indicates that the belief in normalcy is not necessarily held by Sissie or the narrator, but rather is a dominant way of thinking that sustains the ideology of heteronormativity. This passage occurs after Marija has told Sissie about her fondness for two Indians who worked for a while in the supermarket of her town:

Sissie looked at the young mother and the thought came to her that

Here,
Here on the edge of a pine forest in the
Heartland of
Bavaria, among the ruins of one of the

see how women’s sexuality is interlaced with the effects of hierarchical power relations marked by gender, race, and culture” (344). In McWilliams’s analysis, the function of homosexuality in the novel is to allow Sissie to gain the kind of knowledge through which she can critique the “neo-colonialist, heterosexist paternalism” of African men (345). McWilliams concludes that Sissie’s “knowledge gained since” is “a knowledge balanced on the willingness to take risks in the face of neo-colonialist and heterosexist ideologies,” and the novel thus provides “energetic hope for positive change for Africa through its female constituency” (347). Ultimately, McWilliams argues, “Aidoo’s protagonist is in the transitional space from which awareness of oppressions turns into productive actions of female autonomy and strength” (347). While McWilliams attends to sexuality as a central problematic of the text, her reading of the use of homosexuality as a means through which “female autonomy and strength” is reached assumes heterosexuality as normative sexuality. These readings each take heterosexuality for granted and assume that the queer relationship between Marija and Sissie functions as a developmental stage of Sissie’s knowledge, figuring for and exposing the power relations of heterosexuality (which Odamtten suggests are only present in a “sexist” version of heterosexuality). In doing so, critics maintain the heteronormative assumptions that structure and delimit readings of texts by Third World women.

Largest
 Castles in all
 Germany,
 IT CANNOT BE NORMAL
 for a young
 Hausfrau to
 Like
 Two Indians
 Who work in
 Supermarkets. (23)

This passage connects (hetero)normative ideology with Europe through the repetition of the word “here,” as well as indicates that the heterosexual imperative is simultaneously an injunction against miscegenation. While Sissie assumes that the Indians “might have been male” (20), there is no indication from Marija about their sex, and, “from knowledge gained since,” it could equally be assumed that they were female. The capitalization of “IT CANNOT BE NORMAL” signals the language of dominant discourse that is challenged throughout the text. Indeed, Aidoo utilizes capitalization throughout the novel to expose, challenge, and parody phrases from dominant discourses that uphold normative ideologies. In another passage of “The Plums,” an extended poetic critique of the colonial form of rule upheld by current governments in African nations contains capitalized phrases such as: “JUST LIKE THE GOOD OLD DAYS / BEFORE INDEPENDENCE” (56) and “EDUCATION HAS BECOME TOO / EXPENSIVE. THE COUNTRY CANNOT / AFFORD IT FOR EVERYBODY” (57). Aidoo’s use of capitalization indicates a critique of the discourse that is sustained by repetition of such phrases, as well as connects the discourses under critique. The capitalized phrases in “The Plums” function to not only challenge African nationalist discourse and the

discourse of heteronormativity, but also to reveal how these discourses are fundamentally connected.

The above passage can also be analyzed in connection with a later passage in the same section in which the questions and statements of the villagers about Marija and Sissie's relationship are repeated and, I argue, exposed as the functioning of the ideology of heteronormativity. For instance, lines such as: "Meanwhile who was this Marija Sommer who was monopolising the curiosity that provided such fun just by being?" (43), and "There must be something wrong with that Marija Sommer! !" (44), not only parodically repeat the kinds of assumptions upon which heteronormativity is based and the statements that must be repeated in order to maintain its dominant position, but the repetition of these statements itself also functions to expose the unstable foundations of heteronormativity:

Why does she always walk with the black girl? asked the director of the local branch of a bank.

Sommer does not speak English and the African speaks no German. So who interprets for them? asked the manager of a supermarket.

What could they be talking about? wondered an insurance broker.

She must not take her to her house every day!

She must be getting neurotic!

It is perverse.

SOMEONE MUST TELL HER HUSBAND! ! (44)

This passage links ignorant and racist views ("the curiosity", "the black girl", "the African") with the pathologizing of queer desire (Marija as "neurotic", their relationship as "perverse"), as well as suggests that domesticity is at stake: "She must not take her to her house every day!" The home is revealed to be a site of contestation through which heterosexuality is enforced and the supposedly stable reproductive function of the nation

is preserved. In this passage, Aidoo's use of parodic repetition not only exposes the way in which heteronormativity is connected to the nation, but also destabilizes this connection and challenges the heterosexual injunction upon which nationalism and narrative are based. The experimental strategies of these passages—repetition, shifts to poetic form, and the use of capitalization—function to expose and challenge the connection between the heteronormativity of nationalist discourse and normative narrative form. The exposure of this connection enables a rethinking of the relationship between nationalist discourse and narrative form, and suggests that a critique of heteronormativity is key to such a rethinking. These passages also demonstrate that in order to engage Aidoo's challenge to heteronormativity, it is necessary to rethink the experimental qualities of the text as strategies through which a challenge to nationalism, as well as an exposure of the norming function of narrative, becomes possible.

“The Plums” is titled in reference to the plums that Marija gives Sissie every time they meet. The plums are explicitly connected to love, and implicitly connected to queer sexuality, through the erotic descriptions of the fruit. The line breaks and repetition in the passage that introduces the plums are significant as they not only demonstrate the importance of the plums, but also create a sense of erotic anticipation. After an introduction in prose about the fruit, the narrative is fragmented with the following passage:

But
The plums.
What plums.
Such plums. (38)

The following passage not only suggests that the plums encode queer desire between the two women, but also connects Sissie herself to the plums and to the “beautiful and black Bavarian soil”:

Sissie had decided that being fruits, she liked them all, although her two loves were going to be pears and plums. And on those two she gorged herself. So she had good reason to feel fascinated by the character of Marija’s plums. They were of a size, sheen and succulence she had not encountered anywhere else in those foreign lands. And which, unknown to her then, she would not be encountering again. What she was also not aware of, though, was that those Bavarian plums owed their glory in her eyes and on her tongue not only to that beautiful and black Bavarian soil, but also to other qualities that she herself possessed at that material time:

Youthfulness
 Peace of mind
 Feeling free:
 Knowing you are a rare article,
 Being
 Loved.

So she sat, Our Sister, her tongue caressing the plump berries with skin-colour almost like her own, while Marija told her how she had selected them specially for her, off the single tree in the garden. (39-40)

Significant in this passage is also the difference between Sissie’s perspective and the narrator’s: the phrases “unknown to her then” and “What she was also not aware of” highlight this difference and indicate the narrator’s greater understanding of Sissie’s position. The interventions of the narrator in this passage indicate that Sissie will not experience a relationship like the one she has with Marija again, and that Sissie is unaware of the way in which her “material” situation at that time allows her to be “free” and “loved.” As I will show, it is the fact of her being in “foreign lands” that enable this queer relationship.

In the following passage, the narrator describes the context and setting in which Sissie and Marija’s relationship develops as conducive to the “love” that has already been

ascribed to Marija's feelings for Sissie: in a description of how "Marija picked each lot about twenty-four hours ahead and kept them overnight in a polythene bag" to soften and sweeten the plums, the narrator notes: "Yes, / Work is love made visible" (40-41). The following passage details the development of love in the context in which Sissie finds herself:

For who knows of a better inspirer of puppy-love, European-style,
than

An ancient ruined castle at the edge of a
Brooding pine forest, on the
Bank of a soft flowing river that
Sparkles silver
Under the late-night
Sun?

So there was a great deal of hand-holding, wet-kissing along ancient
cobble corridors. Pensive stares at the silvery eddies of the river.
The promises exchanged were not going to be kept. But who cared?

Love is always better when
Doomed . . .
If Sonja Simonian, Jewish,
Second generation immigrant from
Armenia to Jerusalem
Falls in love with Ahmed Mahmoud bin
Jabir from Algeria –
Then who dares to
Hope? Or not to hope?

On others, the great romanticism of the setting was completely lost. Most
of Sissie's room-mates were such infants. (41)

What is significant in this passage is that the love described is supposedly between the scholarship students, but, if the narrative shifts and repetitions are taken to be significant and productive of meaning, then the "doomed" love of this passage can also be understood as the love between Sissie and Marija. Indeed, the narrative suggests that,

while Sissie's fellow students are "such infants," it is Sissie who is out late at night with Marija, while her roommates wait up for her return, "an hour or so before midnight" (42). Significantly, the notion of "doomed" love is repeated in the scene in Marija's bedroom and can be connected to this passage as an indication of the way in which such repetitions across the text function to enable queer meaning to emerge.

In the section of "The Plums" that describes the encounter between Sissie and Marija in the latter's bedroom, temporal shifts function to destabilize the "knowledge" imparted to the reader in this section. The temporal shifts create uncertainty as to the relationship between Marija and Sissie (what "actually" happened) and thus expose and refuse to fulfill the desire on the part of the reader to "know," which is also a refusal of the requirements of realism²⁷:

Sissie felt embarrassed for no reason that she knew. The atmosphere changed.

Once or so, at the beginning of their friendship, Sissie had thought, while they walked in the park, of what a delicious love affair she and Marija would have had if one of them had been a man.

Especially if she, Sissie had been a man. She had imagined and savoured the tears, their anguish at knowing that their love was doomed. But they would make promises to each other which of course would not stand a chance of getting fulfilled. She could see Marija's tears . . .

That was a game. A game in which one day, she became so absorbed, she forgot who she was, and the fact that she was a woman. In her imagination, she was one of these black boys in one of these involvements with white girls in Europe. (61)

The temporal shift of the line, "A game in which one day, she became so absorbed, she forgot who she was, and the fact that she was a woman," and the ambiguity of "one day"

²⁷ As noted in an earlier footnote, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's formulation of what African women writers should write about stresses the notion that their writing should be based on "truth" and "reality." She argues that African women writers *must* write "the reality of the African woman" (8), and it is this argument (and variations on it), which, I suggest, functions to delimit the ways in which African women's texts are read, as "the truth about African women and womanhood" (8) is assumed to be heterosexual.

function to create uncertainty about the boundary between Sissie's imagination and her "actual" relationship with Marija. The lines which follow the encounter between Sissie and Marija in Marija's bedroom are also significant for the way in which they draw attention to the norming function of narrative: "They returned to the big kitchen. They must have done. And Marija must have laid the table for two" (68). The use of "must have" creates doubt, as it also calls attention to the (hetero)normative function of narrative, suggesting that narrative and language create expectations about what "must have" happened—and what "must have" happened would be what would preserve or maintain heteronormativity. The linguistic and formal experimentation challenges and exposes the heteronormative function of narrative, while enabling the possibility for queer desire in the experience, truth, and reality of an African woman. Furthermore, heteronormativity is exposed as a construction related to the global expansion of Western imperialism: Marija's tear is connected to "slavers and slave-traders", "Solitary discoverers", "Missionaries", "Speculators", "Preachers of apartheid and zealous educators" (65-66). This section, then, exposes connections between heteronormativity, the imperial project, and the "norming" function of narrative, and it is only through attending to the experimentation that the critique of these connections is revealed.

The connection between heteronormativity and the norming function of narrative is also brought into view by the way in which the text draws attention to the limits of narrative and what can be told. The following passage is also particularly noteworthy in this discussion for the shift to second person:

But then how can one believe in the existence of this being? You make friends with a woman. Any woman. And she has a child. And you visit the house. Invited by the woman certainly. Every evening for many days. And

you stay many hours on each occasion but you still never see the husband and one evening the woman seizes you in her embrace, her cold fingers on your breasts, warm tears on your face, hot lips on your lips, do you go back to your village in Africa and say . . . what do you say even from the beginning of your story that you met a married woman? No, it would not be easy to talk of this white woman to just anyone at home . . . (64-65)

This passage presents the story of Sissie and Marija, but also addresses the impossibility of telling this story. The sudden shift to second person also functions to interpellate the reader, while creating distance from Sissie's perspective. This shift in narrative voice addresses the reader directly, while questioning the structures of belief that regulate and delimit what kinds of stories can be told. What is brought into view through the narrative shifts in "The Plums" is the relationship between Sissie and Marija, and the impossibility of talking about this relationship "to just anyone at home." The above passage considers the way in which heteronormativity structures and delimits what can be said, and the queer experimentation connects this critique of heteronormativity to the questions of nationalism at issue in the text. Moreover, in exposing the heteronormative limits of narrative and nationalism, the queer experimentation reveals how heteronormativity also structures and maintains certain expectations about literature by postcolonial women writers. It is significant that the limits of what can be said by Sissie about her experience in Europe is related to the "lies" of the "been-tos," whose stories about Europe are limited by expectations of a particular form and content. Who can tell those stories and the content of those stories is delimited by heteronormativity and neocolonial ideology, so that the stories that circulate are those that are aligned with the dominant nationalist discourse, which in turn maintains the ideology of colonialism.

Narrative, then, is also connected to the ideological construction of home and nation, as described by McClintock and Alexander, in which the national body is figured in familial terms so that women simultaneously represent the nation (or “Mother Africa,” in the discourse of African nationalisms and Pan-Africanism) and are regulated by and subordinated to its heterosexual imperatives. In the following passages, Marija is aligned with Africa in particular ways, and this connection destabilizes the heteronormative alignment of women, home and nation. At the first meeting between Sissie and Marija, Marija is described as follows:

Marija was warm.

Too warm for
Bavaria, Germany
From knowledge gained since. (27)

While readings which attend to the queer relationship between Marija and Sissie argue that Marija represents homoerotic desire that is “Western,” the above passage can be read to suggest that Marija’s warmth, her queer desire, is not suited to her position in Germany. For in the novel, it is Africa that is figured as “warm”: as Sissie’s plane reaches Africa, she awakens to “the heat which suddenly hit the plane” and looks forward to the “unavoidable warmth” of “home” (133). When Marija picks Sissie up in the evening, the narrator explains that Marija “was flushed and hot” and “Sissie could feel the heat” (45). Later on that night, when Marija kisses Sissie in the bedroom, Marija’s “warmth” is also connected to a complex consideration of “home”:

It was the left hand that woke her up to the reality of Marija’s embrace. The warmth of her tears on her neck. The hotness of her lips against hers.

As one does from a bad dream, impulsively, Sissie shook herself free. With too much effort, unnecessarily, so that she unintentionally hit Marija on the right cheek with the back of her right hand.

It all happened within a second. Two people staring at one another. Two mouths wide open in disbelief.

Sissie thought of home. To the time when she was a child in the village. Of how she always liked to be sleeping in the bedchamber when it rained, her body completely-wrapped-up in one of her mother's akatado-cloths while mother herself pounded fufu in the anteroom which also served as a kitchen when it rained. Oo, to be wrapped up in mother's cloth while it rained. Every time it rained. (64)

Sissie's rejection of Marija is described as "unintentional" and "impulsive" and results in "disbelief" for each of them. Rather than explain Sissie's feelings about Marija and her kiss, the narrative immediately shifts to Sissie's memory of home. The connection between Marija's "warmth" and "[t]he hotness of her lips" to the feeling that Sissie used to have as a child "completely-wrapped-up in one of her mother's akatado-cloths" is implicit, so that the meaning of this connection lies in the narrative shift itself, and can only be recognized as meaningful if the narrative shifts and fragmentation are taken to be significant and productive of meaning.

The description of Marija as "warm" also contains the first statement of the phrase "From knowledge gained since," which is repeated throughout the text. For instance, the story of the female missionary on the Guinea coast who discovers two girls in bed together occurs at the point of the novel's plot when Sissie has rejected Marija's advances and considers the significance of Marija's tear. The story is written in both prose and poetry, and it begins: "Once upon a time, many years ago, a missionary went to the Guinea coast," and explains how she devoted her life "to educating and straightening out African girls" (66). The act of "straightening out" here can be read as the missionary's function in the processes of heterosexualization upon which colonialism and

the state rely. When the missionary discovers two girls in bed together, the narrative shifts to a poetic dialogue in which the word “bush” simultaneously encodes African rural space and homosexuality as “backward”:

‘Good heavens, girl!

Is your mother bush?’

‘No, Miss.’

‘Is your father bush?’

‘No Miss.’

‘Then

Why

Are

You

Bush?’

Giggles, giggles, giggles.

Naughty African girls

Cracking up

To hear, and

See

European single woman

Tearing up herself over

Two girls in a bed.

But

Madam,

It is not

Just

Bush . . .

From knowledge gained since.

[. . .]

Because

Madam,

It’s not just b-u-s-h

But a

C-r-i-m-e

A Sin

S-o-d-o-m-y,

From knowledge gained since.

Sissie looked at the other woman and wished again that at least,
she was a boy. A man. (66-67)

The modern, colonial ideologies of development and normative sexuality are connected in this passage through the missionary's use of the term "bush" to designate both the location of African rural space and the practice of homosexuality as "backward" and in need of "straightening out." However, the critique of this discourse is made explicit in the "giggles" of the African girls and the parodic repetition of the way in which Western discourses—the law and Christianity in particular—have criminalized homosexuality so as to maintain heterosexuality as the norm. The spelling of particular words—"b-u-s-h," "c-r-i-m-e" and "s-o-d-o-m-y"—is also characteristic of Aidoo's style and, like her use of capitalization, indicates her interrogation of the assumptions upon which normative ideologies are based: in other words, it is a literal spelling-it-out—a prompt to thinking through the meaning and significance of particular words, as well as how they function to sustain normative (racist, sexist, and homophobic) discourses. Significantly, this passage challenges not only the epistemological foundations of Western discourses, by linking the "knowledge gained since" to queer relations between girls and women, but also the foundations of nationalist discourse through its critique of the heteronormative ground upon which nationalism is based. Moreover, this passage locates queer desire between women in Africa and suggests that it is the heteronormalizing project of colonialism (and, by extension, postcolonial nationalism) that has led to the belief in the impossibility of such desire.

The experimentation of Aidoo's novel is a significant aspect of its queerness, as formally innovative techniques highlight the difficulty of telling a story that does not conform to the heterosexual imperatives of narrative, as well as produce the non-heteronormative meaning of the text. The fragmented style, capitalization and spelling of particular words, repetition, shifts in narrative voice, shifts from prose to poetry, and temporal shifts, not only function to critique heteronormativity and dominant discourses of nationalism and neocolonialism, but also indicate the difficulty of telling a story that cannot be contained by the narratives these discourses sustain. The queer experimentation of Aidoo's novel considers the connection between heteronormativity and the limits of narrative, and directly challenges expectations of what the form and content of postcolonial writing by Third World women should be and do. By challenging the realist imperatives of so-called Third World women's writing, Aidoo's novel highlights the way in which experimentation in postcolonial texts is significant, and my queer reading of the novel's experimentation suggests the importance of exploring this significance in relation to the politics of narrative and location in the context of global literary studies in English.

Rethinking Global Women's Writing

By analyzing the non-heteronormative aspects of Aidoo's novel, as well as the experimentation that simultaneously upholds and interrogates nationalist discourse, my reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* seeks to make a connection between experimentation and the figure of the nation, or the function of nationalism, in global women's writing in English. To focus on nationalism at the expense of an analysis of the experimental qualities of the text is to assume that the political content of the text is detached from its

form. It is also a failure to recognize the ways in which experimental form can function to destabilize the supposedly transparent meanings of the text. Criticism of Aidoo's novel exemplifies the ways in which postcolonial novels are delimited by expectations of their content and form. As Aidoo herself has noted, the critical consensus about what a postcolonial novel, particularly a postcolonial novel by an African woman, should be is a limiting formulation that needs to be challenged. In an interview with Rosemary George and Helen Scott, Aidoo discusses the limited publishing opportunities that have to do with what she refers to as "this straightjacket to be a 'third world woman'" based on assumptions which delimit what can be written, and in turn, what gets published. As Aidoo states: "Someone can declare that your manuscript doesn't read like a manuscript from a third world person. [. . .] It seems incredible that one can encounter such reactions" (305). Furthermore, Aidoo articulates the problem in terms of global inequalities in which "third world" writers "become 'representatives' of their countries."

She notes:

In a world in which everything was equal, writers would not represent anything other than themselves. But in 1991 everything is far from equal in this world, and those inequalities are particularly heightened in the African world. Most Africans are not in a position to write or speak of their lives, and we few writers who do have that chance become "representatives." [. . .] But to what extent can any of us writers talk on behalf of the people? There is no reason that we would be qualified to do so. (299)

It is important to note that the position of "representative," as imposed on "Third World" writers, is similar to the ways in which "Third World women" are positioned, through nationalist discourse, as representative of the nation and cultural tradition. Furthermore, the imposition of both terms ("Third World" and "woman") functions to further delimit

the kinds of concerns expected in women's writing. Regarding the stories in *No Sweetness Here*, which, Aidoo notes, "are part of the many discourses about culture in the 'postcolonial' context, that are about what has been lost in the process of colonization, and what is being lost in the process of 'Westernization,'" Aidoo states the problem as follows:

Women are expected to *be* African or Indian or Pakistani, by the way that we dress. Men talk about it whilst wearing their Western suits. At a conference elite men will stand up in three piece suits and hold forth about the need to be culturally authentic. [. . .] Of course whether or not this amounts to a difference in concerns in terms of men and women writers is a difficult question. *Killjoy* has been described as 'masculine' which gets me raving mad. The implication is that when a woman's writing moves away from the record of minutia, like our clothes and our wigs and so on, and discusses more obviously political issues, she is being masculine, which is mad. (302)

Aidoo describes the way in which Third World women writers are limited not only by expectations in publishing, but also by nationalist discourses which posit a realm of "women's concerns" outside of, yet culturally important in sustaining, the political sphere.

In *The Politics of Home*, George critiques the way in which critical expectations of "Third World" literatures have been defined within the western academy. George's analysis of Jameson's 1986 essay, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" demonstrates the way in which this essay, as a representative and defining theorization of "Third World" literature, functions "to enable its readers; to make 'us' at home in the alien territory of 'Third World Literature'" (102) through a reading practice in which "we" (Western readers) are positioned in opposition to "them" (Third World writers and inhabitants). Furthermore, George notes that this reading practice is based on

what Johannes Fabian has called the “denial of coevalness,” in which native cultures are seen as archaic and existing in the past, while western culture represents present and future time and progress. George argues that Jameson’s notion “that all politics in these texts is national allegory” (103) allows for a reading position in which the “alienness” of these texts “is decoded and defused in this announcement of national allegory” (103). Thus “Third World” fictions, their “alien” qualities recognized and defined as national allegory, become consumable products for western readers. George demonstrates the limits of this reading practice, noting that “there are times, places and texts in the non-west that are not related to nationalism – directly or even allegorically” (118), and complicates the problem of reading texts from “other” locations by asking: “how do ‘we’ read, understand or participate in resistive texts produced from locations other than our own? How do we recognize resistance produced from elsewhere when there seems to be no translation required? What do we do about counter-hegemonic meanings that entirely escape us – distances to which we cannot travel even when we speak the language?” (102). Further, she argues: “Reading (as much as writing) in a *politically committed* fashion amounts to more than locating metaphors of national or state politics” (120). I attempt to address this problem of reading through an analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* that attends to the way in which experimentation produces “counter-hegemonic meanings” that are erased by reading practices, which rely upon a limited understanding of “Third World” literary politics.

The critical problem in which I engage here is that analyses of literature written in English outside of the West (problematically but usually defined as either “postcolonial” or “Third World” literature) tend to be based on certain assumptions about what a non-

Western novel should look like and be about.²⁸ Such analyses fail to take experimentation seriously because of the way in which analysis of postcolonial or Third World novels has been defined and delimited by particular assumptions in postcolonial literary criticism and theory, as well as in the publishing industry. The South African writer Agnes Sam describes the difficulty posed by the assumption that postcolonial texts are necessarily not experimental. Explaining the difficulty she encountered in attempting to have her experimental novel *What Passing Bells* published, she writes:

I've seen other works published which are experimental and this reinforces my view that it isn't simply that publishers determine what is acceptable for some prescribed market, but they have a stereotype of how one should write if belonging to a specific group. One publisher's representative asserted very firmly that Black women write autobiographically. A black woman experimenting with language and form has no business writing. In the new Commonwealth, those writers who do not conform to these stereotypes are said to have been influenced by Western tradition, to have had an "English" as opposed to a "Bantu" or "Third World" education, or they are said not to be writing for the "people" [. . .] But the crunch comes when we disregard Western tradition and publishers' stereotypes, and attempt to experiment – this isn't tolerated. (qtd. in George *Politics* 119)

While I do not wish to suggest that postcolonial theorizing and criticism are invalid unless they attend to form, this study suggests the ways in which a consideration of narrative form in postcolonial novels might extend analyses of nationalist and anti-imperial politics.

The assumption that Third World and experimental writing are somehow incompatible has also led to a lack of critical writing that examines the significance of

²⁸ I refer, for instance, to the way in which "Third World" writing is located in opposition to Western literature and ideology, the way in which "postcolonial" literature is understood solely as a response to colonial discourse, and the way in which representations of local traditions are necessarily seen as a challenge to Western universalism.

experimentation in postcolonial or Third World texts. Kumkum Sangari's 1987 essay, "The Politics of the Possible" is a useful examination of the politics of form that attends to the different locations of Third World fictions so as to problematize the assumption that Western postmodernism provides the most appropriate lens through which to analyze texts that "play" with the conventions of the novel form. Sangari notes a problematic tendency similar to the reading practice established by Jameson, in which Third World texts become consumable products for Western readers when understood through a specifically Western notion of postmodernist writing practices. She outlines the problem as follows:

The nonmimetic narrative modes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie [the two writers on whose work she focuses in this essay] inhabit a social and conceptual space in which the problems of ascertaining meaning assume a political dimension qualitatively different from the current postmodern skepticism about meaning in Europe and America. Yet such nonmimetic, non-western modes also seem to lay themselves open to the academized procedures of a peculiarly western, historically singular, postmodern epistemology that universalizes the self-conscious dissolution of the bourgeois subject, with its now characteristic stance of self-irony, across both space and time. The expansive forms of the modern and the postmodern novel appear to stand in ever-polite readiness to recycle and accommodate other cultural content [. . .]. The ease with which a reader may be persuaded to traverse the path between such non-western modes and western postmodernism—broadly defined here as the specific preoccupations and "sensibility" of both contemporary fiction and of poststructuralist critical discourse may well lead us to believe they were indeed made for each other. [. . .] The question concerns the way in which the writings of the "Third World" (a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single "underdeveloped" terrain) are consumed in the West (a term produced to opposite effect by the same procedures). (157-158)

I quote Sangari's introduction almost in its entirety because it addresses several points about "nonmimetic" form with which my analysis of experimental writing seeks to

engage. Firstly, Sangari outlines the problematic reading practice through which nonmimetic narrative modes in Third World texts are understood to signify in the same way as Western postmodernist texts. Secondly, she articulates the way in which this problem arises within the academy, so that critical practices (such as poststructuralism) current in Western academic discourse come to define how texts are read. Implicit to her argument is a critique of a process similar to the one George addresses in her analysis of Jameson's argument: the ease with which the "alienness" of a nonmimetic non-Western text can be subsumed within the conventions of dominant Western writing and reading practices—in this case, postmodernism and poststructuralism.

As I have explained in my discussion of the usefulness of queer commentary and queer methodology as reading practices that resist "the regimes of the normal" (Warner 16), my reading of *Our Sister Killjoy* does not seek to impose Western reading practices onto a Third World text; rather, in attending to what has been "deliberately or accidentally excluded" (Halberstam 13), my analysis considers aspects of the text that demonstrate the limits of readings of *Our Sister Killjoy* as a nationalist lament. The nationalist lament argument, as exemplified by the critics I have discussed, fails to attend to the particularities of the text: specifically, in focusing on the nationalist argument Sissie directs at African men, critics have upheld the heterosexist logic of nationalism itself. Indeed, it could be argued, following Alexander, that such readings align themselves with the (hetero)norming function of the state, by maintaining heterosexual roles as central to their logic. My queer reading attends to the critique of heteronormativity that, I argue, is central to *Our Sister Killjoy*. Rather than excluding the non-normative, "alien," or queer aspects of the text, this reading attends to the ways in

which the non-normative structures and enables the critique of the heteronormative foundations of the nation and of narrative itself.

Chapter 2: “The Bleached Bones of a Story”: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

The 1990s was the decade in which postcolonial literature, criticism, and theory reached a peak in terms of production and consumption in mainstream reading publics and in academic literary studies. Over the course of the decade, there was a surge of interest in books—primarily novels—by postcolonial authors from various parts of the world. While novels such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) played an important role in locating postcolonial literature on the global mainstream cultural map, it was in the 1990s that postcolonial literature became a significant part of that map. Literary awards—the Booker Prize in particular—as well as growing popular interest in fiction from “exotic” (i.e. non-Western, Third World) locations around the world, functioned to bring postcolonial literature into the mainstream at a time when the discourses of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” were gaining strength in liberal politics, popular media and the North American cultural imaginary. It was in this context that Arundhati Roy, a first-time novelist from India, won the Booker Prize for her 1997 novel, *The God of Small Things*, which received widespread critical attention in mainstream publications and in academic studies of postcolonial literature. At the time of its publication and Booker win, the novel aroused a range of responses in the literary community and mainstream reading publics, as critics reacted to the success of a novel whose style they either praised for its innovation and playfulness, or criticized as a kind

of superficial literariness catering to the short attention span of Western consumers. The novel's content was also brought under scrutiny, as several critics, most notably Aijaz Ahmad, focused their critique on Roy's negative portrayal of Kerala communists, while within India the novel drew criticism for its graphic portrayal of taboo-breaking sexual relations.²⁹ Most critics, however, regardless of their reaction to the text's form, content and success, have been in agreement about the importance of Roy's novel in the tradition of Indian literature in English, as well as the importance of its position on the global literary map.³⁰

My engagement with Roy's novel in this chapter considers how it has been positioned in relation to the discourse of postcolonial literary studies, as well as the ways in which it has been understood in relation to the processes of globalization. I focus my textual analysis on the experimental qualities of the language and narrative form, and attend to the use and function of poetic strategies such as fragmentation and repetition. I argue that Roy's use of poetic language and poetic structure, as well as her experimentation with narrative voice and narrative structure, revise the binaries through which postcolonial literature is understood, and through which the world is conceptualized. Through its experimentation, Roy's text engages critically with the uses

²⁹ In Ahmad's "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically," he criticizes three aspects of the novel: that "far too much is anxiously written, and therefore overwritten"; "the book panders to the prevailing anti-Communist sentiment which damages it both ideologically and formally [...] she has neither a feel for Communist politics nor a rudimentary knowledge of it"; and "the way it depicts and resolves the issues of caste and sexuality, especially female sexuality [...] since the novel does stake its transgressive and radical claim precisely on issues of caste and bodily love." Ahmad's analysis thus identifies the three aspects of the text upon which most critics focus their critique.

³⁰ As discussed in the introduction, the notion of a global literary map has been theorized in various ways in recent years. Roy's novel, like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, played a significant role in maintaining the place of Indian literature in English as one of the dominant parts of the global map of postcolonial literature in English.

and potential of language and narrative in constructing the world and their function in delimiting, regulating, and creating possible ways of being in the world. By attending to the novel's engagement with questions of language and narrative form, as well as the political and ethical questions it raises, I demonstrate the ways in which Roy's experimentation with language and narrative is not only indicative of an innovative literary style, but also challenges the binaries through which postcolonial literature is conventionally understood.

The 1990s: Postcolonial Studies, Globalization, and the Discourse of Multiculturalism

By the 1990s, postcolonial theory had established a place for itself in academia, and the field of postcolonial studies was defining itself through a rich and diverse breadth of publications, including collections such as *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin 1989), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman 1994), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin 1995), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, Ella Shohat, 1997), as well as important works by individual postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak.³¹ In defining itself as a field of inquiry within the context of U.S.-dominated globalization, however, postcolonial studies during the 1990s also became a

³¹ Including, for instance, Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), and Spivak's *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1993).

site of active debate and conflict over the purposes of its inquiry and its political and ethical engagements. At the same time, there was a surge of interest in postcolonial novels in the mainstream literary market: the 1990s followed the trend begun in the 1980s with the immense success of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) in the publication of popular postcolonial novels, as well as international literary acclaim for postcolonial writers. Since its inception in 1969, the Booker Prize in particular has been one of the primary sites of mainstream recognition for a range of postcolonial writers, including Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, Anita Desai, J.M Coetzee, and Rohinton Mistry.³² While the Booker in the 1980s and 1990s facilitated the success of a range of postcolonial writers, the Nobel Prize for literature was also awarded to several postcolonial writers, including Wole Soyinka in 1986, Naguib Mahfouz in 1988, Nadine Gordimer in 1991, and Derek Walcott in 1992. Rushdie's win in 1993 for the "Best of the Bookers" Prize (for *Midnight's Children*), as well as the media storm surrounding the *fatwa* issued against him in 1989 for 1988's *The Satanic Verses*, also, interestingly, kept the subject of postcolonial literature alive in mainstream cultural discourse throughout the 1990s.³³ Film production in the 1990s also played a role in arousing and sustaining

³² Successful postcolonial novels that either won or were shortlisted for the Booker include: V.S. Naipaul's *In a Free State* (winner 1971) and *A Bend in the River* (shortlist 1979), Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (winner 1974), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (shortlist 1980), *In Custody* (shortlist 1984), and *Fasting, Feasting* (shortlist 1999), J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (winner 1983) and *Disgrace* (winner 1999), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (winner 1991), Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (shortlist 1991) and *A Fine Balance* (shortlist 1996), Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (winner 1981), *Shame* (shortlist 1983), *The Satanic Verses* (shortlist 1988) *The Moor's Last Sigh* (shortlist 1995), Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (winner 1985), Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* (shortlist 1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (winner 1989), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (shortlist 1987), and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (winner 1992).

³³ The way in which Rushdie's work and Roy's novel have generated significant amounts of controversy is interesting to note because of the way in which such controversy has functioned in bringing Rushdie and

critical and popular interest in narratives about non-Western cultures, as films by directors such as Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, and Stephen Frears brought postcolonial, immigrant, and diaspora issues to Western viewing publics.³⁴ Attendant to the neo-liberal processes of globalization at the time, the context in which these texts gained international recognition and success was also one in which “multiculturalism” and “diversity” had become keywords in liberal American discourse, and it was this convergence of American liberal discourse and cultural production by Third World writers (and filmmakers) within the larger context of U.S.-dominated globalization, which provided the cultural background for the thematic and political issues and debates of academic postcolonial studies in the 1990s. Much of the tension and grounds for debate have to do with the question of the extent to which postcolonial theory and criticism, as well as Third World creative texts, produced in the context of the processes of globalization and U.S. neo-imperialism, participate in or are complicit with such processes.

Roy to international attention and, arguably, has been enabling in ensuring the popularity and critical success of their works in the West.

³⁴ English director Stephen Frears came to international attention in the mid-1980s with two films of screenplays by Hanif Kureishi, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). Indian director Mira Nair gained international recognition and critical success with *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), which won various international awards, including the Golden Camera award for Best First Film at the Cannes Film Festival, as well as a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Nair’s next film, *Mississippi Masala* (1991), furthered this success, winning several awards at international film festivals. Indian-Canadian director Deepa Mehta received international attention with the first two films in her Elements Trilogy, *Fire* (1996) and *Earth* (1998), while the former also generated heated controversy for its depiction of a lesbian relationship. All three filmmakers have continued to work with postcolonial and diaspora issues, and have received mainstream critical success in their films of this millennium, which include Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and *Vanity Fair* (2004), Mehta’s *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002) and *Water* (2005), and Frears’s *Dirty Pretty Things* (2003) and *The Queen* (2006).

As outlined in the introduction, the notion of the “postcolonial” has been highly contested, and the debate frequently centers around a conflict between two very different views of postcolonial studies, one of which is represented by the work of critics such as Arif Dirlik, Benita Parry, and Aijaz Ahmad, who see postcolonial theory as complicit with the ideologies of neo-liberal globalization, in contrast to those theorists and critics who recognize the ways in which postcolonial studies not only arises from the historical and contemporary processes of globalization, but also has the critical potential to challenge and resist those processes as they structure the world and human lives in limiting and unjust ways. The crisis in postcolonial studies that characterizes the debates of the 1990s and also continues today has been addressed by David Scott, who argues that postcolonial theory has not only lost its relevance, but has also lost touch with the political point of its scholarship.³⁵ Revising the questions that motivate postcolonial theory is thus necessary in order to reframe the discourse of postcolonial studies so that its inquiry is relevant to the political and ethical issues of the present. As has also been discussed, the original political purpose of postcolonial studies was the production of deeper and more subtle ways of understanding the encounters, processes, and discourses of colonialism, and this project was relevant to the context of decolonization and independence movements in the post-World War II era. Necessary now, perhaps, is that the purpose of postcolonial studies is critical engagement with the present, and, in turn, that postcolonial studies redefine itself as a discipline and critical resource by redefining its ethical and political commitments for the present.

³⁵ David Scott “The Social Construction of Postcolonial Theory.” *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba, Suvir Kaul, Matti Bunzi, Antoinette Burton, and Jed Esty. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 385-400.

In his historical study of the related processes of postcolonialism and globalization, Sankaran Krishna articulates two questions from which to begin to reconsider and redefine the purpose of postcolonial studies for the present: “What is it that we wish to change in the world out there through our inquiry?” (119), and “what in the present represents the greatest threat to that which we hold dear?” (120). These are key questions about the metacommitments of postcolonial studies, questions that are crucial if postcolonial studies is to remain relevant, or, moreover, if postcolonial studies is to redefine and reassert its relevance, for the present. The question of defining what “we wish to change in the world” and what “we hold dear”—what it is that matters to us as critics, scholars, and teachers—cannot be assumed to have only one answer, nor must postcolonial theorists and critics agree on only one answer to these questions in order to assert the relevance of postcolonial scholarship for the present. However, rather than remaining mired in the internal disagreements that, as Gayatri Spivak has noted, keep literary studies marginalized,³⁶ it is necessary for postcolonial theorists and literary critics to reconsider, reformulate, and recommit to the purpose of our inquiry so as to not only remain relevant, but also—and more importantly—to assert the way in which our inquiry offers a unique perspective for understanding the present and imagining possible futures. And as I have suggested, following Spivak, it is the specificity of the literary that gives our inquiry its critical edge and ethical potential. My analysis of Roy’s novel engages with the question of the unique ethical value of the literary by showing the way in which literature itself, through experimentation with language and narrative, offers a site in

³⁶ Gayatri Spivak “Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties.” *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York and London: Methuen, Inc, 1987. 95-102.

which to queer normative ways of being in the world and understandings of selfhood. Through its experimentation, the novel challenges the values of liberal individualism, upon which present understandings of politics and selfhood are based, and suggests the need for alternative ways of understanding possibilities for being in the world and with others.

As noted, Roy's novel engages with contemporary issues of U.S.-dominated globalization, and many critics have read the novel in the context of her non-fiction work and activism against globalization. Depending on the location and perspective of the critic, Roy's novel either caters to or critiques the exoticism that underlies the "multicultural" ideals of Western—and particularly American—liberal discourse. In considering the position of Roy's novel within the global cultural map, the role of the United States is significant for the way in which American-led global consumer capitalism dominates and determines international cultural trends, thus positioning the U.S. at the arguable center of global culture, and it is with this context of U.S.-led globalization in the 1990s which Roy's novel engages.³⁷ To read the novel as a critique of globalization and American neo-imperialism is to also position it directly within the stated purpose of contemporary postcolonial studies for critics such as Ania Loomba et al., who, as Krishna notes, "argue that in the post-9/11 world, the vocation of postcolonial

³⁷ Since the publication of *The God of Small Things*, Roy has been an active critic of U.S. imperialism and globalization, and has received much international attention in this role. Interestingly, critical readings of the novel have tended to see its form as catering to the global, U.S. dominated market and thus as pandering to Western audiences, while analysis of the novel's content clearly shows the critique of the forces of globalization and American imperialism, particularly in the sections describing environmental devastation and the simultaneous devaluing and exoticizing of local culture in the context of tourism. In these sections, the narrative describes the changes brought about by the History House becoming a hotel for Western tourists, the way in which Kathakali performances are staged as entertainment for those tourists, and how the Meenachal river was devastated due to the development of a dam. See, for instance, pages 118-121 and Chapter 12, "Kochu Thomban."

studies unmistakably should be that of resisting neoliberal globalization or what they call ‘contemporary neo-imperialism’ under U.S. auspices,” and thus for whom, “the future of postcolonial studies is inextricably tied to its critique of globalization” (Krishna 120). While Roy’s novel clearly critiques the inequality and injustices of globalization and “development” (though it was written in the “pre-9/11” world), it also, as critics such as Chitra Sankaran have argued, is a product of and participates in the same processes of global consumer capitalism it supposedly critiques. Thus its fraught position within the global cultural map—a position that Sankaran describes in terms of what she calls “the paradox between the anti-globalization sentiment that permeates the narrative and its utilization of global marketing to extend its reach” (106)—has been a focus of much of the criticism that examines the novel’s critique of globalization. Readings of Roy’s novel, which focus on the question of its participation in globalization, exemplify the ways in which analyses of postcolonial texts are frequently limited by certain binary assumptions that shape postcolonial theory and criticism.³⁸ In contrast to such binary ways of thinking about the positioning of cultural texts in the contemporary globalized world, my argument emphasizes the potential and specificity of the literary and its ability to expand and move beyond the limits of dominant modes of thought—in mainstream culture, as well as criticism and theory—so as to produce alternative ways of understanding the present and imagining possible futures.

The question of what is at stake in the writing, teaching and analysis of postcolonial literature in English in the contemporary context of globalization is a critical

³⁸ Elleke Boehmer, for instance, criticizes the way in which critics from the West judge the book’s value through a binary framework of European versus South Asian characteristics, producing a “neo-Orientalism” (88), which stereotypes and exoticizes “the once-colonized” so that the novel is “commodified and made safe for a western readership” (67).

issue in the project of reconsidering the assumptions and purpose of postcolonial literary studies. The issue is not only one of moving beyond the question of the extent to which postcolonial studies is complicit in the processes of globalization, but also to rethink the assumptions upon which analyses of postcolonial texts are based. At issue also is the potentially empowered position of the literary critic, in assuming responsibility for the way in which she reads. Against what Spivak refers to as the “received dogma of the discipline of literary study” (“Reading the World” 97)—the ideology which maintains that literature and literary studies are not relevant to the world, and thus that literary critics have nothing to say about the world—she argues: “The world actually writes itself with the many-leveled, unfixable intricacy and openness of a work of literature. If, through our study of literature, we can ourselves learn and teach others to read the world in the ‘proper’ risky ways, and to act upon that lesson, perhaps we literary people would not forever be such helpless victims” (95). The empowerment of literary scholars thus lies in a project that involves “the displacing of the ideology of our discipline of literature” (97) and that requires us “to ask not merely how literary studies . . . can adjust to changing social demands, but also how we could, by changing some of our assumptions, contribute toward changing those demands in the very long run” (100). In “Teaching for the Times,” originally published in 1992, Spivak addresses these issues further in her consideration of the responsibility of new immigrant academics in their role as “the emerging dominant” within American universities as a result of the processes of globalization (474). Rather than remaining bound by disagreements over the supposed complicity of postcolonial studies in the processes of neo-colonial globalization—disagreements which, as noted, function to keep postcolonial studies from being relevant

to the present—Spivak argues as follows: “Now more than ever it seems right for good teaching to turn from emphasis upon our contingent histories to the invention of a shared and dynamic present—as the continuous unrolling of an ungraspable event with consequences that might as well be called ‘global’ in its minute detail” (469). While Spivak is specifically considering the role of new immigrant academics in Western (primarily American) institutions, I take her argument to be relevant to the broader question of the role, responsibility, and critical potential of literary studies—a question that animates her work as well as my own—and asks literary critics to consider the ways in which analysis of a text engages in the world in a particular way, as well as, perhaps more importantly, the way in which textual analysis theorizes the world in a particular way through its critical assumptions.

“Faith in Fragility”: Reading *The God of Small Things*

In its engagement with the global and local processes of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the cultural, environmental, and economic restructuring of the world attendant to global consumer capitalism and American imperialism over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, Roy’s novel challenges the binary categories through which literature by Third World writers tends to be read. Rather than engaging only, on the one hand, with national culture and politics, or, on the other, with the neo-imperialist processes of U.S.-dominated globalization, the novel produces a nuanced critique of how the local and the global are inextricably interconnected, particularly as they structure and regulate possible ways of being in the world. While the critique of caste, class, and gender norms, as well as of national politics and power structures within

India, is central to the narrative of the novel, its engagement with the processes and ideologies of capitalism and globalization is just as significant. As my analysis will show, the novel's critique at the levels of the local, the national and the global demonstrates the simultaneous, dynamic and mutual processes of regulation that structure ways of being in the world at all levels. Through its critique of binary oppositions that structure dominant modes of thought and ways of being, the novel demonstrates the ways in which the local, the national and the global are always already mutually intertwined and function to simultaneously influence and reinforce each other.

One of the binary constructions that Roy's novel critiques is the temporal opposition between the First and Third Worlds in which the former is constructed as progressive, multicultural, diverse, and the latter is constructed as "backward" and stuck in traditions and belief systems that belong to a past that the West has moved beyond. This linear, developmental notion of temporality structures the historicist understanding of the world, described by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, in which the Third World is seen as belonging to a time that is constructed as the past of the West.³⁹ And, as Ann McClintock has argued, the linear and binary construction of history and temporality that underlies dominant understandings of cultural difference also structures ideologies of gender. Moreover, such constructions of temporality and cultural difference are perpetuated by the ideologies of consumer capitalism and globalization, and Roy's

³⁹ In the Introduction to *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty notes: "Historicism [...] posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance [...] that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization. In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment" (7). As noted in Chapter 1, and as Chakrabarty notes, this structuring of historical time is what Johannes Fabian has called "the denial of coevalness."

experimentation with language and narrative addresses the way in which assumptions about history, temporality, difference, and selfhood structure and limit possibilities for being in the world. Readings of the novel that focus only on its critique of caste, class and gender norms in India, however, tend to work within a binary framework in which emphasis on Indian culture precludes analysis of the ways in which the novel addresses the interconnections between local, national, and global cultural dynamics and social structures.⁴⁰ While Roy's novel certainly critiques the caste, gender, and social norms of Indian culture, it also challenges binary understandings of global and local, the West and "the rest," as well as demonstrates the ways in which consumer capitalism and globalization are complicit in perpetuating racial, gender, sexual, and economic norms that delimit, structure, and regulate possible ways of living and being in the world.

Furthermore, one of the ways in which the binary understanding of the West as developed and progressive and the Third World as undeveloped and traditional is perpetuated is through a discourse—often nationalist and/or imperialist—in which the position of women in a particular culture is indicative of either its traditionalism or progressiveness.⁴¹ Readings of the novel that focus on Ammu's position within Indian society—first as a divorced mother of two, then as the lover of an Untouchable man—emphasize a critique of gender and caste norms and the way in which they regulate

⁴⁰ Even critics who examine the novel from a postcolonial feminist framework tend to reproduce binary models of "resistance": for instance, M.K. Ray argues that Roy's narrative strategies express "the fractured sensibility and the broken and fragmented world of women" (106) as a resistant feminine psyche that is "so different from that of men" (105), while Anita Singh argues that the novel gives voice to "all those dispossessed of an identity or a speaking voice" (133) as a postcolonial "act of liberation" (133).

⁴¹ See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of how women are positioned symbolically in nationalist and imperialist discourses.

individual lives within the heteronormative structures of the nation. My analysis demonstrates that Roy's attention to the way in which sexuality is a primary site of regulation produces a queer critique of regulatory and normative social structures, as well as, more specifically, a queering of what the narrative refers to as the "Love Laws" that regulate and enforce heteronormativity, and, in turn, articulates the need for alternatives. While the critique of national politics and cultural norms, as well as of globalization and the discourse and processes of development, can clearly be analyzed at the level of the novel's content, the queerness of the novel's critique can only be fully analyzed by attending to its form. The novel's critique of heteronormativity is not only a critique of the regulatory heteronormative structures of the nation, but also attends to the ways in which normative sexuality—based on the logic of liberal individualism—structures and regulates the global culture of consumer capitalism. In demonstrating the ways in which normative sexuality structures possibilities for being at the levels of the local, national, and the global, Roy's novel challenges a dominant binary assumption in which Third World nationalism is seen to be a site of regulatory and repressive sexual and gender norms, while U.S.-dominated global culture is seen as an emancipatory force for spreading liberal individualist values such as "freedom," and thus as enabling a range of possibilities for being. What Roy's novel shows, instead, is the way in which heteronormativity is fundamentally connected to the liberal individualist values which structure the global cultural norms of the contemporary world.

Through the relationship between Estha and Rahel, Roy's novel not only challenges binary ways of thinking that tend to structure analyses of postcolonial texts, but also enables a consideration of the heteronormative assumptions that structure critical

analysis, and suggests the limits of the liberal individualist values upon which the assumptions of dominant modes of thought are based. My analysis focuses on the relationship between Estha and Rahel as the primary relationship of the novel, one in which a radical critique of heteronormativity, liberal individualism, and the comforting narratives of historicism—whether national or global—is staged. In contrast to the emphasis common to postcolonial studies on loss and fragmentation, the relationship between Estha and Rahel invites a rethinking of human being and relationships, showing the impossibility of loss and fragmentation when there is “no Each, no Other” (215). While this understanding of what might be called *inter-being* occurs in the novel between twins, the possibility suggested by this relationship is the recognition of inter-being at all levels—extending toward and including, the planetary.

Writing the “Small Things”: Narrative’s Challenge to Historicism

Roy’s experimentation with narrative and use of poetic strategies including, primarily, the fragment and repetition, produce a queering of narrative norms that articulates the need for alternative ways of thinking about the past, present, and possible futures. The structure of the narrative moves fluidly between two time periods: the past of the early-70s, in which the events surrounding Sophie Mol’s death and the relationship between Ammu and Velutha unfold; and the present of the late-90s, twenty-three years later, in which Estha and Rahel have both returned to Ayemenem after having been abroad for several years—Estha in England, after having been sent to live with his father when Ammu’s relationship with Velutha was discovered, and Rahel in the United States, having “drifted” there in her marriage to an American. The narrative shifts back-and-

forth between the past and present, unfolding the events of each temporal moment simultaneously. In most critical readings, emphasis is placed on the past and, in particular, on the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, so that the story of Estha and Rahel in *Ayemenem* in the present is eclipsed. If the present is mentioned, it is to note the critique of the ways in which globalization, “development,” and tourism have transformed—and degraded—*Ayemenem*, so that the relationship between Estha and Rahel remains secondary not only to the events of the past, but also to the globalized processes unfolding in the present. My reading attends to the relationship between Estha and Rahel as not just significant, but as holding the possibility for change that the novel offers.

Two of the primary poetic strategies Roy’s novel utilizes are the fragment and repetition, and it is in attending to the use and function of these two forms, as well as the innovative use of imagery within the narrative that the challenge to historicism and liberal individualism becomes clear. The fragmentary quality of Roy’s language does not simply represent the commonly theorized postcolonial understanding of the fragmentation, rupture, and loss caused by the experience of colonization, but is also a creative expression of the transformative potential of that experience. The fragment in Roy’s text simultaneously expresses loss, fragmentation and rupture, as well as the transformative potential of such experiences, and considers the interrelated dynamics of the historical contexts of both colonization and globalization. In the following passage, I show the way in which attending to narrative form is necessary for understanding the critique of the assumption that loss structures the lives of individuals from formerly colonized nations, as well as the assumption that the postcolonial self is inextricably

bound up with the nation. The following passage describes Rahel's American husband Larry McCaslin's exasperation with a certain look in Rahel's eyes, and considers the connections between individual and national histories:

But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Someone watching. Looking out of the window at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passerby in the mist in a hat.

He was exasperated because he didn't know what that look *meant*. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of the nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterized, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered. It was never important enough. Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening.

So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully. Like a rich boy in shorts. He whistled, kicked stones. The source of his brittle elation was the relative smallness of his misfortune. He climbed into people's eyes and became an exasperating expression.

What Larry McCaslin saw in Rahel's eyes was not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism. And a hollow where Estha's words had been. He couldn't be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies. (20-21)

This passage not only emphasizes the relative ways in which the "Worse Things" that happen on a national level affect the individuals of that nation, but also suggests the possibility of moving beyond modes of self-identification and subjectivity that too closely align individual destiny with that of the nation. The repetition of "Nothing mattered much. Nothing much mattered. And the less it mattered, the less it mattered"

functions not to uphold this despairing vision of the lives of individuals in Third World nations as *not* mattering, but rather to directly question and challenge this notion. Further, the fragment in the description of the relationship between Estha and Rahel challenges the understanding of the self as inextricably bound to the nation, and suggests an alternative notion of selfhood based on connection. The repetition and the fragment in the phrases beginning with “That” and “Like” suggests an alternative way of being that will be repeated, again, in later scenes between Estha and Rahel in the present—scenes I will discuss in the next section. It is significant in this passage that the possibility presented is not a globalized, cosmopolitan version of selfhood, in which the subject is “free” from connections—an atomized, rootless individual belonging anywhere in the globe—but is rather a grounded, connected individual whose sense of self is precisely rooted in connection with an other. And it is such connection with others that challenges the linear, developmental historicism and individualism that underlie capitalist, nationalist and globalized conceptions of selfhood. Repetition and the fragment function in this passage not to solidify, sustain, or reassert normative ways of thinking about the Third World through either the logic of nationalism or the totalizing logic of capital and globalization, but rather to question, challenge, and destabilize those norms—and, further, to demonstrate the ways in which they are interconnected.

The relationship between Estha and Rahel also challenges the normative understanding of fragmentation and loss in postcolonial subjects through the imagery and repetition of “emptiness” and “quietness” as representations of the twins. In a reading of the relationship between Estha and Rahel that is not based on a liberal individualist understanding of self, “emptiness” and “quietness” are not negative qualities, but rather

qualities of peace, ease, comfort, and well-being that connect the twins, so that the image of them as “stacked spoons” and “familiar lovers’ bodies” creates an image of selfhood based on interconnection—a connection so deep that the qualities of one individual are “only a version” of the qualities in the other. In this way, the novel writes the relationship between Estha and Rahel as both a challenge to liberal individualism and a presentation of alternative possibilities for being. At stake in the creation of new modes of being, the narrative suggests, is also fundamentally a need for new stories. The need to transform the narratives by which we live is central to the way the novel presents future possibilities for being otherwise. The night that Estha and Rahel watch the Kathakali dancers at the temple, they are described as follows:

They sat there, Quietness and Emptiness, frozen two-egg fossils, with hornbumps that hadn’t grown into horns. Separated by the breadth of the kuthambalam. Trapped in the bog of a story that was and wasn’t theirs. That had set out with the semblance of structure and order, then bolted like a frightened horse into anarchy. (224)

Watching the Kathakali men perform the “Great Stories” at the temple “to ask pardon of their gods” for performing as entertainment for tourists and thus “corrupting their stories” (218), Estha and Rahel are described as being “trapped” in a story that does not completely belong to them, that is not entirely their own. At the level of plot, Estha and Rahel are “trapped” by the events of their childhood, the “story” that belongs to Ammu and Velutha, so that neither Estha nor Rahel seem to have any identity of their own: as the narrator states: “Estha occupied very little space in the world” (12) and, for Rahel, “neglect seemed to have resulted in an accidental release of the spirit” (18) so that she “drifted” (16, 19) into and out of situations, including marriage, “like a passenger drifts toward an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge” (19). At the level of the critique of

historicism and the “master narratives” of the dominant, Estha and Rahel are further “trapped” by the stories, based on the “Love Laws,” that assert heteronormativity and reproductive sexuality as fundamental to normative ways of being in the world. Moreover, it is not only being “trapped” in a story that is not their own, but also their separation for so many years that produced the sense of not-quite belonging to the world in the twins. For, “[i]n those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was Forever, Estha and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us” (4). And, after years of separation, in which “Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits . . . appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons” (5), Estha and Rahel are reconnected again in Ayemenem, and, after watching the Kathakali men perform at the temple, “[t]hey walked home together. He and She. We and Us” (225). While the narrator describes the memories that Rahel shares with Estha as “the small things” (5), their connection is, the narrative shows, integral to their identities and, moreover, to possibilities for being in the world in ways that are not contained and limited by stories that are not their own. While the relationship between Ammu and Velutha is portrayed as doomed from the beginning and ends that way, the relationship between Estha and Rahel is offered, tentatively, as holding possibilities for creating new stories and ways of being in the world that are not bound—“trapped”—by the past.

The fragment and repetition function as strategies for writing the “small things” as an alternative way of thinking about pasts and futures. It is also in this writing of the “small things” that Roy’s reinvention of the image offers a challenge to historicism. Writing the stories of “Small God (cozy and contained, private and limited)” (20)

demonstrates the way in which those stories are inextricably connected to the narratives of dominant histories. In writing the “small things,” Roy’s narrative demonstrates not simply that individual, local stories are affected by dominant, national, and global histories, but rather that the local, national, and global are inextricably interconnected—that national and global stories and ways of being are “contained” and “limited” in the same ways as individual and local stories and ways of being. And it is the dominant assumptions of historicism, liberal individualism, and heteronormativity that limit and contain possibilities for being and the kinds of stories that can be told at all levels.

The novel’s experimentation with narrative also demonstrates the ways in which lives are limited and contained by dominant modes of thought, and presents a queer critique of such modes of thought. The representation of Baby Kochamma in the following passage functions as a parody of dominant, heteronormative narratives and as a challenge to the limiting narratives of historicism. Baby Kochamma’s reaction to Estha and Rahel, and her attempt to “prop” herself up with false narratives are indicative of the limits of dominant modes of thought:

Baby Kochamma settled back on her pillow and waited to hear Rahel come out of Estha’s room. They had begun to make her uneasy, both of them. A few mornings ago she had opened her window (for a Breath of Fresh Air) and caught them red-handed in the act of Returning From Somewhere. Clearly they had spent the whole night out. Together. Where could they have been? What and how much did they remember? When would they leave? What were they doing, sitting together in the dark for so long? She fell asleep propped up against her pillows, thinking that perhaps, over the sound of the rain and the television, she hadn’t heard Estha’s door open. That Rahel had gone to bed long ago. (283)

The use of capitalization and questions in this passage function to parody and expose the normative ways of thinking of the dominant, including the “uneasiness” of the dominant

about relationships and ways of being that challenge normativity. The alliteration of “propped up against her pillows, thinking that perhaps” suggests the ways in which the dominant comforts itself by inventing and adhering to false stories as if they are the truth. In this reading, the softness of the pillows represents the comforting and false narratives that serve to “prop up” dominant modes of thought. The narrative voice and narrative structure function in this passage to parody the normativity of the dominant and to challenge it: the paragraph ends with the comforting story—the only story that makes sense within the framework of the dominant, and allows the dominant to sleep at night—“That Rahel had gone to bed long ago.” However, after a double space in the text, there is a single line that dismantles this comforting and false story: “She hadn’t” (283). And, to further shatter the normative assumptions upon which dominant narratives are based, the following paragraph begins by revealing the truth: that not only had Rahel *not* “gone to bed long ago,” but rather, “Rahel was lying on Estha’s bed” (283). And, as I will discuss in the next section, this is also the evening that Estha and Rahel make love—an act that not only challenges the heteronormativity of dominant modes of thought and the values and assumptions of liberal individualism, but also functions as part of the queer critique at stake in Estha and Rahel’s relationship, and, in turn, offers the possibility for alternative ways of being in the world.

Writing the “small things,” particularly through the relationship between Estha and Rahel, is not simply about focusing on subaltern histories in contrast to dominant “master narratives,” but rather is a narrative argument for the need to acknowledge the past in order to address the present and move forward into a future that offers alternatives to the limitations, violence and injustices of past. While it is necessary to attend to the

details—the “small things”—of the past that have contributed to shaping the present, this attentiveness must be oriented toward the future, rather than remaining “trapped” and contained by the past. Recognizing the generational difference between Ammu and Velutha’s story and Estha and Rahel’s story is important for recognizing the way in which Roy presents the need to move beyond a simple emphasis on loss and “despair” in postcolonial narratives. It is necessary to simultaneously acknowledge those histories of violence and injustice and move toward alternatives. And in acknowledging past and present traumas while suggesting the need for future alternatives, Roy’s narrative presents possibilities for being otherwise, specifically through the potentially transformative relationship between Estha and Rahel. Roy’s writing of history through the lens of Estha and Rahel, and the “small things” that connect them, offers alternatives for imagining histories, futures, and ways of being in the world, so as to challenge the assumptions of dominant modes of thought, as well as to expand and enrich the range of possibilities for change.⁴² And, as noted, it is Roy’s experimentation with narrative and her use of poetic strategies in narrative that challenge the binaries upon which historicism is based so as to destabilize and, potentially, transform the linear, developmental, and heteronormative logic that structures dominant modes of thought. This challenge, in turn, also destabilizes the conventional critical distinction between experimental writing and realist narrative, as well as the assumptions and critical emphases of postcolonial studies

⁴² Several critics note the way in which the novel’s emphasis on “small things” as a way of writing history is in opposition to the master narratives of dominant, national “History.” Anuradha Dingwaney Needham aligns the novel’s writing of the “small things” with Guha’s theory of the “small voice of history,” in which the grand narratives of Indian national history can be challenged by attending to the “small voices” of the subaltern. Priyamvada Gopal also notes that Roy’s emphasis on the “small things” is not only a challenge to dominant, national narratives of history, but also provides a contrast to “the Rushdie-esque epic nation” and the “stylistic pyrotechnics of magical realism” (156).

itself, so as to demonstrate the need to move beyond the limits of criticism and consider the work of narrative in more expansive ways.

In leaving open possibilities for the present and future for Estha and Rahel, Roy's novel not only demonstrates how literature might offer possibilities for "the invention of a shared and dynamic present" that Spivak calls for, but also addresses the critique of historicism outlined by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, in which a central task is "to rethink the problem of historical time and to review the relationship between the possible and the actual" in order to reconsider "how one might think about the past and the future in a nontotalizing manner" (249). Chakrabarty argues for the specific ability of literary texts to offer narratives about "diverse ways of being human" (254) and to represent possibilities for how "ways of being human will be acted out in manners that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital" (67). Literature thus offers a site in which to write alternative histories not simply as "alternatives to the narratives of capital," but rather as constant interruptions to the totalizing logic of capital and dominant history (66). Furthermore, such writing of alternative histories also includes what Chakrabarty refers to as "futures that 'are'"—futures that "do not lend themselves to being represented by a totalizing principle" (251) and thus are part of a notion of futurity that differs from historicist notions of temporality. The notion of what Chakrabarty refers to as the future that "will be" is based on the linear logic of historicism and capital that is fundamentally derived from notions of will and power, whereas the notion of futures that already "are" is based on an understanding of "[b]eing futural [as] something that is with us, at every moment, in every action that the human being undertakes," and is thus an ethical understanding of "futurity that already *is* in our

actions at every moment” (250). The notion of “being oriented toward the future” (250) in this way allows for a fundamentally different understanding of human possibility in which resides potentially transformative ways of thinking about difference, diversity, and possibilities for being in the world. Roy’s novel, in its writing of the “small things” through the relationship between Estha and Rahel, not only offers a critique of historicism and articulates a way of thinking about time and history in a nontotalizing way, but also offers, through its experimentation with language and narrative, an alternative vision of the present and possible futures that challenges the totalizing logic of capital, as well as presents the necessity of alternatives for thinking about diverse ways of being in the world. As I have noted, while criticism tends to focus on the past of the narrative—the events surrounding Sophie Mol’s death and the relationship between Ammu and Velutha—my queer reading focuses on the present of the narrative: the reconnection of Estha and Rahel, and the sense of possibility offered in that connection. The narrative suggests that being “trapped” in a story that is not theirs keeps Estha and Rahel in the past, and thus suggests the necessity of “being oriented toward the future”—and, crucially, it is in being oriented toward each other, *together*, as “We” and “Us” that Estha and Rahel’s relationship provides a model of interconnection that offers a potentially transformative and ethical understanding of being human otherwise—in a way that transcends the limiting logic of liberal individualism, historicism, and capitalism, all of which are based on separation.

Roy’s experimentation with narrative produces a critique of the seemingly inevitable, normative logic of dominant history, and articulates the need for alternative ways of writing and thinking about the past, present and future, so as to reinvent

possibilities for being in the world. The novel's experimentation with narrative voice and structure challenges binary and heteronormative ways of thinking that structure nationalist, colonialist, and capitalist modes of thought, and the experimental qualities of the narration produce a queer critique of those dominant modes of thought. The queerness of the narration not only challenges the regulatory structures of heteronormativity, but also demonstrates the ways in which sexual and narrative norms are fundamentally connected, and that this connection also regulates narrative norms and delimits the kinds of stories that can be imagined and told. Reimagining and reinventing the world, the novel suggests, requires revision of the structures and forms of language and narrative. By experimenting with narrative, Roy's novel works to destabilize, revise, and imagine alternative possibilities for the kinds of stories that can be told, the ways in which stories can be told, and the ways in which lives can be lived in this world.

Necessary Impossibility and Impossible Desires: Reinventing the Future

My argument, therefore, is that the novel does offer possibilities for change—a reading that differs significantly from much of the criticism. Critical readings of the novel that focus on the past of the narrative and analyze its critique of caste, gender, and sexual norms within the postcolonial nation of India, focus the critique through the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Thus, for such readings, even though the narrative ends with the word “tomorrow,” seemingly offering a sense of possibility and openness, in the chronology of the narrative, Ammu and Velutha are already dead, and therefore the possibility of an as-yet unknown future is closed. This reading of the text, however, focuses only on the relationship of Ammu and Velutha as structuring the text's meaning

and its consideration of the unfolding of colonial and postcolonial pasts, the global present, and possible futures. Such a focus on Ammu and Velutha's relationship, while important for considering the ways in which the novel challenges the caste and sexual norms of Indian social structures, remains structured by heteronormative logic, and nation-based understandings of postcolonial literature in English. Such a reading not only maintains the heteronormative logic through which postcolonial literature is understood, but also demonstrates the way in which the linear, developmental logic of historicism is connected to heteronormativity. As my analysis in this section will show, it is only by attending to the experimentation with language and narrative that the text's queer critique becomes clear, and, more importantly, it is in the queer critique offered through Estha and Rahel's relationship that possibilities for alternative futures emerge.

As I have suggested, attending to the narrative structure and experimental strategies of the text as significant demonstrates its challenge to historicism and to the emphasis on the past, loss, and trauma in postcolonial literary studies, as well as reveals the novel's offering of possible alternatives. Moreover, to emphasize the past of the narrative is not only to privilege the past over the present, but also to privilege heteronormativity—Ammu and Velutha's relationship—over the queer critique and possibility of the present. Thus, readings that attend to Ammu and Velutha's relationship as holding out the meaning of the text—and the significance of the word "tomorrow" as connected only to that relationship—not only fail to attend to the text's narrative structure as significant, but also fail to attend to the queer critique of heteronormativity that is connected to the structural experimentation. It is only by attending to the experimentation with narrative form as significant that the novel's queer critique becomes legible, and, in

turn, it is only by shifting emphasis from a heteronormative analysis that privileges Ammu and Velutha's relationship that the queer critique at stake in Estha and Rahel's relationship can be fully analyzed. In my reading, then, the repetition of the word "tomorrow" and the phrase "things can change in a day" is part of a queer critique of the heteronormativity that structures narrative itself by shifting the potential for possible futures to the relationship between Estha and Rahel. The narrative ends with the possibility for a "tomorrow" as well as the possibility that "things can change in a day" for Estha and Rahel—and this possibility is the creation of an as-yet unknown future, a future that has yet to be imagined and invented.

While the sex scene between Ammu and Velutha has received significant attention, due to its graphic portrayal of taboo-breaking sexual relations between a Syrian Christian woman and an Untouchable man, the sex scene between Estha and Rahel has not received much critical attention apart from brief references, which mention it only in relation to larger arguments about the violence and trauma resulting from Ammu's transgression. The critical tendency, derived from such centering of Ammu and Velutha's relationship, is to analyze the relationship between Estha and Rahel as a result of Ammu's experiences, so that Estha and Rahel are analyzed as damaged, traumatized victims of the injustices of colonial, national, and cultural norms. The sexual encounter between Estha and Rahel, then, is also only read as a result of and response to the trauma that they experienced as children. Such critical analyses focus on the relationship between Estha and Rahel from a psychological or psychoanalytic perspective, and thus privilege assumptions about individual identity and the linear logic of development that underlie normative understandings of liberal individualism. One of the problematic

aspects of such readings is that, in following a linear logic, they do not attend to the way in which the novel's narrative form specifically challenges that logic and linear, developmental understandings of history and human being. Attending to the experimental strategies of the text as a queering of the dominant logic of heteronormativity and liberal individualism, however, challenges not only the critical emphasis on the national and the heteronormative, but also the linear, developmental logic of dominant understandings of history and narrative. The heteronormativity that structures and sustains the logic of liberal individualism and normative understandings of history and narrative is challenged by the formal experimentation of the text, and it is only by attending to the experimental qualities that the text's queer critique becomes apparent. As my analysis in this section will show, the experimental qualities of the text queer the linear and heteronormative logic that structures conventional understandings of history and narrative, in national, colonial, and critical discourse, all of which are fundamentally based upon and structured by the values and assumptions of liberal individualism.

In the sex scene between Estha and Rahel, experimentation with the poetic techniques of the fragment and repetition, and innovative use of imagery function to queer normative interpretations of the novel by challenging the national and heteronormative emphases of criticism and conventional linear understandings of history and narrative. Chapter 20, "The Madras Mail," is a short (7-page), yet significant chapter in which the scene of Estha and Rahel's separation when Estha is "Returned" to his father precedes the scene in which Estha and Rahel make love—which is, chronologically, the

final scene of the narrative.⁴³ The section in which Estha and Rahel make love picks up the scene that begins the night Baby Kochamma falls asleep telling herself that Rahel must have “gone to bed long ago” (283). Instead, Rahel is “lying on Estha’s bed” (283) and Estha is “sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested” (310). After Rahel draws Estha down to lie beside her, the narrator states: “They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness and Emptiness” (310). Separated from the surrounding text, the following two lines are significant as they precede the description of the sex between Estha and Rahel:

They were strangers who had met in a chance encounter.
They had known each other before Life began. (310)

The separation of these lines from the surrounding text highlights their significance and suggests a sense of possibility surrounding their meaning and relationship to each other. The possibility of the relationship between Estha and Rahel as being as-yet undefined is underlined by the content of the two lines. The repetition in these two lines might be interpreted through a binary way of understanding human relationships and ways of being in the world. In such a reading, the repetition of the word “They” at the beginning of each sentence would suggest an either/or way of reading the two statements, as they seem to suggest opposing ways of understanding the relationship between Estha and Rahel. Understanding the two sentences as separated by a binary logic—and focusing only on the narrative content—would therefore read the first line to suggest what is not true, and the second to suggest what could be perhaps understood as biologically true, as they

⁴³ Chapter 21, however, the final chapter of the novel, tends to be read as the most significant, as it contains the scene of Ammu and Velutha making love for the first time.

existed together in their mother's womb before being born (if birth is the moment in which "Life began"). However, an alternative, queer reading that attends to form as significant would produce a different understanding, one based on a logic of multiplicity—structured by the possibilities offered by "and" rather than the binary of "either/or"—in which the question of how to reinvent the world and ways of being in and belonging to it is foregrounded. Both lines could then be interpreted by a different logic, one that challenges the developmental, unified, coherent logic of liberal individualism and suggests an alternative way of thinking about human being. In such a queer reading, then, it is the relationship between Estha and Rahel, as "strangers who had met in a chance encounter" *and* who "had known each other before Life began" that offers an alternative way of thinking about ways of being in the world and with others. The experimental strategy of repetition therefore functions to produce an alternative way of understanding truth, temporality, and human ways of being in the world. Rather than being based upon a binary logic, the repetition here offers a multiplicity of ways of being in the world that simultaneously reimagines and reinvents conventional understandings of "truth" and "reality". Furthermore, the possibilities offered by the poetic structure of these lines challenge the logic of liberal individualism and the unified, coherent, developmental logic of selfhood upon which liberal individualism is based.⁴⁴ To read the logic of these two lines as based on the multiplicity of the conjunction "and" (rather than the binary logic of "or") is to theorize selfhood in a way that resists the developmental, linear logic of liberal individualism, and to offer a possibility for selfhood in which

⁴⁴ My queer reading of these two lines also allows for the possibility that Estha and Rahel's relationship is one of two souls who have known each other in previous lives and thus knew each other before this current "Life" began. The belief in reincarnation also challenges linear, developmental, liberal individualist, and historicist notions of selfhood and human history.

individual identity is not coherent, but rather allows for multiple ways of being and multiple truths, thus also challenging conventional understandings of temporality and history. For both statements in this passage to be true, the linear, binary logic of both liberal individualism and historicism must be challenged, and it is the queer, experimental challenge of the text that simultaneously destabilizes the normative—and heteronormative—logic of conventional understandings of selfhood, history, and narrative, as well as suggests the need for alternatives.

The final “act” of the narrative is the lovemaking between Estha and Rahel in the following passage:

There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi’s book) would separate Sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings.

Except perhaps that no Watcher watched through Rahel’s eyes. No one stared out of a window at the sea. Or a boat in the river. Or a passerby in the mist in a hat.

Except perhaps that it was a little cold. A little wet. But very quiet. The Air.

But what was there to say?

Only that there were tears. Only that Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-colored shoulder had a semicircle of teethmarks on it. Only that they held each other close, long after it was over. Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief.

Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (310-311)

This passage includes the repetition of several phrases and images that have been significant throughout the novel. The repetition from the first chapter, in which Estha and Rahel are described as fitting together, “Like stacked spoons” (20), and in which her husband is “offended” by Rahel’s eyes when they make love, is significant as it contrasts to the lovemaking between Estha and Rahel, in which “no Watcher watched,” suggesting

the depth of the connection between them. Several instances of repetition also occur from the set-up to this scene in “Cochin Harbor Terminus,” including the lines:

It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air.
But what was there to say? (283)

The repetition of the lines “There is very little that anyone could say” and “But what was there to say?” highlights the way in which the normative and the heteronormative structure and delimit not only narrative, but also language itself. These lines are also indicative of the “impossible desires”⁴⁵ between Estha and Rahel, and the impossibility of describing their intimacy suggests that the limits of language are also the limits of thought, and the limits of sexual norms. It is in this staging of such “impossible desires” that the queer critique of the limits of heteronormativity—as it structures and delimits not only language and narrative, but also possibilities for being in the world—emerges. The repetition of the word “only” functions as part of this queer critique, as an attempt to articulate the impossible, and therefore suggests the need to attempt to articulate the impossible. The importance of this attempt is to expand the possibilities of language and narrative, to enable new ways of being to be imagined and invented, and to challenge the norms that regulate and limit “who should be loved. And how. And how much.”

The ways in which heteronormative regulation and enforcement of the “Love Laws” structure the kinds of stories that can be told and the ways in which lives can be lived is centrally at stake throughout the novel. In the first chapter, the narrator notes the following about the structure of narrative and how stories unfold:

⁴⁵ The term “impossible desires” is taken from Gayatri Gopinath’s book about queerness in South Asian diasporic texts, *Impossible Desires*, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In a purely practical sense it would probably be correct to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem. Perhaps it's true that things can change in a day. That a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those few dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house—the charred clock, the singed photograph, the scorched furniture—must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for.

Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story.

Still, to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it.

Equally, it could be argued that it actually began thousands of years ago. Long before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived, before the Zamorin's conquest of Calicut. Before three purple-robed Syrian bishops murdered by the Portuguese were found floating in the sea, with coiled serpents riding on their chests and oysters knotted in their tangled beards. It could be argued that it began long before Christianity arrived in a boat and seeped into Kerala like tea from a teabag.

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.

And how much. (32-33)

Heteronormativity is shown to fundamentally underlie the norms of local and global ways of being in the world, and, in demonstrating the interconnection of local and global norms, the queer critique also demonstrates the need to attend to the ways in which heteronormativity limits and contains ways of being in the world in order to move toward the planetary. The scenes of the night Estha and Rahel make love, as well as in chapter 17, "Cochin Harbor Terminus," and in "The Madras Mail," Estha and Rahel are situated in a way that is planetary, so that their relationship is located in the planetary, in all the complexities and injustices and historical complications of the globalized world. Whereas Ammu and Velutha's relationship is clearly situated in the colonial past and Indian national present of the 1970s, Estha and Rahel's relationship is futural and planetary in its orientation, and thus the repetition of the line, "what was there to say?" is also significant

for the way in which it suggests the as-yet undefined way of being that their relationship offers. As I have also been suggesting, the separation of Estha and Rahel can be read as the real trauma that defined their lives in limiting ways and it is in their togetherness that “futural” ways of being are presented. The sex scene between Ammu and Velutha situates their relationship in such a way as to suggest that they are already doomed by the “stakes” of the colonial and national histories and the postcolonial present: “Biology danced the dance. Terror timed it. . . . It only raised the stakes. It only cost them more” (317). The clarity of the costs of sex in a world regulated by the Love Laws, and, more specifically, the clarity of the stakes and costs in the postcolonial national past and present, can be contrasted to the representation of the “impossible desires” between Estha and Rahel, as well as the utopian sense of possibility that is presented by the quality of the narration and language in these representations of the erotic.

In the representation of the eroticism in Estha and Rahel’s relationship, the fragment, repetition, and the image function to create a sense of possibility for alternative ways of being and alternatives for the erotic itself. Roy uses poetic structure and language to create images that challenge dominant modes of representation and ways of thinking about sexuality and human relationships. Estha and Rahel are represented through images that are suggestive of new possibilities for being. The images of Estha in “Cochin Harbor Terminus” and “The Madras Mail” represent him through repetition: “He sat very straight. Shoulders squared. Hands in his lap. As though he was next in line for some sort of inspection. Or waiting to be arrested” (279); “He sat very straight. Waiting for the inspection” (283); “He sat even straighter” (283); “Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested, takes his fingers to [Rahel’s mouth]. To touch the words it makes. To keep

the whisper. His fingers follow the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed. Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain” (310). The fragmentation and repetition in these images of Estha, as well as the use of the passive voice, function not only to create a sense of the erotic, but also to create an image of masculine sexuality that challenges heteronormative representations of male sexuality as active and dominating. The images of Rahel utilize alliteration in the repetition to enhance the sense of the erotic and to challenge heteronormative representations of women’s bodies as sexualized objects for the male gaze:

Rahel was lying on Estha’ bed. She looked thinner lying down. Younger. Smaller. Her face was turned towards the window beside the bed. Slanting rain hit the bars of the window-grill and shattered into a fine spray over her face and her smooth bare arm. Her soft, sleeveless T-shirt was a glowing yellow in the dark. The bottom half of her, in blue jeans, melted into the darkness.

It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air.

But what was there to say?

From where he sat, at the end of the bed, Estha, without turning his head, could see her. Faintly outlined. The sharp line of her jaw. Her collarbones like wings that spread from the base of her throat to the ends of her shoulders. A bird held down by skin. (283)

The alliteration of “Slanting,” “shattered,” “spray,” “smooth,” “soft, sleeveless” and “sharp” function to create images that are concrete and explosive. “Slanting,” “shattered,” and “spray”—angular and explosive imagery—contrast with “smooth” and “soft,” as well as with “sharp,” so that the angular can be read as signifying a different way of seeing, the explosive “shattered” and “spray” as signifying a breaking open so as to create new possibilities, “smooth” and “soft” as signifying a gentler way of being with others, and “sharp” as signifying the difficulty of going toward a space and way of being that is entirely new and as-yet undefined. The positioning of the gaze in these images is also

significant for the way in which it represents the as-yet undefined way of being that is being suggested: Rahel's face is turned away from Estha and half of her body "melted into the darkness," while Estha can see her only "[f]aintly outlined." Not only do these images suggest the tentative, as-yet undefined representation of alternatives for being in the relationship between Estha and Rahel, but also suggest that their interconnection also poses a challenge to dominant heteronormative images of sexuality and eroticism—the hyper-sexualized, yet de-eroticized, heteronormative images of consumer capitalism that fail to represent any kind of human connection.

Roy's attention to visual detail and the significance of the image in the text engages in a political and ethical project of dismantling the norms of representation and narrative so as to imagine and reinvent alternative possibilities for thinking about and being in the world. Roy's innovative use of poetic language in the construction of the imagery of the novel also dismantles the distinction between modernism and realism that structures conventional readings of postcolonial literature. Roy utilizes the poetic image characteristic of modernism to simultaneously critique the norms that structure, regulate and limit possible ways of being in the world, as well as to theorize alternatives. Roy's experimentation with language and the image suggests that theorizing new ways of being in the world requires revising linguistic and symbolic norms that structure and regulate possible ways of being in the world. Roy's experimentation thus engages in a struggle over the images that inform and regulate ways of being in the world, and goes beyond critical theory to show that the binaries that structure and regulate criticism itself must also be challenged. The "faith in fragility" of the novel, then, can be read as significant if we consider Roy's experimentation with the image, particularly the images of Estha and

Rahel. As children, in the past of the narrative, Estha and Rahel are most frequently depicted as images of “a puff” and “a knot in a Love-in-Tokyo” (respectively), as well as by Estha’s “beige and pointy shoes” (32) and Rahel’s “yellow-rimmed red sunglasses” (284). Thus they are presented as images of hair and accessories, “small things” that will change. These images of them as children not only represent the fragility of their position in relation to the destructive nature of the normative, but also suggest the possibility for transformation. For the possibilities the narrative leaves open are to have “faith in fragility” and in the “small things,” as well as the possibilities for “tomorrow” and the potential offered by the fact that “things can change in a day.” While most readings assume that the “day” in which things change is the day that Sophie Mol drowns and Ammu and Velutha’s relationship is discovered—a reading that emphasizes loss, trauma, and the past—my queer reading suggests that it is the day in which Estha and Rahel make love that the novel offers as holding out the possibility for change.

The emphasis created through the repetition of images and phrases, then, is a function of the novel’s experimentation with language and narrative, and produces a set of images that challenge the norms of dominant consumer capitalism. The text does not privilege images of exoticized postcolonial others for the Western gaze, but rather invents new images through its central characters, Estha and Rahel—images that are unformed, in progress, yet to be defined. It is the simultaneous clarity and vagueness of the image in the novel’s depiction of Estha and Rahel that challenges the coherence and unity of liberal individualism, not only showing the limits of the notion of the liberal individual, but also opening up the possibility for imagining human being otherwise. Roy’s experimentation therefore lies not only in the way in which she utilizes the poetic

structures of the fragment and repetition, but also in the creation of a set of images that expose and critique the structures of heteronormativity, historicism, and liberal individualism upon which colonial and national ideologies, as well as the logic and ideology of global consumer capitalism, are founded. The experimentation with language and narrative thus exposes and produces a critique of the way in which the “Love Laws,” and their function in regulating and limiting the possibilities for sexuality and human relationships, are fundamental to the normative structuring of ways of being in the world and the construction and regulation of particular identities.

The Local, the Global, and the Planet: Postcolonial Subjects at the End of the Twentieth Century

My argument for the way in which attending to form and reading the relationship between Estha and Rahel as significant on its own terms (rather than as a derivative of Ammu’s relationship with Velutha) also attends to the way in which these two characters are located as individuals in the globalized world. Reading Estha and Rahel’s relationship as significant also allows for an analysis of their not-quite belonging to the nation as another aspect of the novel’s queer critique. As noted, the sexual encounter between Estha and Rahel—the act that ends the story—takes place after they have each been abroad for some time, Estha in England and Rahel in the United States. Even as children, the twins did not belong in a clear sense to the nation, as they are described as being half-Hindu and half-Syrian Christian, and, because of their ambiguous status, are said to have “hornbumps” on their heads where horns, indicating their link to the devil, would grow. However, while the twins do not belong to the nation, nor does Roy suggest that they are

the global citizens of cosmopolitanism: neither Rahel's experience in the U.S., nor Estha's experience in England suggests a sense of global belonging. Thus the novel's queer critique is not only of the heteronormativity of national historicism, but also of global capitalism, as the norms that structure, limit and regulate ways of being in the world—and, in particular, the norms of sexuality—operate at both levels. Queer critique of the heteronormativity that underwrites the nation must also attend to the heteronormativity that structures and sustains the globalized world. It is in this way that the narrative's critique moves beyond the limits of postcolonial criticism and challenges the binaries upon which criticism tends to be based. The narrative instead theorizes the world in an alternate way, showing how the local and the global are always already intertwined, and how the norms that regulate the national are always already operating on a global level. The novel's critique is also significant for the way in which it demonstrates that heteronormativity fundamentally structures and regulates ways of being in the world. The repeated references to the "Love Laws" are not a frivolous or childlike way of articulating the norms that structure and regulate sexuality and gender, but rather function to demonstrate their deep significance as they limit possibilities for being. The experimental qualities of the text thus challenge the binary assumptions upon which postcolonial criticism is based and allow for a queering of the frameworks through which postcolonial literature is read.

One of the conventional forms of postcolonial critical analysis focuses on the ways in which postcolonial literature re-works—often through a destabilizing strategy of mimicry—the narrative modes of the British canon, and, in doing so, "writes back" to the British empire—challenging in particular the binary assumptions upon which its

imperialist logic is based. While this postcolonial project has been important—for instance, in works as varied as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)—the framework of “writing back,” and its attendant binary logic, can tend to limit the ways in which postcolonial writing is understood, as well as the ability of critics to make claims about postcolonial literary texts that deviate from, challenge, or expand this framework. Moreover, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, postcolonial literature by women writers tends to be read through frameworks that limit the writing to reflect the “experience” of the writer, thus undermining the literary value of the text *as literature*. Much of the criticism of Roy’s novel points out similarities between the narrative and Roy’s own life and experience, noting, for instance, that Roy is a trained architect, that her mother, Mary Roy, was divorced, and that Roy was raised in a Syrian Christian community in Kerala during the time period in which the novel takes place. Many of the essays in the 1999 collection *The Critical Studies of Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*, edited by Jaydipsinh Dodiya and Joya Chakravarty, go so far as to call the novel “autobiographical,” based on these connections to Roy’s life.⁴⁶ At issue in such readings is the reasoning upon which arguments are made for the “autobiographical” or “personal” nature of a work of fiction by a Third World writer—and, in particular, by a Third World woman writer. I have previously noted the problems associated with the critical tendency to analyze Third World women’s texts as autobiographical and based upon the “experience” of the author, as well as the claim that Third World women also

⁴⁶ For instance, Chakravarty and Purohit argue: “It is certainly an autobiographical novel” (Dodiya and Chakravarty 152), while Meena Sodhi calls the novel a “personal book” (41) about Roy’s “life reconstructed out of the memories of the past” (41).

therefore “represent” the realities of life in a particular community or nation.⁴⁷ This critical position also fails to attend to the way in which Roy addresses the interconnections of the local and the global, as critics, in reading the novel as autobiographical, attempt to position the narrative as reflecting a personal stance that is either anti-globalization or critical of Indian caste and gender systems. The binary ways of reading the novel’s politics thus fail to attend to the way in which the experimentation of the text produces multiplicity and challenges such limiting binary modes of thinking.

Also characteristic of the criticism of Roy’s novel is a failure to examine the relationship between the novel’s experimental style and its content, as critics tend to separate analysis of the experimental qualities of the text from analysis of its meaning. For instance, in an essay that situates Roy’s experimentation in a tradition of innovative postcolonial fiction with other Indian writers in English such as Desani and Rushdie, Murari Prasad analyzes various forms of linguistic “play” in the novel, and concludes that Roy’s “stylistic oddities here and there are part of her communicative urgency, her intense creative urge to design an ambitious verbal habitat for an essentially nostalgic and hauntingly personal narrative” (133). Prasad’s argument demonstrates a critical

⁴⁷ As seen in Chapter 1, this argument also functions in nationalist discourse to position women as “representatives” of the nation and thus as bearers of national culture, tradition, and values. Focusing on the author’s biography and the historical and cultural contexts of her work as the primary points of entry into the text limits analysis of the work so that the narrative becomes a mere reflection of certain “realities” that the author is assumed to represent. Furthermore, reading fiction by women writers as based on “experience” and thus grounded in “the real world” simultaneously shores up the binary distinction between the literary and the world that marginalizes literary studies, and produces a kind of anthropological analysis of Third World texts that positions them as ethnographic evidence, rather than as cultural texts belonging to the realm of the literary. These problematic assumptions not only delimit the ways in which texts by Third World women writers can be understood, but also maintain the critical division between realism and modernism that continues to structure readings of literary texts. The division between realism and modernist or experimental literature is one that underlies many of the critical assumptions of postcolonial literary studies and, I argue, close examination of the specificities of postcolonial texts reveals the fallacies of this binary way of thinking.

tendency—characteristic, I argue, not only of analyses of Roy’s novel, but also of literary criticism based on an assumed distinction between modernist innovation and postcolonial realism—to attend either to the formal aspects of a text under the rubric of literary innovation or to its content under the rubric of political engagement. Such a critical tendency not only fails to make connections between formal and political analysis, but also assumes and upholds a distinction between literary modernism and realism. Rather than consider the connection between the novel’s experimentation and its political critique, Prasad’s argument demonstrates the tendency to argue for the “personal” nature of the narrative so that the author is conflated with the work and the political potential of the work’s experimentation is neutralized.⁴⁸

Thus, much of the criticism of Roy’s novel reflects conventional frameworks of postcolonial studies that do not fully address the novel’s innovative, experimental challenge to dominant ways of thinking. To emphasize the novel’s critique of nationalism and the regulatory structures of the nation, within the context of twentieth-century globalization is also to limit the text to a mere reflection of postcolonial models, which tend to be structured by the binary of nationalism versus colonialism, which also upholds a binary between local and global.⁴⁹ Rather than analyze Roy’s text as utilizing

⁴⁸ Prasad’s analysis of the novel offers valuable and nuanced insights into its experimental qualities, and I note this part of his argument here only as an example of a critical trend characteristic of readings of Roy’s novel, as well as to note the limits of this form of criticism, and the way in which it is based on binary assumptions, maintained in the discourses of postcolonial theory and literary criticism, which shore up the distinction between modernism and realism that my argument challenges.

⁴⁹ The binary nationalism v. colonialism includes, under the rubric of colonialism, twentieth-century forms of neo-colonialism attendant to U.S.-dominated imperialist globalization. To challenge the binary construction of nationalism versus colonialism is also to challenge the assumptions upon which readings of Third World texts as “national allegory” are based. See my discussion of Jameson’s argument in Chapter 1 on Aidoo’s work.

deconstructive strategies to resist the dominant, my consideration of the novel has focused on the ways in which the experimental aspects of the text challenge conventional binary understandings of the world, including power relations of dominance versus resistance. Furthermore, Roy's experimentation with form, language, and narrative go beyond the limits of the categories of "postcolonial" and "experimental" so as to challenge the assumptions that underlie the binary modes of thought that structure contemporary critical discourse and ways of thinking about and being in the world.

In demonstrating the ways in which the local and the global are always already mutually influential, Roy's novel critiques the cultural essentialism that underlies dominant modes of thinking about cultural identity in the globalized, postcolonial world. Moreover, the critique of essentialism is fundamental to the ethical perspective of Roy's text, as it challenges the limiting assumptions of liberal individualism so as to imagine possibilities for being in more expansive ways. Since liberal individualism is based on essentialist, developmental understandings of identity, the experimentation of the text challenges such assumptions, particularly through the representation of Estha and Rahel as being in-process, "made and remade" in and through different encounters.⁵⁰ While the narrative focuses on how Estha and Rahel are made and remade through specific events, in particular those surrounding Sophie Mol's arrival, death, and Ammu's relationship with Velutha, the poetic language and experimental strategies of the text, including repetition, the fragment, and the image, function to show the ways in which individuals are "made and remade" through encounters with each other. And, as I have argued, it is

⁵⁰ I borrow the phrase "made and remade" from Sankaran Krishna's discussion of Bhabha's notion of cultural difference and the way in which cultures are "made and remade" in and through encounters with others (Krishna 127).

in focusing on the relationship between Estha and Rahel that this critique of liberal individualism and its underlying essentialism emerges. The novel thus also leaves open the possibility of how Estha and Rahel might be further “made and remade” through their encounter with each other. And it is in the as-yet unimagined possibility for the futural and “impossible” relationship between Estha and Rahel that the novel holds out the potential for how “things can change in a day,” as well as the potential offered by “tomorrow.” Through the radical challenge to heteronormativity, liberal individualism, and historicism at stake in the relationship between Estha and Rahel, Roy’s text works toward reinventing and transforming the narratives and norms that structure ways of being in the world. Roy’s experimental strategies, including repetition, the fragment, and her innovative use of imagery function to explode the past, clarify the present, and offer the potential for a different kind of future.

What I have been considering in relation to Roy’s novel, then, is the way in which the imaginative world of the text engages with the material world and the way in which it offers possible alternatives to the dominant images of the globalized world in the late twentieth century. And I have been suggesting that a key question for critical analysis in the present might be: if the images of consumer capitalism, born out of the rise and expansion of industrialization, have played a significant role in creating current global norms, including dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions, how might the production of a new set of images affect our ways of thinking and being in the world? Roy’s creation of a new set of images—images that are as-yet undefined, “faintly outlined”—suggests possibilities for alternative, queer, futural, and planetary ways of being that challenge the dominant norms of nationalism and global consumer capitalism.

Spivak's notion of the "planetary" is a useful concept for considering Roy's critique of globalization and articulation of the need for alternative ways of being in the world, for the way in which it suggests the need for radically different ways of thinking and being in the world. Spivak argues for a shift in thinking, described as "planet-thought," radically different from the modes of thought and being of late-stage capitalism and globalization:

To be human is to be intended toward the other. . . . If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. And thus to think of it is already to transgress, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous. We must persistently educate ourselves into this peculiar mindset. (73)

Roy's novel addresses the specific issues of globalization in the twentieth century through a postcolonial lens, while also articulating the need for change as the consequences of industrialization, globalization and consumer capitalism—all part of the global changes effected not only over the course of the twentieth century, but also at least since the eighteenth century—lead to devastation at the level of individual human lives, as well as at the level of the planet. As my analysis has shown, the experimental qualities of Roy's novel challenge the binaries through which the world is understood, and upon which the distinction between modernist and realist literature has been constructed, as well as destabilize linear, developmental modes of thinking about history, narrative, and cultural difference that structure and sustain dominant modes of thought—including the critical assumptions of postcolonial thought. Thus the imaginative realm of Roy's novel, through its experimentation with language, narrative form, and images, challenges the limits of dominant ways of thinking and being in the world so as to articulate the need for

alternatives. Furthermore, the “futural” orientation of Roy’s text is a result of the experimentation at the level of form and language, and thus it is only by attending to the formal and linguistic specificities of the novel that its engagement in a form of critique that might be characterized as planetary, futural, and queer, becomes clear. Roy’s novel demonstrates how postcolonial literature offers ways of thinking about shared pasts and possible futures so as to allow for “the invention of a shared and dynamic present” that is indeed “planetary” and must—if we are to imagine ways of being in the world that are not delimited by the homogenizing, repressive, and violent logic of capitalism, globalization, and consumer culture—be thought of as such. Given the urgency of our precarious place on earth in light of the realities of global warming and climate change, now more than ever it is necessary for us to turn from the emphasis on individual will that has structured and limited human endeavor at least since the industrial revolution to consider how we might live on this earth in a way that emphasizes collectivity and caring and attends to our shared, planetary condition. Necessary and integral to such transformation is also a shift in thought about difference—from tolerance, which derives from regulation and repressive power structures, in which dominant modes of thought do not respect the agency to those who are seen as different from the dominant, to acceptance, which derives from an ethic of care and understanding of our shared, collective, interdependent situation on this earth, and allows for a diversity of ways of being in the world and being human.

Chapter 3: “The Aroma of Transformation”: Queer Affiliation in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Our first task is to become attentive to the soul’s desire and to place ourselves in its service.

- M. Jacqui Alexander

To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control, that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances for which you were not to blame. That says something very important about the condition of the ethical life: that it is based on a trust in the uncertain and on a willingness to be exposed; it’s based on being more like a plant than a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from that fragility.

- Martha C. Nussbaum

Shani Mootoo’s debut novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, published in 1996, is set on the fictional Caribbean island of Lantanacamera in a town called Paradise, and reconstructs the postcolonial past of a fictionalized Trinidad through the story of Mala Ramchandin, an elderly recluse who, when the narrative begins, has been moved from her home to a care facility and become the charge of Tyler, the nurse who is the novel’s narrator. Tyler is aware of the stories circulating among the island population about Mala: feared and mocked by the islanders as a madwoman, she is also at the center of a story of scandal and incest: her mother, Sarah, left the island for the “Shivering Northern Wetlands” with her lover Lavinia, the daughter of the island missionary, leaving her daughters, Mala and Asha, with their father Chandin, who started to rape both girls after their mother left. Mala is also abandoned by her sister when, as a young woman, Asha leaves Paradise and eventually the island, ending up, we learn in the novel’s conclusion,

in Canada. Moving between the present of Tyler and Mala's developing relationship at the care facility, and the past of Mala's experiences as a child and young adult, beginning with the story of her father Chandin's childhood and young adulthood, the narrative reconstructs the violence and trauma of the colonial and postcolonial past, while also demonstrating narrative's ability to transform our understanding and experience of the past, present and possible futures. In my analysis, I show how Mootoo's experimentation with language and narrative not only articulates the need for present and future transformation of human ways of being in the world, but also demonstrates the creative, transformative potential of narrative in changing the stories by which we live and understand our selves and our individual and collective pasts. In this way, I argue, Mootoo's text challenges the notion that we are defined by our histories of violence, trauma and injustice, and demonstrates that authentic, ethical modes of selfhood, affinity and collectivity arise from reconfiguring how we understand ourselves in relation to each other and to the planet. Mootoo's novel articulates the need for connection in transforming our understanding of the human—connection with our selves, with each other, and with all life on the planet—and thus imagines an alternative way of being that is, to use Spivak's terms, planetary. By transforming the narratives that no longer serve us—the heteronormative narratives of capitalism, growth, progress, and development—and imagining human being otherwise, Mootoo's experimentation with narrative presents the potential for living in alignment with and in service to what Jacqui Alexander describes as our soul's desire. To do so is to challenge—and effectively queer—narrative norms that are in service to linear, capitalist, developmental understandings of human being and to allow for a diversity of ways of being in the world.

As Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts in *Provincializing Europe*, fiction is a significant site in which—along with other creative representational forms such as film—the dominant narratives of capitalism and historicism can be challenged, and possible futures imagined anew. In this chapter, I consider the way in which Mootoo’s novel utilizes the tools of fiction—particularly narrative voice and narrative structure within the novel form—to challenge dominant understandings of selfhood and human relationships. Chakrabarty theorizes two historical visions, History 1, which is “the universal and necessary history posited by the logic of capital” in which “inhere the Enlightenment universals” (250), and History 2, which consists of plural pasts that “inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital’s own logic” (64) and therefore “[do] not belong to capital’s life process” (63), nor “contribute to the self-reproduction of capital” (64). What I am arguing throughout this study is that heteronormativity is one of the fundamental “Enlightenment universals” that sustains and is reproduced by the logic of capital. And heteronormativity is, in turn, sustained and reproduced by the logic of liberal individualism and linear, developmental understandings of selfhood and history. Furthermore, linear notions of selfhood and history reinforce and are reinforced by narrative norms that support dominant notions of temporality. Chakrabarty’s challenge to historicism can thus be extended to challenge linear notions of progress and development that underlie dominant forms of selfhood and narrative—and it is this challenge, this process of undoing the norms and structures of Enlightenment-based, capitalist versions of selfhood, history, and narrative that I am describing as queer. In Mootoo’s novel, it is Tyler’s role as the narrator and the narration of a set of relationships among several characters that function to challenge the developmental model of the secular, separate

liberal individual that reinforces capitalist understandings of progress and human being in the world, and to queer the heteronormative assumptions that underlie such dominant narratives.

Published in the late-1990s in the context of innovative academic work in the fields of postcolonial studies, transnational cultural studies, transnational feminism, and queer studies, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is located in criticism at the intersection of several of these scholarly fields, and offers a broad range of subjects relevant to the contemporary criticism and theory of that period. In an essay that begins to flesh out the range of subjects for consideration in Mootoo's novel, Jaspal Kaur Singh raises several questions that are of central importance to contemporary transnational feminist critical theory and practice, including: "How are transnational women's texts theorized and received in the Western academy? How do multicultural/diasporic South Asian women construct national and gender identity? How do they define gender in cross-cultural spaces where ideas of identity take on special meaning? How are hybrid identities and sexualities represented and received?" (148). Singh argues that given the difficulty of negotiating alternative forms of identity and identification in the context of Western notions of individualism, "the necessity for transformational creative work for transnational feminist critical theory and practice is urgently needed" (148). Furthermore, Singh refers to Ngugi's argument about the significance of language in colonial relations of domination, as language was, Singh notes, "the most important vehicle by means of which the colonizers kept the soul of the colonized imprisoned" (Singh 154). Specifically, Ngugi argues in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of spiritual subjugation" (qtd in Singh

154). Singh's article raises several key points that I address in my consideration of Mootoo's novel, and that are of importance for each of the authors whose work I examine here. As previously discussed, the question of how texts by women writers of global English are received and theorized by Western academia is significant, and has led to my argument, following Spivak, for the need to be attentive to the literary itself. Failing to do so risks reproducing stereotypes of what novels by Third World, transnational, or global women writers should be. And as I have been suggesting, the issues of representing, negotiating, and constructing gender, identity, and sexuality in transnational or global literary texts by women writers are central to analysis of the literary as a site of queer experimentation that challenges the norms of the dominant. The question of language as the representational mode of narrative, and its regulatory and limiting, or creative and expansive, abilities, is at stake in each of the texts under discussion, and is highlighted in Mootoo's text through her experimentation with narrative voice, poetic language, and narrative structure.

Inspired by Ngugi's consideration of the importance of language and representation in colonial relations of power,⁵¹ my analysis of Mootoo's work addresses the way in which language functions in narrative as not simply as a means of spiritual subjugation, but perhaps more importantly, as a means to spiritual freedom. *Cereus Blooms at Night* demonstrates the ability of narrative to transform the stories by which we live and understand our selves and each other. The question of power, as Ngugi has argued, is also a question of representation, as well as fundamentally a spiritual question,

⁵¹ This has been a continued focus in Ngugi's work, from *Decolonizing the Mind* to his lecture at UCSD in 2008.

as power, domination and subjugation function simultaneously at the physical or material level, the level of representation—of language, narrative and images—and at the level of the spirit or soul. The importance of language in constructing the world is foregrounded in Mootoo’s novel through, as most critics note, the use of excessive descriptions of the natural world, which highlight the ways in which colonialist and imperialist ideologies of the world simultaneously constructed ideas about nature and race to naturalize Western imperial dominance.⁵² The critique of the history of capitalist imperialism in such critical work aligns with History 1, offering “glimpses of the Enlightenment promise of an abstract, universal but never-to-be-realized humanity” (Chakrabarty 254). My analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night* focuses on the ways in which Mootoo’s experimentation with language and narrative functions not only to critique how language constructs and maintains dominant ideologies, but also, and perhaps more significantly, imagines alternative, ethical ways of being in the world and with others. In this way, I read the novel to be aligned with “thought about diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to ‘world the earth’ in order to live within our different senses of ontic

⁵² Hong, for instance, notes that Mootoo utilizes the discourse of natural history to challenge normative classifications of gender, sexuality, race, and morality that were produced simultaneously and legitimated by the discourse of natural history. In reference to Mary Louise Pratt’s work, Hong notes “the centrality of the classifying and standardizing function of the science of natural history to colonial epistemes” in the eighteenth century, as well as the way in which the classificatory system of natural history “was actually instrumental to the colonial project insofar as it became the language through which Europeans articulated and thus understood their relationship to the world in this period” (80). Thus, “the emerging science of natural history [became] a mechanism for racial and sexual categorization under colonialism” and “was not a monolithic or uncontradictory discourse, but one that unevenly mediated the anxieties of the era” (80). Hong suggests that the language of natural history structures all forms of relationships in the novel, and argues that Mootoo’s novel “describes its alternative notions of affiliation and collectivity through the language of natural history. [...] Nature is thus represented in the novel as both providing the metaphors through which all types of social interactions can be described, and also as the language for delineating the desires, histories, and affects that cannot be spoken” (92-93).

belonging” (Chakrabarty 254). Mootoo’s experimentation, my analysis suggests, enables us to imagine ways of being in the world that move beyond normative ideologies of gender, culture, sexuality, and belonging so as to envision authentic, ethical forms of selfhood and connection with others. In doing so, *Cereus Blooms at Night* foregrounds the creative, transformational ability of narrative in revising the stories by which we live and understand our selves, our present, and our past, and with which we imagine our futures—the ways in which, in Heidegger’s terms, we “world the earth.” Mootoo’s narrative demonstrates the necessity of addressing the spiritual dimension of being—our “sense of ontic belonging”—as well as the material and imaginative dimensions so as to live in authentic, ethical ways. Thus, the novel demonstrates the creative, transformative ability of narrative in imagining ethical ways of being in the world.

Queering the Postcolonial World: Queer Critique and Transnational Cultural Studies

Throughout the late twentieth century, postcolonial studies became a significant and recognized area of inquiry in academia. By the mid-1990s, queer studies and diaspora studies had also emerged as separate academic disciplines, distinct from women’s studies and postcolonial studies, respectively. In the United States, works by founding scholars such as Judith Butler, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, Judith Halberstam, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick began to expand the critical fields of feminist studies and LGBT studies to enable new ways of considering the work of gender and sexuality in society and in literary works. The theoretical work and political goals of postcolonial, diaspora, and queer studies have, in the last decade, been brought into

dialogue in scholarship in the field of queer of color critique. Scholars including Roderick Ferguson, Gayatri Gopinath, Chandan Reddy, and Grace Kyungwon Hong consider the intersections of racial, gender, sexual, and national ideologies as they operate in communities of color in the context of transnational globalization and diaspora. Gayatri Gopinath's theorization of queerness in the context of South Asian diaspora in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* draws upon the foundational cultural studies work of Stuart Hall to theorize "the ways in which discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration" (Gopinath 3). Referring to Hall's argument that the diasporic imaginary is informed by nostalgia for "lost origins," Gopinath argues that "queer desire reorients the traditionally backward-looking glance of diaspora" and, in contrast to "a conservative diasporic imaginary" (3), "a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia for radically different purposes" (4). She argues further:

Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles. ... Queer diasporic cultural forms and practices point to submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present and that make themselves felt through bodily desire. It is through the queer diasporic body that these histories are brought into the present; it is also through the queer diasporic body that their legacies are imaginatively contested and transformed. ... queer diasporic cultural forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies. (4)

The "fictions of purity" to which Gopinath refers are essentialist notions of identity, which tend to be mobilized by nationalist and diasporic discourses. Fixed understandings of gender, sexuality, race, culture, and ethnicity are often the ground for both nationalist

and diasporic cultural ideology. Thus the notion of community in the contexts of both nationalism and diaspora is founded upon fixed, essentialist understandings of identity that are, to paraphrase Anne McClintock, frequently exclusionary, and, in those exclusions, also often violent.

In “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” Hall notes the dangers of privileging ethnicity and “the local” in the context of globalization: “when nation states begin to decline in the era of globalization, they regress to a very defensive and highly dangerous form of national identity that is driven by a very aggressive form of racism” (178). Significantly for critiques of globalization in postcolonial and diaspora studies, Hall argues that it is necessary to get away from “the notion of this singular, unitary logic of capital” and recall:

one of the most profound insights in Marx’s *Capital*—capitalism only advances, as it were, on contradictory terrain. The contradictions it has to overcome produce their own forms of expansion. And until we can see the nature of that contradictory terrain—precisely how particularity is engaged, how it is woven in, how it presents its resistances, how it is partly overcome, and how those overcomings then appear again—we will not understand it. That is much closer to how we ought to think about the so-called logic of capital in the advance of globalization itself. (180)

In the context of the postcolonial, globalized world, Hall defines ethnicity as the act of self-representation and recovery, in which “the subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories” (183-184). Ethnicity, Hall argues, is that moment of recovery, which he defines as follows:

The attempt to snatch from the hidden histories another place to stand in, another place to speak from—that moment is extremely important. ... Through the reconstruction of imaginary, knowable places in the face of the global postmodern, globalized forces have, as it were, destroyed the identities of specific places, absorbed them into a postmodern flux of diversity. So one understands the moment when people reach for those

groundings, and that reach is what I call ethnicity. ... Ethnicity is the necessary place or space from which people speak. ... just as, when one looks at the global postmodern, one sees that it can go in either an expansive or a defensive way, in the same sense one sees that the local, the marginal, can also go in two different ways. When the movements of the margins are so profoundly threatened by the global forces of postmodernity, they can themselves retreat into their own exclusivist and defensive enclaves. And at that point, local ethnicities become as dangerous as nationalist ones. (184)

What is necessary, then, in Hall's definition of the "rediscovery of ethnicity" in the context of the postcolonial, globalized world, is to remember that the past "is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities"; rather, it has "to be learned about. ... It is narrated. It is grasped through memory. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction" (186). Thus, Hall notes, the cultural questions that are raised in this context are "questions of new forms of identity" (187) that might enable a rethinking of identity, culture, and difference so as to offer new—and more authentic—possibilities for being. The literary, I argue, and as I will show in my reading of Mootoo's novel, is a significant site in which the cultural work of narrating the past, present, and possible futures as part of a project of imagining "new forms of identity" takes place as a creative act. Moreover, I suggest that emphasis on ethnicity—or any other identity category—as a ground for constructing "new forms of identity" is a limited and limiting way of thinking about selfhood and collectivity. Rather, the question of new forms of identity and new modes of affinity must move beyond such cultural studies categories so as to begin, instead, from an authentic understanding of selfhood, based on an ethical understanding of the fundamental interconnection of all beings. It is from this radically different understanding of authenticity and selfhood that narrative begins to imagine the world and human being anew.

My argument about authenticity in relation to the imagining and embodiment of new forms of selfhood and connection with others therefore differs from Hall's definition of the act of reaching for "groundings" as ethnicity. The notion of ethnicity as "the necessary place or space from which people speak" suggests that the particular identity category "ethnicity" is the ground for identity and self-definition, whereas, in my analysis of Mootoo's work in this chapter, I show that the ground of authentic selfhood lies in the ability to connect with and express one's own truth, which is simultaneously an ethical awareness of one's connection with others. Such an understanding of authentic selfhood, based on connection to one's own truth and to others, differs from the secular, separate, liberal individualist notion of selfhood which simultaneously shores up and is shored up by the dominant narratives and images of capitalism, historicism, progress, growth, and development. It is, rather, closer to what Hall describes as an "attempt to snatch from the hidden histories another place to stand in, another place to speak from"—a "moment" in which the self grasps and begins to embody and articulate its truth. The understanding of selfhood and being in the world and with others that Mootoo's work articulates is not simply alternative in the sense of resistant to the dominant, but also, as I will show, presents a radically alternate understanding of human being, one which, to use Spivak's and Chakrabarty's terms, is both planetary and futural. Rather than focus on the way in which the past is narrated and "grasped," as Hall describes, through memory, desire, and reconstruction, my reading focuses on the way in which Mootoo's narrative demonstrates how, as Chakrabarty, following Heidegger, argues: "All our pasts are . . . futural in orientation" (250). The writing of the past in Mootoo's narrative is not in service of the logic of capital, but rather articulates "the futurity that already *is* in our actions at every

moment” or “the futures that already ‘are’” (Chakrabarty 250); the futures that challenge and, as I am arguing, queer the logic of capital and historicism. These futures are, perhaps, what Hall calls “another place to stand in, another place to speak from”—not ethnicity, but moments in which the self becomes aware and recognizes its own truth, its queerness, its alterity to the dominant logic of capitalism and historicism. Mootoo’s narrative experimentation, particularly in the narration of a series of relationships in the novel—including those between Tyler and Mala, Tyler and Mr. Hector, Tyler with himself, and Mala with herself—imagines alternative ways of being with oneself and with others that are based on ethical relations of care, connection and acceptance. As in the previous chapters on Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* and Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, my attention to language and narrative form in *Cereus Blooms at Night* demonstrates the ways in which the queering—and transformation—of dominant discourses and modes of thought occurs through the writing of particular relationships, and it is by attending to the text’s experimentation as significant that the creative, transformative writing of authentic, ethical modes of being—the futures that already are, the moments in which we “world the earth” and grasp another place to stand in and speak from—becomes clear.

“So Extremely Ordinary”: Queer Experimentation in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

As I have been arguing, the norms of nation and narrative that are aligned with the dominant ideologies of capitalism, historicism, growth, progress and development are fundamentally heteronormative, and it is through queer experimentation with narrative voice and narrative structure that Mootoo’s novel mounts a critique of heteronormativity. Tyler’s queer narrative voice not only challenges the regulatory structures of

heteronormativity, but also demonstrates the ways in which sexual and linguistic norms are fundamentally connected—and, further, that this connection also regulates narrative norms and delimits the kinds of stories that can be told. The novel addresses the violence of heteronormativity within the structures of colonialism and ideologies of development, as well as demonstrates the way in which this violence is bound up with language and narrative. In addressing the violence of language as it is regulated and limited by heteronormative structures, the novel articulates the need to revise linguistic and narrative norms for transformation—bodily, experiential, political, and ethical—to be possible. Reimagining and reinventing the world, the novel suggests, requires revision of the structures and forms of language and narrative. By experimenting with narrative voice as well as narrative structure, the novel works to destabilize, revise, and imagine alternate possibilities for the kinds of stories that can be told, the ways in which stories can be told, and the ways in which lives can be lived in this world.

While criticism of the novel frequently refers to Mootoo's excessive descriptions of the natural world as a postcolonial challenge to colonialist notions of racialized subjects as inherently closer to the natural world and, therefore, as less human, my analysis considers the way in which the very notion of "nature" and what is "natural" is reconfigured through Tyler's personal journey and through the relationship between Tyler and Mala.⁵³ Tyler's personal journey is a process of self-reflection in which he

⁵³ Critics also note the ways in which colonialist notions of colonized people as closer to nature not only uses a language that dehumanizes, but also sexualizes them. Roberto Strongman, for instance, argues that Mootoo's narrative challenges the notion "of the Caribbean as a hypersexualised, libidinous zone," a "tradition which sees the Caribbean as a place of unrestrained sexual freedom, as a Garden of Eden in which the traditionally accepted rules for sexual conduct are not applicable" (38). Thus, Strongman argues: "For Mootoo, the representation of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone, essentialist as it has been, can be re-deployed for purposes such as the validation of alternative sexualities" (38-39).

seeks to understand himself—his true, natural self—outside the limiting frameworks offered by dominant understandings of gender, sexuality, and selfhood. Tyler describes the way in which his desire to study abroad had more to do “with wanting to be somewhere where my ‘perversion,’ which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why” (48). The language here follows the conventions of sexological theory of the late-nineteenth century, which defined many of the dominant ideologies of sex and gender throughout the twentieth century. However, Tyler’s language in the following paragraph dismantles these conventions and reconfigures notions of nature and the natural: he refers to his comfort in the present “now that I have grown up and found my own nature” and describes “the affiliation blossoming” between himself and Mala, explaining that “Miss Ramchandin and I, too, had a camaraderie: we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world” (48). In this way, it is both through their own acceptance of their individual natures, and through their relationship—their “affiliation” and “camaraderie”—that Tyler and Mala are able to begin to accept and express their own selves and their “own ways.”

The novel suggests that the world is a place of normativity, and therefore, out of necessity, Mala and Tyler have “fortified” themselves against it. Through this process of fortification and self-acceptance, their relationship also reconfigures the notion of “home,” as they build their metaphorical fortress in Mala’s room, through the daily construction and dismantling of her furniture structures as well as through their deepening connection and mutual understanding and acceptance of each other. The

consideration of the norms of the world is also the first (and perhaps only) instance of the word “queerness” in the novel (48). Tyler notes that it is “a shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin” (48) that enables him to gain access to her story. Mala and Tyler’s relationship thus connects the act of ethical understanding with authentic selfhood and with storytelling, suggesting the ethical function of narrative—not just in the telling, but in the hearing—as a model for ethical ways of being with others. Significantly, it is Tyler’s positioning as “queer,” outside dominant norms and conventions that limit ways of being in the world, that enables Tyler to learn Mala’s story, and for them both, through their “shared queerness,” to begin to embody and express their own natures.

The question of place is also of central importance in Mootoo’s work, and *Cereus* foregrounds questions of belonging not only through conventional understandings of place in relation to nation, community, and family, but also by considering the ethical question of being in the world in an authentic way. The ethical understanding of authenticity to which I refer is not the essentialist understanding of “authenticity,” which refers to the notion that specific groups and individuals can be defined by certain characteristics assumed to be “inherent” to a particular group or identity category. The ethical understanding of authenticity is instead based on the notion of care—care for the self and care for others, based, in turn, on the belief in the fundamental interconnection of all beings. Questions of ethics, care, and belonging are central to reimagining ways of being in the world, and reconsidering the significance of place in conceptualizing identity, selfhood, and collectivity. Drawing upon the claim that “the deterritorialization of culture has produced an urgent need for new narratives of belonging” (24), Sarah Phillips Casteel argues that in *Cereus*, Mootoo “reject[s] notions of a stable identity and

fixed relationship to place,” yet also “do[es] not celebrate placelessness” (27). Rather, the emphasis on the garden in Mootoo’s narrative, Casteel argues, addresses “the need to establish a sense of place in the face of the recognition that no absolute stability is possible” and the image of the volatile cereus plant suggests that “rootedness...is never stable or secure but instead must be continually renegotiated” (27). Although the narrative suggests the need “to lay claim to a sense of place, ...place is understood as an ongoing, laborious, and always provisional process” (27). Narrative, I argue, is one of the central sites in which a sense of belonging and place are negotiated and revised. And the narrative of Mootoo’s novel suggests that it is in relationships—with our selves, with others, and in the world—that we construct, negotiate, and revise our sense of belonging.

The act of narration and the form of narrative itself are significant means of writing and imagining authentic, ethical ways of being in the world and with others. Regarding the way in which the act of narration is foregrounded in Mootoo’s novel, Casteel argues: “Tyler reveals himself to be rather unreliable and self-involved. He has difficulty maintaining control of his narrative and must repeatedly remind himself to keep his focus on Mala’s story rather than becoming distracted by his own issues of sexual identity” (19). Casteel’s characterization of Tyler as an “unreliable narrator” fails to take into account the broader complexities of the narration, while it also privileges Mala’s story instead of Tyler’s, viewing the stories and the characters in a binary way that reproduces a critical divide between feminist and queer analyses. Tyler’s function as narrator, rather, challenges liberal individualist understandings of selfhood, as well as addresses the functions of language and narrative as they simultaneously limit and enable the imagining of alternative and ethical ways of being in and belonging to the world.

Rather than privileging Mala's story, the narrative structure of the novel demonstrates the fundamental importance of connection through the development of Mala and Tyler's relationship. Just as Tyler's care for Mala allows the truth of her story to be revealed, Mala's understanding and complete acceptance of his true "nature" enables Tyler to access, accept, and embody his own truth. In this way, Tyler's narration of Mala's story and the development of their relationship reconsiders conventional definitions of "authenticity" and "essence" and produces a very different understanding of an authentic and essential self; one that is grounded in the notion of the fundamental interconnectedness of being. The literary thus offers a means through which to access our connection with others and to rethink our way of being in the world to foreground this essential connection as the basis for living in the world and caring for the self, others, and the world we live in.

Attention to a set of relationships—those between Tyler and Mala, Tyler and Mr. Hector, Tyler with himself, and Mala with herself—brings into view the way in which Mootoo's narrative articulates authentic, ethical relations among self and others. Moreover, the connections among these various relationships demonstrates the fundamental interconnection of all beings, and the way in which this understanding of human beings as always already connected enables possibilities for transformation. As I will show, Mootoo's experimentation with narrative form in the writing of these relationships demonstrates the significance of narrative in transforming our ways of being in the world and understanding our selves and others. It is necessary, Mootoo's novel suggests, to transform the narratives by which we live and engage with ourselves and with others to align our ways of being with our soul's deepest truth and, in doing so, to

live in an authentic and ethical way. Tyler's relationship with Mr. Hector is significant in reinventing the way in which narrative and relationships with others enable more authentic, ethical ways of being in the world. Reflecting upon how people had always harassed Mala, and his own unquestioning complicity with it, Mr. Hector notes:

‘It was the thing to do, and though I didn’t take part in it I didn’t question it either. Hmmm. I never question them. Somehow you don’t question things until you come face to face with the person and suddenly— suddenly you realize that behind all them stories it have a flesh-and-blood, breathing, feeling person who capable of hurting, yes!’ (68)

This passage, or Mr. Hector's realization, suggests the insidious nature of “stories” and the way in which narrative functions to create normative ideas about people that may be false or unjust. Simultaneously, this passage demonstrates how encountering someone “face to face” enables a shift away from false narratives into the greater truth of ethical recognition. The relationship between Tyler and Mr. Hector unfolds at the same time as Tyler's relationship with Mala unfolds, and these relationships address the way in which it is necessary to move beyond inauthentic ways of engaging with others, based on fear and prejudice, to authentic ways of engaging with others, in which we recognize others as “flesh-and-blood, breathing, feeling,” based on compassion and connection.

Tyler's encounter with Mr. Hector also demonstrates the way in which encounters with others offer the possibility for transforming one's own relationship with oneself, and vice versa. When Mr. Hector asks Tyler about whether Mala would like to have a gardening plot and offers Tyler the cut gerbera he had picked for Mala, Tyler is simultaneously aware of the awkwardness and discomfort of the situation, and of the kindness at the heart of Mr. Hector's curiosity about Tyler. Tyler also recognizes his own feelings about Mr. Hector's “attentions” and “discomfort and polite disdain” (70).

Attending to the “roller coaster of emotions and thoughts,” Tyler confronts, within himself, the way in which dominant homophobic narratives arise from this encounter—narratives in which Tyler is “bad,” “depraved” and “perverse”—and, in that moment, Tyler decides to change his own relationship with himself so as to engage in an authentic way with Mr. Hector: “Trying to change him or his reaction might well bring only grief. I decided there and then that I would change my own feelings about myself. I would, I must, cast him out of my thoughts and stand tall.” However, in the same moment he chooses self-acceptance, Tyler doubts his ability to “stand tall” and thinks of his beloved “Cigarette Smoking Nana,” and “wondered for the umpteenth time if Nana would have been able to accept and love the adult Tyler, who was neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing” (71). In this moment of self-reflection, Tyler’s thoughts demonstrate the power of dominant narratives in determining our relationships with our selves and with others, and in preventing us from living the truth of our soul’s deepest desire for authentic connection and expression. Haunted by narratives of depravity and perversity, which assert that Tyler is fundamentally “bad” or flawed, Tyler is also doing battle with self-loathing. Rather than being able to accept and love himself as he is, he recognizes that he loathes his “unusual femininity” and, because of this, is entirely dependent on the reactions of others to him for his own self-worth. However, at the same time, Tyler’s intuition that it is necessary to change his own feelings about himself—from self-loathing to self-love and self-acceptance—also recognizes that, in doing so, he invites the same change in others.

This recognition of his own ability to shift the narratives by which he lives empowers Tyler to shift his relationship with Mr. Hector to more authentically embody

his own truth and connect with others. Tyler therefore “decided to do battle against the sinking feeling” and joins Mala singing, and in doing so, begins to transform himself through his connection with Mala: “I walked lighter and clapped my hands to her chant. I felt like an explorer charting her life in murky, unmapped waters. I was not sure what I was discovering beyond her voice but I felt it would not be long before I would have the privilege and honour, of entering her world” (72). It is significant that in that moment, Mr. Hector returns, having decided to take charge of the situation and give Mala the opportunity to plant the first plant in the garden. Significantly, the “turnaround” with Mr. Hector is also one in which he is honest with Tyler about the feelings that Tyler raises in him. Mr. Hector says: “‘Look. You know every time I see you, my heart does break. I does watch you and, sudden-so, it does feel like something heavy sits on my chest. Is like I recognize you but is a sad feeling. I realize now what it is’” (72). Mr. Hector explains that he had a brother who was sent away when he was young, and, when Tyler asks why, also noting that “I wanted to hear the reason and at the same time hoped he would not have the brazenness to say it” (73). Mr. Hector, however, responds:

‘He was kind of funny. He was like you. The fellas in the village used to threaten to beat he up. People used to heckle he and mock his walk and the way he used to do his hands when he was talking.’

That he was brave enough to say it suddenly lifted a veil between us. Unexpectedly, I felt relief it was voiced and out in the open. I had never before known such a feeling of ordinariness. (73)

The novel suggests that the freedom of “ordinariness” is an ethical question of language and expression, as well as the reconfiguration of narrative and social norms. It is, the novel suggests, the complete simplicity and ordinariness of accepting what is—in one’s self and in others—that matters most: as Tyler notes about Mala’s ability to not “manacle

nature” and the matter-of-fact way in which she accepts what “simply was,” this acceptance is an ethical act of freedom (77). In contrast to Tyler’s concern about his appearance in the nurse’s uniform, Mala is completely unconcerned:

When I stepped out from behind the curtain, I saw that Miss Ramchandin had made herself busy. She was piling furniture in front of the window. She glanced at me, made no remark and kept right on building her tower. I walked over to her and stood where I was bound to be in her vision. At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women’s clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun. I felt flat-footed and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence. She had already set a straight-back chair on the table in front of the window. On top of that she placed a stool and was now preparing to stand on her bed and place an empty drawer on the pinnacle.

Just as I was hoping the tower would come crashing down and extinguish me forever, a revelation came. The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom. (77)

Significantly, Mootoo is not using an essentialized notion of identity and her use of the word “nature” intentionally interrogates such essentialization. Tyler’s reaction to Mala giving him the dress also utilizes this non-essentialized notion of nature, as he realizes: “She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature.” Realizing this “knowing” on Mala’s part, Tyler finds himself able to act and experience himself as he is, his true nature:

I reached for the dress. My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs. I felt more weak than excited but I was certainly excited by the possibilities trembling inside me. I hugged the dress. (76)

The language and form in this section create a sense of ordinariness, freedom and possibility. The repetition is significant, as Tyler notes: “I reached for the dress,” preceding the transformation of his body, and then: “I hugged the dress,” after feeling the “possibilities” in his body. In this moment, reaching and hugging become significant ethical acts of caring for oneself, and it is Mala who enables these acts of self-care in Tyler, through her complete acceptance of him, her knowledge of his true nature. While in the encounter with Mr. Hector, Tyler struggles with self-acceptance, his encounter with Mala in this section enables him to begin to shift into self-acceptance and, more importantly, the truth of his soul’s deepest desire to express and embody his true nature. Mala’s complete acceptance of Tyler allows him to come into his authentic self, the truth of his being, his true nature. And, significantly, Mala’s utter acceptance of his being enables Tyler to move beyond his need for reassurance from others for his own feelings of self-worth: Mala’s complete acceptance of Tyler’s being as something to neither “congratulate or scorn,” as something that “simply was,” is a complete acceptance of Tyler as he is. And it is this ethical position—the complete acceptance of one’s being exactly as it is—that enables Tyler to transform his own relationship with himself so as to live in an authentic way, from his own truth. Significantly, the authenticity of this relationship between Mala and Tyler leads to the transformation of Tyler’s way of being in the world and embodying his truth in the world, which, in turn, leads to the transformation of a series of relationships—between Tyler and Otoh, between Mala and Ambrose, and Tyler’s way of presenting himself in the world and to others—as well as opens the possibility for future transformations and connections. The relationship between Mala and Tyler is significant in imagining an ethic of care in which acceptance

of others enables care for the self and vice versa. Whereas postcolonial theory has articulated the way in which colonialist ideology produces self-hatred in the colonized,⁵⁴ Mootoo moves beyond the power relations delineated in the colonial/postcolonial framework to show new modes of affinity and affiliation, based on relations of care.

The relationship between Tyler and Mala suggests that an ethic of care is of central importance to not only creating new forms of identity, but also creating new modes of connection and community. Although Tyler is in the socially recognized role of caretaker in his position as a nurse, Mala's role in taking care of Tyler—allowing him the freedom to just be himself—is, Mootoo's narrative shows, just as important. Significantly, the narrative also demonstrates that ethical modes of caring and connection are fundamentally intertwined with language. Tyler's caring for Mala is based on learning to understand her language, on listening attentively and approaching her difference without judgment or preconceived ideas about language and communication. Furthermore, the simplicity of the language with which Tyler describes the transformation in himself—"I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it" (78)—is significant as Tyler's narration highlights the need for clarity in language, in expression, in communication, and suggests that such clarity is an ethical act, which can function to lift the veil of dominant—and frequently false and violent—norms to allow for authentic understanding. Narrative, in this way, offers the ability to fundamentally transform our ways of being so as to live and understand ourselves in authentic, ethical ways, as well presents possibilities for creative, transformational work in postcolonial and feminist theory and criticism.

⁵⁴ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove P, 1994.

The sections of the novel in which Tyler describes the development of his relationships with Mala and Mr. Hector articulate a process of self-reflection, of accessing one's own "nature," one's own way, and details the way in which this process must be completely open, even when it is uncomfortable in what it reveals. Tyler's total honesty about the range of his feelings toward Mr. Hector after their encounter is striking, not only for its open self-awareness, but also for the way in which his self-awareness leads him into a process of self-inquiry that allows him to gain deeper access to an authentic truth about himself and allows him to move into a more authentic relationship with Mr. Hector, Mala, and himself, which ultimately leads to a more authentic way of being in the world. These sections are significant for their detailed narration of the relationships Tyler has with himself, Mr. Hector, Mala, and the world, and demonstrates the ability of narrative to articulate and reconfigure ways of being with oneself, with others, and in the world. Mootoo's experimentation with narrative structure is significant for the way in which the shifts between the narrative past and present function to connect and highlight the development of the relationships among the characters in the present. Tyler's reflections about his Cigarette Smoking Nana and his encounter with Mr. Hector are separated by the story of Lavinia and Sarah's relationship and abandonment of Mala and Asha, and the beginning of Chandin's sexual abuse of his daughters. These sections in the present of the narrative are separated by twenty pages detailing this violent, horrific part of Mala's childhood, thus seemingly privileging the horrors of the past. It is only when reading Tyler's encounter with Mr. Hector in relation to his reflections about his relationship with his Cigarette Smoking Nana—sections of the narrative that are separated by twenty pages of the story of Mala's past—that Tyler's story becomes

central. Although Tyler suggests that Mala's story is more important than his own, as he states: "The significance of the previous episode was not to dwell on issues about myself or to relate the bond forming between Mr. Hector and me" (74), the narrative function of that episode is precisely to show the significance of the "bond" between Mr. Hector and Tyler. The detail with which the formation of that bond develops is significant, as it demonstrates—similarly to the detail with which the affiliation between Mala and Tyler develops—possibilities for being with others in ethical ways, based on recognizing and accepting one's own truth and one's interconnection with others.

While much analysis of postcolonial novels remains grounded in notions of resistance, as I will discuss in the section that follows, I suggest that attention to queer experimentation with narrative challenges the notion of the centrality of resistance and moves beyond the binary framework upon which readings of dominance and resistance in the work of cultural texts is based. In Mootoo's novel, the queer experimentation with narrative and, specifically, Tyler's positioning as narrator to Mala's story, challenges the understanding of histories of violence, trauma and injustice as definitive of selfhood, and suggests that such histories are not central to building new modes of subjectivity and collectivity. Rather, Tyler's narration of the relationships between Tyler and Mala, Tyler and Mr. Hector, and Tyler with himself articulates a radically different understanding of being in which selfhood and relations with others are based on an ethical knowledge that it is connection that grounds us in our selves and with others. And it is this fundamental connection that is at the heart of an ethical way of relating to self and others, as well as defines an authentic way of being in the world. The specificity of the literary—its unique ability to work with language and narrative in creative, transformational ways—provides

the site from which to imagine and theorize connections in ways that move beyond established modes of thought.

While my analysis focuses on the narration of the relationships in the present of the narrative, the narration of the past—the “reconstruction” to which Hall refers—also functions to enable new possibilities for being; not through dwelling, as it were, on the past, but through acknowledging it and releasing it. For instance, Tyler notes that: “On visiting days Miss Ramchandin and I practically hover above the ground with excitement. She puts aside her mutterings and I put away my book and pencil” (247). While Mala’s “mutterings” and Tyler’s “book and pencil” function to bring the past to light, it is significant that this process of “recovery” does not have the goal of fixing some point of origin or purity, nor to undo past wrongs or ask for redress—rather, the act of setting aside and putting away is a significant act of laying to rest the violence and trauma of the past so as to move forward—not as an act of forgetting or erasure, but as an act of care for the self and for others in which new modes of being, based on connection and care, rather than histories of violence, trauma and injustice, are foregrounded.⁵⁵

My reading differs from the readings of other critics, in that I read Mootoo’s experimentation to be suggestive of the ways in which we are always already whole, complete, connected beings, and I argue that it is the fragmentation produced by

⁵⁵ In her consideration of Tyler’s position as the narrator of Mala’s story, Vivian May, citing Jacqui Alexander, suggests: “The mediated or double I of *Cereus Blooms at Night* [. . .] points to a ‘need for a different kind of re-membling’: one that is connected to ‘the making of different selves,’ an ontology based on multiplicity rather than autonomy or singularity” (13). May argues that “this story filtered through two I’s/eyes also challenges imperial notions of the autonomous, individual subject” and “[t]his shift away from a singular I/eye suggests an approach to remembering and to witnessing trauma that necessitates collectivity and intersubjective relations rather than individual accounts” (17). Further, May notes: “Each story is incomplete without the others: each fragment gains meaning in relation to, not in isolation from, each other, which is why Tyler finds himself as narrator ‘fashioning a single garment out of myriad parts’” (21). I discuss May’s analysis further in the final section of this chapter.

language, narrative, social norms, and histories of violence and domination that disconnect us from our true selves.⁵⁶ The “ordinariness” which Tyler longs for signifies the state of being in which we are able to access our true selves and live from that place of truth in which we always already reside. This is the ethical way of being that is based on connection to one’s self, to others, and to the world—and it is Mootoo’s experimentation with language and narrative that moves beyond notions of loss, fragmentation, trauma, and violence associated with colonial histories and contemporary ideologies so as to imagine possibilities for living in ethical ways, from the truth of our being. The understanding of wholeness upon which an ethical way of being in the world is based is not a Western Enlightenment notion of the unitary, coherent subject—the subject of liberal individualism—but rather is based on an ethical understanding of all beings as fundamentally interconnected and always already whole, complete. Cultural studies discourse, which has had significant influence on literary criticism, tends to remain in the realm of politics, based on analysis of material relations and representation—the material relating primarily to the bodily and relations of economics and production, and representation relating to ideology and the images and narratives that reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. In order to adequately address the question of

⁵⁶ Most critics understand “wholeness” to be aligned with Enlightenment notions of the subject that underlie nationalist and colonialist discourses of belonging. Hong, for instance, argues that rather than simply “adding a queer diasporic perspective” to “flawed and incomplete” versions of history and national belonging, Mootoo’s novel “question[s] the presumption that a complete record can exist, and in doing so, identif[ies] the desire for totality, resolution, or wholeness as fundamentally nationalist and colonial” (76). Further, Hong argues that “the novel offers another mode of historical memory through an aesthetic of contingency, unknowability, and the deferment of resolution,” as well as “imagines community as *remembering* the exclusions and losses occasioned by nationalist notions of community, and in so doing, bringing to light different modes of affinity and affiliation” (76). My argument considers the way in which the novel suggests that each of us is always already complete, perfect, whole, and it is the fragmentation, dislocation, and separation of liberal individualist notions of selfhood, which also underlie nationalist and colonialist ideologies, that separate us from this essential truth of being.

power, I am suggesting, an understanding of human beings and human relations as not only physical and imaginative, but also as connected to the spirit, to an inner, intuitive sense of meaning and purpose in life, is necessary. A capitalist, liberal individualist understanding of the world, based on a teleological notion of development and “progress” toward success (i.e. material wealth) effectively disempowers us from leading meaningful, authentic lives. The question of power is therefore also fundamentally a question of ethics, and, in the present era of the environmental devastation of the planet, the ethical, it has become apparent, extends further than simply the human and becomes planetary. Each author I examine demonstrates the need to rethink human ways of being in the world so as to highlight our fundamental interconnectedness. And, in exploring the “shared queerness” that connects Tyler and Mala, as well as the understanding and authentic ways of being that develop from their relationship, Mootoo’s novel challenges dominant understandings of what is natural, and articulates an alternative, authentic, ethical understanding of human being within the world.

My focus on Mootoo’s writing of queer relationships in the novel emphasizes the importance of affinity, affiliation, and connection, and highlights connections that reconsider notions of kinship and caring so as to imagine ways of being in the world, with others, and with our selves otherwise. In her introduction to the 2007 symposium *Strange Affinities*, Grace Kyungwon Hong outlines the ways in which critical work in the fields of comparative racialization, women of color feminism, and queer of color critique aims to address the “complex question about how a focus on differences between and within racialized groups might enable us to imagine alternative modes of coalition.” Moreover, Hong acknowledges the complexities involved in such a comparative project:

“While creating and recognizing new modes of affinity is the purpose of this project, doing so means recognizing the strangeness at the heart of this enterprise.” Thus, “this scholarship suggests a methodology by which contradictions, conflicts, and disidentifications emerge as the ground on which cross-racial relations informed by anti-racist, feminist, and queer critiques are forged.” Critical analysis that engages with the complexities of building and theorizing modes of affinity across a range of differentiated histories and communities remains necessary. The literary, my analysis shows, is an important site in which the imagining of what Hong calls “new modes of affinity”—among individuals and groups across a range of different identity categories and, potentially, I argue, moving beyond such categories—occurs. Thus, the literary is also a site in which to negotiate and theorize difference and belonging in new ways, perhaps based in, but moving beyond the limits of the critical frameworks of queer, feminist, postcolonial, and diaspora studies. As I suggested in the previous chapter, analysis of literary texts often reproduces the assumptions and analytical foci of critical and theoretical perspectives, as well as the identity categories they theorize.⁵⁷ Comparative cultural studies such as the work outlined by Hong above is grounded in assumptions about difference as fundamental, and thus notions of belonging and affinity are always already based on the assumption that difference must be bridged or overcome in order for connections to be established in theory and practice.

⁵⁷ As I have shown in my discussion of *Our Sister Killjoy*, for instance, analysis of Aidoo’s work has tended to avoid a queer critical perspective, instead focusing on a Third World feminist critique of heterosexuality and the fundamentally gendered social and political norms that sustain and are complicit with the power structures of both colonialism and nationalism.

My approach differs in that I assume connection as the fundamental ground for authentic, ethical modes of identity, selfhood, collectivity and affinity, and I argue that the literary is an important site in which to engage in the creative, transformative act of narrating human being based on connection, rather than difference and “disidentification.” I have considered the ways in which Mootoo’s novel envisions modes of affinity based on connection and thus challenges the assumption that there is “strangeness” at the heart of an enterprise that seeks to build connections among people with different histories. Rather, the act of connecting with others cannot be “strange” because it is based on the ethical assumption that human beings are all always already connected.⁵⁸ In this way, Mootoo’s novel enables us to move beyond the cultural studies emphasis on difference so as to imagine ethical ways of understanding human being based on connection and care. Also, although it challenges the positivist assumptions of liberal humanism, the cultural studies understanding of the human is based on Enlightenment notions of the liberal individual as secular and separate. My argument, as I have noted, is not based on a liberal humanist perspective—rather, my position is that liberal humanism is a fundamentally flawed worldview and, because its assumptions continue to structure contemporary modes of thought and narrative norms, it is necessary to examine and reconsider those assumptions so as to move beyond them. Because Enlightenment notions of the human are so bound up with narrative, the literary is a

⁵⁸ Such a position is ethical not only in its understanding of human beings as always already interconnected, but also of all beings as connected—a perspective that is aligned with an ethical concern for the planet and the environment in which we are all living. The interconnectedness of all beings—not only across space, but also across time—has been theorized primarily in the realm of science, and one of the ways in which we are all connected is through the air molecules we breathe and that sustain all life on earth. For an excellent discussion of this scientific ethics of planetarity, see Sturla Gunnarsson’s recent documentary on Canadian scientist and environmental activist David Suzuki, *Force of Nature* (2010).

crucial site in which to engage and dismantle the assumptions upon which these notions are based so as to begin to imagine and narrate human being otherwise.

Nation, Narration, and Queer Belonging: Moving Beyond “Resistance”

Considerations of queerness in diaspora, including Gayatri Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires*, note the limits of not only national discourses of belonging, but also the gendered and heteronormative assumptions of traditional theories of diaspora. In Chapter 6 of *Impossible Desires*, Gopinath discusses “the implicit heteronormativity” of much scholarship and argues for “the necessity of an analysis of diasporic public cultures that is at once both feminist *and* queer” (164). Moreover, she argues that “consideration of queer diasporic literature also makes evident the inadequacy and dangers of feminist theorizing of diasporic public culture that ignores its queer valences” (164). Her readings of *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* demonstrate the way in which “a queer diasporic logic displaces heteronormativity from the realm of natural law and instead launches its critique of hegemonic constructions of both nation and diaspora from the vantage point of an ‘impossible’ subject” (186). In what follows, I engage with analyses of Mootoo’s novel that attend to its queerness and demonstrate the ways in which the narrative “displaces” the (hetero)norms of dominant understandings of history, national belonging, collectivity, and subjectivity. My engagement with these critics begins to think through how we might theorize queerness beyond notions of resistance to the dominant. Of central importance, I argue, is the need to move beyond the liberal individualist model of selfhood so as to imagine human being alternatively to binary frameworks, which are based on difference and separation and uphold that notion of the

self. And the literary provides a site in which to imagine, construct, and write human being otherwise.

Analysis of Mootoo's novel frequently refers to M. Jacqui Alexander's "Not Just (Any)Body Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Post-coloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," which addresses the ways in which nationalism after independence in these Caribbean nations naturalized heterosexuality and thus discursively produced the impossibility of queer desire in the Caribbean. Mootoo's novel not only challenges the heteronormativity of colonialism, but also challenges the heteronormativity of postcolonial nationalism. The novel addresses the fundamental violence of domesticity as a norming discourse and practice by exposing its connection with colonialism and making a radical argument for the need to imagine human connection and interconnectedness in ways that are not based on the linear, developmental models of individualism and family upon which both colonialism and nationalism are grounded. As Gayatri Gopinath argues: "If legislated heterosexuality, in the context of patriarchal family arrangements, is one of the primary means by which the colonial state keeps bodies fixed in place, then the novel suggests that queer bodies and queer desires become the means by which to escape the totalizing logic of colonial order" (185). Grace Kyungwon Hong's analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night* considers the ways in which understandings of history and belonging are fundamentally intertwined, and addresses the way in which "the establishment of Trinidadian and Tobagan post-independence nationalisms necessitated the simultaneous production and pathologization of unruly sexualities to produce essentialist definitions of Indian and Afro-Trinidadian identity" (79). Her reading of the novel therefore focuses on "queer, deviantly sexualized

subjects [...] in order to show how a different kind of collectivity can be imagined by and through such excessive subjects” (76). She suggests that “*Cereus Blooms at Night* is [...] a record of the alternative forms of affinity and affiliation—distinct from that of nationalism—that must emerge out of these unruly histories” (79), and argues that *Cereus* is an “act of resistance” that emphasizes remembering so as challenge the “process of forgetting and erasure” associated with colonial violence, “and, in so doing, imagines new modes of subjectivity and collectivity” (82). Hong’s analysis thus reads Mootoo’s novel through the lens of critical theory conventions that see the work of certain cultural texts—particularly, it might be noted, texts by queer women of colour—to be resistance to the dominant.

Hong argues further that while racial and sexual categories of colonial classificatory systems were utilized to regulate laboring populations in opposition to each other, “by emphasizing natural history’s production of racialized disidentifications, *Cereus Blooms at Night* also shows the ways in which this discourse is used to articulate new forms of collectivity” (88). Rather than viewing natural history as a totalizing discourse, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Hong argues, “suggests that alternative ways of knowing emerge through the language of natural history and that they are the signs of the contradictions of this discourse” (90). In this way, the novel, in Hong’s argument, demonstrates the way in which alternative identities and forms of collectivity exist simultaneously with seemingly totalizing dominant discourses and forms of identification and belonging. Moreover, Hong argues, “the text demonstrates that the production of the norms of white sexual purity and colonial superiority necessarily constitutes the deviant and excessive sexualities that threaten to exceed these norms” and, “while the

nonnormative sexuality of incest is represented as stunted, the novel situates other nonnormative sexualities—queer and cross-race connections as represented by Tyler’s relationship to Otoh and Mala—as sites of potential” (91). Regarding the relationships of the characters in the novel, Hong argues that “the characters’ various estrangements are the basis for their connections” (95) and “[r]ather than a bond that replaces and thus resolves the estrangements that form these characters, the connections between these characters heighten these estrangements, exactly as these estrangements enable their bonds” (96). In Hong’s argument, it is “estrangements” that enable connection, as she argues: “out of these moments that point to the limits and failures of ‘knowledge’ come the possibility of community” (96). Furthermore, Hong argues that deferral in the queer relationships of the text suggests “a different mode of affiliation, one forged through disidentification, alienation, and contradiction, rather than through resolution. In so doing, the novel narrates a notion of community that does not promise limitless incorporation and thus erase exclusion and differentiation” (97). Hong defines “queer” in Mootoo’s text “as that which is in excess of categorization” (97), and argues that the novel “reminds us that even the most pernicious and powerful modes of control have within them contradictions from which new modes of living and knowing emerge to contest, explain, and unsettle” (98).

Hong’s theorization of the way in which Mootoo’s text suggests possibilities for community that emerge within and from the contradictions of dominant forms of knowledge and social relations provides an insightful reading of the text’s negotiation of queerness in the context of colonial histories and the neocolonial, globalized present. However, Hong’s emphasis on “disidentification, alienation, and contradiction” is

characteristic of the modes of cultural studies discourse that my analysis seeks to expand. While Hong's reading of "queer" in the novel is an excellent analysis of the way in which the text theorizes possibilities for queer community, by assuming a queer of colour critical perspective, Hong's analysis does not address Mootoo's use of the literary as significant, nor the extent to which the novel's imagining of new forms of identity and identification is based in literary experimentation and narrative form. Hong, along with other critics such as Casteel, acknowledges the way in which language is foregrounded in the novel, yet does so by connecting the novel's concern with language to the discourse of natural history. The critical tendency to address a novel's language—and, occasionally, form, though it is more rare to see critical analysis of form in a novel—as indicative of its engagement with or critique of a dominant social or political discourse is certainly necessary and important critical work. However, it is also necessary to attend to the specificity of the literary and its function—without such attention, we readers and literary critics lose sight of the unique ability of the discipline of literary study to engage with the world and our selves in a way that differs from the work of other humanities and social science disciplines. As my analysis has sought to demonstrate, the novel's literary experimentation with language and narrative form is embedded in a critical engagement with the function of language and narrative in structuring our lived experience of the world and our selves, and it is therefore not only the novel's engagement with colonial discourses of natural history, gender, race, and sexuality that is significant and productive of alternative visions of community, but also the engagement with the literary itself—an engagement that I characterize as experimental—that enables the imagining of new forms of being in the world and with others in ethical ways.

In contrast to understandings of queerness as “excessive”—even progressive understandings such as Hong’s—my argument considers the ability of narrative to move beyond a framework in which dominant notions of totality are opposed by resistant or deviant “excessive subjects” so as to imagine selfhood, history, belonging, and affiliation in a radically different way. My analysis of Mootoo’s novel shows the way in which narrative presents possibilities for moving beyond notions of totality and excess, dominance and resistance, which are based on difference and separation, to an ethical understanding of being based on connection. By emphasizing connection as fundamental to authentic, ethical ways of being in the world, my engagement with Mootoo’s novel considers how we, as readers and literary critics, might enrich the frameworks of criticism to consider the text’s unique way of theorizing the world. While the content of literary texts may indeed correspond to already-established frameworks of critical and theoretical perspectives, literary analysis might expand the frameworks with which we are already familiar to consider the ways in which literary texts offer perspectives that differ from and expand current ways of thinking about and being in the world.

Vivian May’s engagement with *Cereus* addresses the characteristics of the novel as fiction and thus offers an analysis of the text that attends to its literary qualities. Beginning with a discussion of the fictional setting of the novel, May notes that critics including Maryse Conde and Paule Marshall “point to the critical utility of a fictional island setting: they see an imaginary space as offering opportunities to remember identities and histories differently, while also providing room to imagine different futures” (2). Regarding Mootoo’s novel, May notes, Conde argues that the “fictional island setting and indeterminate time periods fit well with the novel’s evasion of

certainties in its simultaneous exploration and subversion of various categories of belonging” (2). May argues that the “decision to create a fictional island setting allows Mootoo to sidestep the constraints of dominant discourse or of mirroring ‘reality’” and that “the fictional setting and indeterminate, multiple timeframes creates an opportunity to reflect back upon the ‘real,’ to critique it, to push beyond what is already known, usually perceived” (3). In this way, May suggests, the fictional qualities of the text are significant for the way in which they enable different ways of engaging with the narrative’s “larger political implications and social meaning” (3). The aspects of the political and social world with which the text engages, May argues, include exile and migration, and she argues: “A key site of redefinition in *Cereus* is that of citizenship in a way that can account for multiple identities and hybrid histories” (5). Noting the significance of sexuality as it is fundamentally linked to national notions of space and belonging, as well as to “histories of exile and resistance” (6), May argues that “[b]y linking various forms of exile, Mootoo connects histories, narratives, and identities that are often conceptually separated” (6). Doing so not only allows the narrative “to clarify the violence at the heart of practices of knowledge, faith, and love but also to claim queer space within the Caribbean and South Asian diasporas” (6). Moreover, drawing connections between diverse stories “allows Mootoo to demonstrate connections across multiple legacies of imperialism and simultaneously to critique them” (6). May’s argument offers an insightful engagement with the queer vision that underlies the narrative’s consideration of the ways in which “practices of knowledge, faith, and love”

regulate and enforce (hetero)norms, as well as its critique of such limited and limiting notions of possible ways of being in the world.⁵⁹

As a strategy of resistance to the dominant, therefore, May theorizes Mala's garden as a "queer space," which she creates on her own terms as what Jacqui Alexander has called in a different context "politicized nonbelonging" (qtd. in May 7). May suggests that Mala's garden is a non-hierarchical space that offers "an alternative economy of being" (8), and argues that "Mala and her garden are oppositional, even defiant, and the hierarchy between human, animal, and plant forms of life has been abandoned" (9). Drawing upon notions of resistance from several feminist critics, including Sarah Hoagland, Trinh Minh-ha, and Chela Sandoval, May reads Mala's garden as a "subversive method of politicized resistance," "a site of enabling impurity in which unthought relationships emerge" (9), and "a radical space, a space where nonbelonging

⁵⁹ The challenge to dominant epistemological, spiritual, and sexual norms in Mootoo's novel is similar to the challenge to the "Love Laws" in Roy's novel. May argues further that *Cereus* deconstructs the ideology of family and home by connecting heteronormative notions of family and love with the violence of colonialism and Enlightenment reason (21). By exposing the violence of colonialism and the regulatory practices and ideologies of family, 'home,' and love, Mootoo's novel, May argues, "introduces other worlds and ways of being" and offers "alternative visions of love and ethics as affiliated with multiplicity, interconnectedness, and difference" (23). May argues that "[s]howing Mala's different relationship with nature is one way that Mootoo is able to introduce love-ethics-knowledge as interrelated practices that are, in and of themselves, ideally about interrelation itself" (23). Mala's "philosophy of nature" is thus, May argues, Mootoo's way of demonstrating "her vision of a radicalized, egalitarian form" of love that is not based on notions of "possession, objectification, or domination" (25). Citing Davis, May argues that Mootoo's novel articulates "the need for an epistemology that engages with 'the limits of knowledge'" and "that is informed by an ethics of interrelation and alterity." Furthermore, May suggests: "Knowing, love, and ethics must no longer be thought of as separate but as conjoined practices politically engaged with social transformation for all" and concludes:

Mala's silence, her refusal of first-person narration, asks readers to rethink, question, and alter our practices of loving, knowing, and relating to others. At the same time, Tyler's narration asks us to think collectively, to recognize the possibility for change if we keep each other in mind, if we gain resistant consciousness through our knowledge of each other's (unknowable) stories. Connecting the individual and the collective is, in and of itself, a political strategy. (25)

While referring to the potential offered through the connection between stories and collectivity, May's critical emphasis remains on resistance.

and incommensurability are politicized forms of resistance in their own rights” (10). The notion of resistance through “nonbelonging” may be politically useful for theorizing alternative forms of identity that challenge the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the dominant. However, my argument seeks to reconsider such critical modes of theorizing resistance and suggests that Mootoo’s experimentation with narrative shows the limits of such politicized understandings of dominance and resistance so as to move from binary frameworks of politics and resistance into the realm of ethical connection and transformation.

Regarding May’s reading of the significance of Mala’s garden, I suggest instead that it is only through connection with others once she has left the garden that Mala starts to heal. The language of the text figures her garden as a site of decay and traumatic repetition, rather than, as May argues, a site of radical potential. In the garden, Mala’s relationship with her self is fragmented, and she is isolated from others. After “Mala all but rid herself of words” (Mootoo 126), and her only “companions were the garden’s birds, insects, snails and reptiles” (127), her relationship with the garden becomes one in which she accepts decay and decomposition as part of the cyclical nature of life: “The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended, and she revelled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms along the back wall of the house” (128). However, it is also in this solitude in her garden that Mala experiences a daily repetition of the traumas of being abandoned by her mother and raped by her father; a traumatic repetition in which “[t]ime would collapse. Every inhaled breath was a panicked tremble sustained and each exhale a heavy sob” (132). Mala’s attempt to move

past this traumatic repetition involves burning her mouth with a fermented paste of hot peppers in a passage that repeats the language used to describe the brutal rape she endures after her father catches her after she has had sex for the first time with her beloved, Ambrose Mohanty.⁶⁰ This episode of Mala's attempt to move beyond traumatic repetition includes "the only words she had spoken in ages," which are: " 'Oh God. I beg you. Please. Doh leave me, I beg you, oh God, oh God, doh leave me, I beggin you. Take me with you'" (133). Mala survives this episode, even though "[h]er flesh had come undone" (134), and her plea to God is a plea not for mere survival, but for healing, for moving beyond the traumas of the past so as to heal and become whole again. While this episode in the garden is significant in the development of Mala's relationship with herself, it is only when Mala connects with Tyler that the potential for transformation and healing, for being in the world, with others, and with herself in an authentic and ethical way begins to be fully realized. Through Mala's relationship with Tyler and the trust and understanding that builds between them, the transformative potential Mootoo's narrative offers envisions ethical connections based on healing past traumas and accessing the truth of the interconnectedness of being. The relationship between Mala and Tyler demonstrates that recognizing one's connection with others and one's own inherent completeness enables a rewriting of one's own story so as to live one's truth and, in doing so, to live in the world and with others in an authentic and ethical way.

⁶⁰ This passage includes a graphic description of Chandin beating and raping Mala (221-222) before he rapes her three more times throughout the night. The next day, Mala endures a further trauma of being abandoned by Ambrose when, after arriving and seeing Mala's condition, he realizes everything and, after Mala fights back her father and rages around the house, Ambrose runs away from her in fear (228).

In her consideration of the language and narration of the novel, May also addresses the question of narration as an issue of resistance, of “how to use the oppressor’s language and narrative models to demonstrate Mala’s double consciousness as resistant, not simply ‘mad’” (12). Tyler, May argues, functions as a mediator and witness to resist colonial narratives through what Trinh has called a “position of indirection” (qtd in May 13), and suggests: “This filtering of Mala’s voice asks readers to recognize how ‘subject status,’ as Gayatri Spivak points out, has been refused to the oppressed” (13). Noting the way in which the novel highlights the limits of language and, in particular, the English language as the language of the colonizers, May argues that Mala’s language becomes an embodied language, as she “becomes thoroughly grounded in the radical egalitarian space of her garden” (14). Regarding the narrative shifts between Tyler’s first-person narration and the third-person omniscient narration, May notes that “*Cereus*’s form suggests that language itself is a site of displacement and dislocation” and, citing Trinh, argues that Mootoo “writes Mala’s unruly tale [...] from the space of the ‘interval’” (17). Thus, through the layering of Mala and Tyler’s “remembering and retelling,” Mootoo connects a range of narratives and histories, “destabilizing lines of containment around narratives, identities, and forms of violence usually categorized as distinctly different” (20) and, as Ella Shohat argues, “the retrieval and reinscription of a fragmented past becomes a crucial contemporary site for forging a resistant collective identity” (qtd in May 20). May argues, then, that “Mala’s/Tyler’s remembering and retelling are part of crafting a different collective memory, an oppositional community consciousness to resist the rigid mores and violent rationalities of empire, heteronormativity, and sexual domination” (20). May links Mootoo’s strategy

of resistance through fictional creation with Anthony Bogues's notion of "symbolic insurgency," in which "an individual is engaged in consistent efforts to rearrange the ways in which mainstream reality is both constructed and explained." This strategy "shatters the legitimacy of the dominant order," "creates everyday spaces of hope," and "punctures the self-image of the old order [...] while seeking to profoundly influence people" (qtd in May 25). In this way, Mootoo's novel, as May argues, simultaneously resists the dominant and invites us to "imagine liberation from oppression" (26).

As noted, while May refers to what she calls Mala's "double consciousness" as "resistant," I read Mala's relationship with Tyler to suggest that connection with others is necessary for healing and for living in the world in an authentic and ethical way. Furthermore, the narrative suggests that an authentic relationship with one's self is only possible through ethical relations with others, and vice versa. My analysis of Mootoo's text suggests the limits of the cultural studies emphasis on the potential for alternative ways of being that are "resistant" to the dominant. Such an understanding of resistance is limited and limiting because it relies upon an understanding of relations of dominance and resistance that are fundamentally dualistic, and, moreover, privileges resistance itself. My argument—my reading of Mootoo's novel in this chapter, as well as my readings of the novels in other chapters—demonstrates the limits of arguments for resistance, and shows how the literary enables us to move beyond binary understandings of power and resistance that maintain notions of separation and difference as the ground for understanding human relations so as to move into the realm of transformation. In this way, the literary—through the transformative power of narrative—moves beyond critical theory understandings of politics so as to imagine authentic, ethical ways of being.

Emphasis on resistance in critical theory, particularly in postcolonial studies, derives from Marxist and feminist understandings of politics—political models that have been appropriated for reading literary texts. The usefulness of such critical modes of analysis varies, but I argue instead for the need to begin with the literary—to address the specificity of the literary first in order to expand and, possibly, reinvent our understandings of ourselves and our relationships with others and the world. In this way, I utilize certain aspects of the critical discourses of feminism, postcolonial, transnational and diaspora studies, and queer theory, while attending to the ways in which literary texts intervene into these discourses so as to reframe their assumptions and imagine alternative epistemological and ontological possibilities. My argument takes into account the usefulness of queer theory for the way in which it acknowledges that “queer” functions beyond the limits of politics to move into alternative understandings for being. The literary, I argue, foregrounds the norming function of language—how language produces and sustains normative ways of being in the world—and thus, the literary is a key site through which to challenge the normativity of language. In this way, experimentation—because of its challenge to linguistic and narrative normativity—becomes a queer practice. Furthermore, it is not only the norming function of language at stake in the literary, but it is also, and more importantly, the norming function of narrative. And, as noted, it is not only a critique of the norming functions of language and narrative at issue in Mootoo’s work, it is also—and more importantly—the creative, transformative potential and power of language and narrative in rewriting the stories by which we live and understand our selves and our relationships with others and the world. Thus, experimentation with narrative is a crucial site from which to queer the normativity

associated with narrative, including, in particular, linear and developmental understandings of time, space, selfhood, and human relationships, based on Enlightenment notions of reason and human being, which underlie English literary traditions.

My reading of *Cereus* has analyzed the way in which the central relationships in the present of the narrative (as opposed to the relationships in the past of the narrative) are narrated, and attended to the way in which the text imagines authentic, ethical modes of being that move beyond the conventions of current forms of critical theory.⁶¹ It is, I argue, through experimentation with narrative form and language that the text enables alternative ways of understanding selfhood and affinity to emerge. Mootoo's novel thus explores the way in which the act of narration can enable the stories that most align with our inner truth to emerge, and can challenge, revise, and indeed reject the dominant narratives of liberal individualism, capitalism, and historicism that have structured Western thought about human ways of being in the world at least since the industrial revolution. The novel highlights the transformative power of narrative—the way in which

⁶¹ While several critics attend to the “shared queerness” (48) of the relationship between Tyler and Mala, these readings tend to be based upon understandings of “queer” as resistant to the dominant. As I will discuss further in the final section of this chapter, my analysis considers the way in which “queerness” in the novel signifies a notion of being that emphasizes connection so as to move beyond conventional models of dominance and resistance and imagine human being otherwise. Vivian May's excellent analysis of the novel, for instance, notes the way in which “Mootoo offers, through the characters of Tyler and Mala, an alternative epistemology and economy of being that rely upon notions of love and desire which do not uphold the dysfunctional ‘family’ of empire” (2). May articulates the problem of defining alternate forms of being when difference has already been “placed within an already-made frame of ‘understanding,’ a framework built upon the epistemological and ontological values of the dominant social order, an understanding that simply places one as outside of logic, perverse,” so that “any possibility for meaningfulness, for alternative moral or social values, to be found in different lives and experiences becomes impossible because those who are more powerful or socially central contain stories of difference by means of ready-made explanations that reinforce the status quo” (15). Similarly, Hong notes: “Because the queer formations that *Cereus Blooms at Night* invokes are simultaneously produced and pathologized by nationalist discourses, this text registers different modes of affiliation: alternative sexualities and cross-race alliances emerging from, in the text's words, ‘a shared queerness’” (79).

the creative act of narration can shift stories of trauma and disempowerment to an alternate understanding of connection, belonging, and empowerment. Through the writing of the relationships I examine in my analysis, Mootoo shows how authentic, ethical understanding and connection with others is necessary for authentic connection with and expression of our own selfhood.⁶²

Thus my analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night* considers Mootoo's experimentation with language and narrative as a queering of dominant understandings of selfhood and collectivity, which functions as a creative, transformative act of imagining alternative, authentic possibilities for being in the world and with others. By attending to the experimentation with language and narrative as significant, my reading, while influenced by the critical discourses of feminist, queer, and postcolonial theory, moves away from those discourses as the starting point for analysis, and instead shifts to a framework that begins with the literary and asks how the literary enables us to imagine and narrate alternative, authentic ways of being in the world and with others. One of the questions I consider is how literary experimentation, through its linguistic, symbolic and narrative transformations, offers possibilities for actual, lived transformation. Because we live by our stories, the act of rewriting our stories, of reinventing our pasts, of reclaiming our histories from a position of empowerment and connection is an ethical, transformative act in which we can revise and alter the narratives by which we live and through which we understand our selves, our relationships with others and our ways of being in the world. In other words, by changing our stories, we can also change our selves and our ways of

⁶² And, as noted, what I describe as authentic and ethical selfhood is alternate to dominant understandings of liberal individualist selfhood/subjectivity that conform to and sustain the logic of capitalism, development, and historicism.

being with others and in the world. My argument therefore asserts that narrative is of fundamental importance in structuring our lives and ways of being in the world, as well as our ways of understanding our selves. Based on this understanding of the function of narrative in creating—and transforming—the stories by which we live, I suggest that the realm of representation and the realm of experience are fundamentally connected, that text and world are mutually influential, and that the literary enables us to imagine the world and our selves in new ways.

Transforming Our Stories, Transforming Our Selves: The Work of Language and Narrative

My argument in this chapter has focused on the way in which *Cereus Blooms at Night* foregrounds the importance of language in revising the world. Mootoo's novel demonstrates that in order to address the problem of how to reimagine the diversity of possible ways of being in the world and thus to reinvent the world—a project which entails, among other things, dismantling the ways in which heteronormativity, domesticity, and liberal individualism structure the social realm and all concepts of politics and rights—it is also necessary to revise and rework language itself. This novel foregrounds the fundamental interconnectedness of the linguistic, social and political realms, and brings to light how linguistic and narrative norms structure and support social and political norms, as well as the ways in which sexual, gender, racial, and cultural norms structure, limit and regulate narrative. Mootoo's novel foregrounds the ways in which the telling of stories is fundamental to how we live and the kind of world in which we live. Language and narrative, this novel suggests, are fundamental for defining and

constructing ways of being in the world and how the world is thought, structured and experienced. Any project—social, political, literary—that seeks to challenge, dismantle, revise, and restructure the norms of the world must attend to the ways in which language and narrative structure the world and possibilities for being. My analysis of Mootoo's novel has shown how experimentation with language can also function as a critique of the liberal individualism that underlies dominant notions of politics and rights. The notion of a coherent, unified self is fundamentally challenged by the narrative experimentation, and Mootoo's novel demonstrates the ways in which liberal individualism structures and limits the kinds of narratives that can be told, and the kinds of lives that can be lived. The experimental qualities of the novel function to expose and challenge linguistic and narrative norms, as well as to demonstrate how such norms are fundamentally bound up with sexual, gender, racial, and class norms that regulate and limit how lives can be lived, and thus regulate and limit possibilities for being in the world.

My argument thus far, in my analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, *The God of Small Things*, and *Our Sister Killjoy*, has addressed the ways in which the heteronormativity that underwrites national histories also underlies and sustains the structure of narrative itself, and my queer readings demonstrate that it is through attention to the formal experimentation of each text that a simultaneous critique of sexual and narrative norms becomes clear. Each novel, through its experimentation with narrative voice, narrative structure, and form, produces a critique of heteronormativity and queers the norms of narrative, and, in doing so, demonstrates the ways in which sexual norms not only support and maintain cultural and social norms, but also structure linguistic and narrative norms. Each of these novels demonstrates the ways in which heteronormativity

and narrative norms are connected and suggests that this connection delimits possibilities for being in the world and for the kinds of narratives that can be told. By experimenting with the norms of language and narrative, these novels articulate the need for the reinvention of ways of being in the world, and demonstrate that in order to revise our ways of being in the world, a revision of narrative and linguistic norms is also necessary.

Chapter 4: “The Century of Strangers”: Zadie Smith and the Post-Postcolonial Millennium

The literature we love amounts to the fractured shards of an attempt, not the monument of fulfilment.

- Zadie Smith, “Fail Better.” *The Guardian*. January 13, 2007

Zadie Smith arrived on the global English literary scene in the first year of the new millennium, with the publication of her debut novel, *White Teeth*, in 2000. Hailed in mainstream reviews as the multicultural novel of the new century, *White Teeth* portrays the lives of immigrants in London with a literary liveliness—primarily due to the witty, comic, and ironic narrative voice and its comedic cast of characters—that cemented its status and success as the novel of the new millennium. Smith herself gained a significant amount of fame in the literary world, being described as “the post-post-colonial Salman Rushdie,”⁶³ and much was made of the large advance she received from her publisher (250, 000 pounds), as well as of her youth (she was 24 when the novel was published). Reviewers consistently praised Smith’s lively portrayal of multicultural London, and enthusiastically described the novel as proof of Britain’s new multicultural openness. Understood by most mainstream literary and academic critics as “optimistic,” and described as such by the author herself, *White Teeth*’s portrayal of immigrants in London reinforced an image of London’s diversity and multiculturalism that seemed to serve the nation’s desired self-image well.⁶⁴

⁶³ Catherine Lanone describes Smith’s portrayal by reviewers as “the post-post-colonial heir of Salman Rushdie” and “as the millennium literary sensation” upon the publication of *White Teeth* (185).

⁶⁴ Reviewers have described the novel as “an incredibly optimistic portrayal of life in multicultural London,” “a generally optimistic view of multicultural Britain,” and a “fairy-tale” of Britain as “Happy Multicultural Land” (qtd in Jakubiak 202). Smith herself has stated in an interview: “It’s optimistic, I

At the turn of the century, national discourse and mainstream media in England, as well as the United States and Canada, were emphasizing multiculturalism, diversity, and “openness” as signifiers of new national belonging. While conservative discourse remained firmly rooted in the view of immigrants as “others” and as a threat to the purity of the national body, dominant liberal discourse sought to reframe thinking about the nation-state as a friendly, open, welcoming home in which immigrants were acknowledged as a vital part of the national body. As Paul Gilroy notes in the introduction to *The Black Atlantic*, “mainstream Britain has been required to become fluent in the anthropological idiom of official multiculturalism” (xxii). Focusing on two families—the Joneses, made up of Archie Jones, a white Englishman, his younger, black wife, Clara, and their daughter Irie, and the Iqbals, first-generation Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants, Samad and Alsana, and their twin sons, Millat and Magid—the novel’s attention to the multicultural, postcolonial present of London at the end of the twentieth century is also grounded in an historical view of the recent colonial past. Contrasting the older generation with the younger generation, the novel suggests the possibilities held by the younger generation—the children of the new millennium—whose lives have moved beyond the traumas of the past into a genuinely multicultural future in which “difference” is simply a fact of each individual’s existence.⁶⁵ For instance, passages like the following describe the multicultural world in which this generation is growing up:

think” (qtd in Gerzina 271). It should be noted that “Happy Multicultural Land” is actually a quote from the novel itself, which, in the context of the novel, is highly ironic.

⁶⁵ Several critics have commented on the novel’s portrayal of the younger generation in contrast to the first generation of immigrants. Raphael Dalleo, for instance, argues: “The future for London immigrant subcultures cannot be reduced to either assimilation or marginalization; instead, Smith shows us the emergence of something else entirely, a London that is British and Caribbean and South Asian and

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secret within them mass exodus, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checkups. It is only this late in the day, and possibly only in Willesden, that you can find best friends Sita and Sharon, constantly mistaken for each other because Sita is white (her mother liked the name) and Sharon is Pakistani (her mother thought it best—less trouble). Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), despite all this, it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English. There are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist. (271-2)

While the narrator's description of the "reasonable comfort" with which immigrants and the English have "slipped into each other's lives" on the "collision course" of multiculturalism can be read as "optimistic," it is also attentive to the dark side of such "mixing up," the way in which fear of the other breeds anger and violence. And it is the use of repetition in this paragraph that demands attention: each clause beginning with the word "despite" creates layers of complexity in which it is necessary to question any notion of diversity or multiculturalism that is too simplistic.

American all at the same time" (93). Citing a study by the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain in 2000, Kris Knauer argues that "the younger generations of the city have frequently much more in common with each other regardless of their background than with the elders of the communities from which they came" (176). The commission referred to the members of the younger generation as "skilful cultural navigators," and Knauer describes Smith's ability for writing their distinct experience: "the younger generations of her characters in her novels go well beyond the conventional ways of envisaging identity in relation to their nationality, religion, race, or ethnicity" (171). Interestingly, one critic's argument differs from the conventional reading of the younger generation's facility with difference, focusing instead on the concept of "Britishness" and suggesting that "*White Teeth* demonstrates that the second-generation migrant's relationship with Britishness differs dramatically from that of the previous one. Unlike Archibald and Samad, the twins find multicultural friendship a much more difficult challenge" because they "cannot draw upon the sense of imperial patriotism" that Archie and Samad shared (Mirze 198-9).

In contrast to the violence that “still” occurs, “despite” all the blending into each other’s lives, the narrator also notes the fear of the older generation of immigrants, stemming from a similar conservative impulse to preserve ethnic difference, who see such “mixing” as having the potential to dissolve the very existence—not just the purity—of their ethnicity. The next paragraph begins: “But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears—dissolution, *disappearance*” (272). Describing Alsana’s fear of her children marrying white women and producing “unrecognizable great-grandchildren (*Aaaaaaa!*), their Bengalianness thoroughly diluted, genotype hidden by phenotype,” the narrator also notes: “It is the most irrational and natural feeling in the world.” And even though Clara herself married a white man, her fears are similar to Alsana’s: “Clara saw an ocean of pink skins surrounding her daughter and she feared the tide that would take her away” (272). Passages such as these demonstrate Smith’s attentiveness to the multicultural reality of the younger generation’s daily experience, as well as to conservative beliefs that still exist about “difference” and “purity.” Because of the comic, ironic perspective with which conservative views are represented—for instance, in the narrator’s insertion of the parenthesized and italicized “(*Aaaaaaa!*)”, which adds an element of comedy to Alsana’s fears—Smith’s novel can be read as moving beyond such views so as to write—to bring into literary representation—the everyday realities of urban, multicultural experience in what might be called a post-postcolonial novel.⁶⁶ My argument suggests that Smith’s

⁶⁶ It should also be noted that it is not simply the conservative impulse that is brought under critique and into comic relief in *White Teeth*. Rather, the liberal perspective of “official multiculturalism” is highly

experimentation with the form of the realist novel, as well as with elements of the comic novel, queers the norms of narrative as an ethical challenge to the narratives of heteronormativity, progress, and liberal individualism that are shored up in the novel form. Smith's "century of strangers" queers the dominant narratives of the twentieth century—of freedom, progress, heteronormativity, and liberal individualism—and, in doing so, revises the norms of the realist novel as an ethical practice.

Two years after the publication of *White Teeth*, Smith's second novel, *The Autograph Man*, was published to mixed reviews. In contrast to the exuberance and literary excess of her first book, *The Autograph Man* seemed like an uncertain effort, with its more subdued tone and its less directly "multicultural" emphasis. The narrative focuses on the half-Jewish, half-Chinese English protagonist, Alex-Li Tandem, who searches for a meaningful sense of self in his seemingly meaningless existence as a collector and an authenticator of autographs. A meditation on celebrity, and on grief (Alex-Li's father dies in the novel's prologue), the novel is also a postmodern engagement with postmodernity itself, an inquiry into a world in which simulacra have overtaken the real, as Jean Baudrillard has theorized. The reception of this novel—and the relative lack of scholarly criticism about it in comparison to the criticism of *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, Smith's third novel—is notable for the way in which it brings to light certain expectations of "the multicultural novel" and the "ethnic" writer, particularly

satirized, in particular through the characters of Joyce Chalfen—the mother of a family with which Irie, Millat, and Magid become involved—and Poppy Burt-Jones, the music teacher at Millat and Magid's elementary school, with whom Samad has an affair. As Raphael Dalleo notes, Smith's portrayal of these two characters critiques their inability to "accept cultural *mélange*" (96) and their desire "to see everything through the lens of difference" (96), showing how "[t]hese liberal Englishwomen want their *Others* othered" (97).

the ethnic woman writer. While *White Teeth* is recognizable in its form and content as a postcolonial novel in the style of Rushdie and other “Black British” writers such as Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali (and *On Beauty* is frequently read through its intertextual engagement with E.M. Forster’s 1910 novel *Howard’s End* and Elaine Scarry’s essay on aesthetics, “On Beauty and Being Just,” to which the novel’s title refers), *The Autograph Man* confounds traditional expectations of a postcolonial, multicultural novel, written by a Black British—and female—author.⁶⁷

In one of the few articles yet written about *The Autograph Man*, Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga notes the novel’s “mixed reception” (57) and how it was said to be lacking “Smith’s greatest strength—a convincing picture of multicultural London and high-spirited characterization” (57), which critics were expecting after *White Teeth*. Noting that *The Autograph Man* “sits uncomfortably with the label of postcolonial fiction” (57), Terentowicz-Fotyga outlines some of the key differences between Smith’s first and second novels: in *White Teeth*, for instance, “the acceptance of multiculturalism is the destination of the protagonists’ youthful quest for identity,” whereas in *The Autograph Man* “it is a point of departure” (57). Furthermore, in the first novel, “the theme of migration is filtered through the lenses of history,” while the second novel “is organized around the theme of the culture industry and the hyperreal experience of space” (57). Therefore, “[a] fluid sense of identity in *The Autograph Man* is not so much an effect of migration and displacement as of problematic experience of reality” (57), a

⁶⁷ It should also be noted that while many critics engage with *On Beauty*’s intertexts—Forster’s *Howard’s End* and Scarry’s “On Beauty and Being Just”—the intertexts that structure *The Autograph Man* into two sections—the Jewish Kabbalah and a series of twelfth-century Zen illustrations by the Chinese master Kakuan, depicting the steps toward self-realization—are only briefly referred to by critics.

concern that is primarily associated with postmodernist writers. While Smith has been situated among her postmodernist peers, including Dave Eggers, Don DeLillo, Tom Wolfe, and David Foster-Wallace, in what Susie Thomas calls “a postmodern, transatlantic literature,” the main critical expectation of Smith’s work, which differs significantly from that of the work of white male writers, is that it engage with issues of postcolonialism and multiculturalism in recognizable ways. One of those ways is through the writing of the colonial past in relation to the postcolonial present, which, as Terentowicz-Fotyga notes, is not part of *The Autograph Man*, as the representation of “different experiences of the first and second generations, central to the meaning of the first novel, remain in the back ground in *The Autograph Man*, and the plot focuses firmly on the immigrants’ children” (58). The differences between the two novels, and their respective reception by reviewers and critics, highlight the ways in which certain expectations frame the successful reception of a text by an “ethnic” author.⁶⁸

My analysis of *The Autograph Man* suggests that Smith’s experimentation with narrative in the novel form queers narrative expectations as an ethical challenge to the norms of closure and conclusion that govern conventional forms of narrative. In her challenge to the normativity of “endings,” Smith’s novels demonstrate the way in which heteronormativity and liberal individualism are shored up by the narrative arc toward an

⁶⁸ Katarzyna Jakubiak describes the way in which the commodification of *White Teeth* was paired with an attempt “to regulate the authorial persona of Zadie Smith herself” (211), noting that “just as they coerce *White Teeth* into optimistic interpretations, the reviewers also try to force Zadie Smith into an image of a successful, happy, and complicit ‘ethnic’ author” (212). Jakubiak also cites several instances of Smith’s own acts of resistance to the commodification of her persona and of *White Teeth*, including her protest to the way in which women writers are viewed as representatives, arguing: “a white male writer is never asked to be a spokesman for anything; he has complete artistic freedom,” and “demanding the right for a woman writer to be treated as an author, ‘not a thing who is being looked at or judged or observed by other people’” (qtd in Jakubiak 213).

ending, and her ambiguous endings, I argue, queer the structure of narrative as an ethical challenge to the normativity imposed by narrative development toward an ending.

Queering narrative form and the linear, teleological structure of narrative, *The Autograph Man*, as well as *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*, challenges the heteronormativity and liberal individualism of the novel form, both of which are shored up by the closure of endings.

While it might be argued that Smith's inconclusive endings are a stylistic weakness, my argument is that the ambiguous endings of her novels function as a queer challenge to heteronormative narrative structure. Refusing to conform to an ending that satisfies the narrative drive for climax or resolution, Smith's ambiguous endings queer narrative structure and reveal the failure of the construction of compulsory heterosexuality and the liberal individual in narrative. Smith queers the structure of the novel form as not only a queering of narrative (hetero)normativity, but also an ethical project of reimagining and expanding possibilities for being in the world.

The Autograph Man marks, in some ways, a transition from *White Teeth* to *On Beauty*, Smith's third novel, published in 2005 and winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2006. While *White Teeth* was solidly rooted in multicultural London, *The Autograph Man* begins to move across the Atlantic to the United States, as its protagonist travels to New York to meet the object of his obsession, a film star from Hollywood's golden era. *On Beauty* is situated in the world of American academia, centering on the Belsey family, composed of Howard Belsey, a white English Art History professor at a New England university called Wellington, his wife Kiki, a black American woman from Florida, and their three children, Jerome, Zora, and Levi. The narrative can arguably be described as "transatlantic," as Howard is an English transplant, and Howard's academic rival, Monty

Kipps, another Englishman, arrives from London as a visiting professor at Howard's university, bringing their families—as well as their divergent and conflicting ideologies—together in unexpected and various ways. Underlying the narrative is an attentiveness to the intersections of race and class in the United States, particularly through the representation of the black, primarily Haitian underclass of the white middle-class world of Wellington, as well as in the representation of the uncertain, varied, and often-conflicting sense of identity of the black characters within this primarily white middle-class world. The relationships among class, race, and aesthetic value are also explored through the opinions of various characters and their interactions with each other, primarily among the members of the Belsey and Kipps families, a talented young street-poet named Carl, and the academic world of Wellington. As a rewriting of Forster's *Howard's End*, *On Beauty* focuses primarily on the interactions between two families of opposing world-views, and the shifts in perspective that arise from these interactions. In its reference to Scarry's "On Beauty and Being Just," and its critical engagement with discourses of aesthetics throughout the narrative, the novel is also a meditation on the influence of aesthetic theory and the importance of aesthetics in how everyday lives are lived. *On Beauty* raises the ethical question of aesthetics through the lives of its characters and explores the way in which aesthetic beliefs influence perception, as well as our engagement with others in the world.

My reading of *On Beauty* attends specifically to Smith's ethical intervention in the novel form, which, I argue, is a queering of the narrative norms that shore up the values of heteronormativity and liberal individualism. In *On Beauty*, Smith demonstrates the ethical failure of liberal academic critical theory, as critical discourse, in its devaluing

of human agency, leads to a failure to treat other human beings in ethical ways. *On Beauty* raises the ethical questions of aesthetics so as to highlight the ethical potential offered by works of art. Queering the form of the realist, domestic, and comic novel, Smith's work demonstrates the failure of the heterosexual marriage plot so as to revise and expand the possibilities for narrative in the novel form. Queering, in *On Beauty*, as in Smith's other novels, functions as an ethical procedure in narrative, and is not only a challenge to the regulation of sexual subjectivity that reproduces heteronormativity through the novel form, but also an expansion of the ethical potential of the novel itself.

Smith's three novels offer a complex engagement with ethical issues of human relations in the contemporary world. Focusing on present realities of multiculturalism, race and ethnic identity, gender and generational differences, the experience of reality and selfhood in an increasingly simulated world, and the question of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, Smith's novels, in both their content and form, enable us to think through the function of literature and narrative in the new millennium. In an increasingly digital, virtual world, Smith's experimentation with narrative and the novel form offers possibilities for the novel's continued ethical significance, for its unique potential as an innovative and continually evolving literary form. While postmodernity tends to be characterized as information-saturated, fast-paced, attention-deficient, shifting and devaluing human relations from actual, lived experience to virtual interaction, Smith's work—in its engagement with the present, as well as in its highly-stylized literariness—offers a view of human relations that foregrounds the importance of narrative, and the ethical, aesthetic function of literature in enabling reflection upon the fundamental questions of how we live and engage with each other in the present. Her

novels so far amount to what we might think of as Smith's "fractured shards of an attempt" to write the present—an innovative attempt to create a new realism for the new millennium. Balancing a modernist attention to structure with a postmodernist understanding of identity and reality as unstable and fluid, Smith's work can be read as simultaneously modernist and postmodernist,⁶⁹ and the interplay between these two seemingly vastly different literary styles in her novels, rather than creating an unbridgeable tension, may be understood as part of her "attempt" to find the balance between representing the postmodern realities of human experience in the increasingly virtual, artificial, and simulated (as well as, arguably, dehumanizing) world of global capitalism, and the affective, psychological level of human experience that has been and continues to be a primary characteristic of the realist novel. Each of Smith's novels demonstrates an experimental attentiveness to narrative form and structure, and Smith's queering of the novel form functions as an ethical engagement with the literary, in which to reflect upon and reimagine ethical ways of being human in the world.

Muddling Multiculturalism: Smith's Ethical, Experimental Realism

If you are told 'they are all this' or 'they do this' or 'their opinions are these,' withhold your judgment until all the facts are upon you. Because that land they call 'India' goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you

⁶⁹ Matthew Paproth's essay "The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and Postmodernist Zadie Smith" focuses on what he calls a "disconnect between postmodernist tale and modernist telling" in *White Teeth* and *On Beauty* (11), arguing that "while Smith's outlook may be postmodernist in its rejection of absolutes, her novels are determinedly modernist in their construction" (10). Paproth reads the content of Smith's novels to be at odds with their structure, arguing: "The traditionally modernist structures [of Smith's novels] are the same ones she is arguing for the impossibility of maintaining in a postmodernist, postcolonial world, where stable boundaries are constantly being obliterated and where meaning is constantly shown to be unstable" (11). Like many critics, it should be noted, Paproth does not consider *The Autograph Man* alongside Smith's other novels.

think you have found two men the same among that multitude, then you are mistaken. It is merely a trick of the moonlight.

- Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (85)

The time to make up your mind about people is never!

- Tracy Lord, *The Philadelphia Story*

Before we begin, there are certain words that make the author very tired. These words are: multicultural, post-colonial, archetype, stereotype, post-millennial, literally, identity, zucchini. The author is not responsible for her own mental shutdown should she come across these words in the course of scrolling down this e-mail interview. In all other respects, however, she will be sweetness and light personified.

- Zadie Smith, in an interview with John Mark Eberhart, *Kansas City Star*

By 2001, the date of Smith's interview with John Mark Eberhart in the *Kansas City Star*, Smith had clearly had enough of the hype surrounding *White Teeth* and, with humor and grace, she makes clear that she is no longer interested in answering the same questions that have been posed of her since its publication. The above quote—a sort of advisory notice to her interviewer and to readers—indicates Smith's resistance to the conventional critical expectations that had arguably produced a limited and limiting reading of the novel and of Smith herself, and it can be read alongside the two other quotes above to produce a view that is suggested in the body of Smith's work—a view that denies conclusiveness and demands that decision and finality be postponed to make room for further reflection. The first quote, from *White Teeth*, is from Samad Iqbal to Archie Jones as the two are becoming friends in an abandoned church during the war which, unbeknownst to them, has already ended, and the second quote, from *The Philadelphia Story*, is one of the epigraphs (the other being: "You get to decide what to worship" by David Foster Wallace) of Smith's 2008 collection of essays *Changing My*

Mind. While reviewers framed Smith's work early on in her career in specific ways—primarily, as noted, as an optimistic celebration of multiculturalism—her writing repeatedly and consistently resists the kind of closure such framing seeks.⁷⁰

In contrast to the celebratory tone and multicultural focus of most reviewers, James Wood's review of Smith's *White Teeth*, published in *The New Republic* and entitled "Human, All Too Inhuman," focused on the novel's style and coined the term "hysterical realism" to describe the kind of "big, ambitious" contemporary novel of writers such as Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Salman Rushdie, and Smith. Wood describes this style of writing as one that pursues "vitality at all costs," in which "the conventions of realism are not being abolished but, on the contrary, exhausted and overworked" so that the novels are "evasive of reality while borrowing from realism itself." The primary strategy of such writing, Wood argues, is an excessive, unstoppable storytelling, in which "stories and sub-stories sprout on every page," reducing character to caricature. At issue in Wood's argument is not only the conventions of realism in terms of events, but also the very humanity of the characters, as Wood argues that the "showy liveliness" and "theatricality" of this style of writing results in a lack of character development in which "[i]nformation has become the new character." Wood's objection,

⁷⁰ In contrast to readings of *White Teeth* as "optimistic," Katarzyna Jakubiak's essay "Simulated Optimism: The International Marketing of *White Teeth*" focuses on the problematic way in which the dominant reading of the novel as "optimistic" is part of a larger cultural process in which the supposed "authenticity" of a 'minority' novel is usually the condition of the novel's ability to tap into the images and expectations that mainstream audiences already hold about the given 'ethnic' community" (202). Jakubiak's essay therefore "explores the mechanisms of commodification, through which international book-marketing industries attempt to turn Smith's multidimensional novel into a 'safe' and easily consumable product" (202), and she argues against "the widespread misperception of the multicultural world represented in the novel as 'optimistic'" (202), suggesting instead that while humor and irony, as well as "its celebratory tone," function to produce this optimistic reading, attention to the plot allows for a reading in which "the events of the novel reveal themselves in their tragic rawness, and the depiction of race relations falls short of giving hope for British society's peaceful future" (203).

therefore, is not “at the level of verisimilitude, but at the level of morality,” since the “mode of narration”—which he describes as a “bonhomous, punning, lively serenity of spirit”—“seems to be almost incompatible with tragedy or anguish” and thus produces caricatures—not characters—lacking true human feeling and depth.

Part review of Smith’s novel, part theoretical description of “hysterical realism,” Wood’s article is also a diagnosis of the literary crisis that produced this type of writing. Arguing that the contemporary “excess of storytelling” is a way of masking what he describes as a lack of humanity of the characters in such novels, Wood suggests that “these contemporary deformations” all arise from a “crisis of character, and how to represent it in fiction.” While he traces this “crisis” back to modernism, arguing that “[s]ince modernism, many of the finest writers have been offering critique of the idea of character, in the absence of convincing ways to return to an innocent mimesis,” he also suggests that the new, excessive literary style derives from the Victorian fiction of Dickens, arguing that “Dickens has been the overwhelming influence on postwar fiction, especially postwar British fiction,” citing authors such as Angus Wilson, Muriel Spark, Martin Amis, Angela Carter, Rushdie, Naipaul, and Smith as examples of writers who are his literary heirs. Wood notes that it is Dickens’ characterization, “his way of creating and propelling theatrically alive characters,” that influences these contemporary writers and “makes caricature respectable for an age in which [...] it has become hard to create character.” However, Wood argues that while Dickens offers “an immediate access to strong feeling, which rips the puppetry of his people, breaks their casings, and lets us enter them,” contemporary novels, in contrast, fail to offer a similar experience of the “affecting, sublime, or beautiful.” Failing to offer affective characterization, “these

novels find themselves in the paradoxical position of enforcing connections that are finally conceptual rather than human,” and thus “since the characters in these novels are not really alive, not fully human, their connectedness can only be insisted on.”⁷¹

Connection among characters is certainly a central concern in Smith’s novels, and each of her novels experiments with characterization and with what Wood calls “connectedness” in different ways. While most readings of *White Teeth* emphasize (or at least note) the way in which the novel demonstrates connections across difference in a multicultural context, Smith’s next novel, *The Autograph Man*, highlights the inability of its protagonist to connect in any meaningful way with other people. In *On Beauty*, while the novel is framed by Forster’s famous line “Only connect,” the characters—even within a single family—struggle to connect with each other across differences of class, race, gender, and ideology.⁷² The critical and literary concern with connection, as well as with the question of characterization, demonstrates a contemporary need to define the value of literature and its specific ability to represent humanity. Wood’s essay raises several key

⁷¹ It should be noted that while Wood is concerned with the trend of “hysterical realism” in general, his review of *White Teeth* is not entirely negative: he notes, for instance, Smith’s “natural comic gift,” and describes her as “skilled at interior monologue, and brilliant [...] at free indirect style.” He also praises her for her stated desire to “get the balance right” between writing the macrocosm of “how the world works” and the microcosm of “family, love, sex, whatever” (qtd in Wood) and argues that of all her contemporaries, she is author who is most likely to achieve this balance. Furthermore, he argues that “[a]t her best, she approaches her characters and makes them human; she is much more interested in this, and more naturally gifted at it, than is Rushdie.” And while he argues that *White Teeth* “lacks moral seriousness,” he also notes that “her details are often instantly convincing, both funny and moving. They justify themselves.”

⁷² In an essay on Smith’s short story “Hanwell in Hell,” Lexi Stuckey argues that this story, published in *The New Yorker* in 2004, “reveals a significant shift in Smith’s presentation of multiculturalism,” and that “Smith’s more recent works show how multiculturalism has failed and may possibly be doomed to fail in instances where families of different colors and cultures try to come together” (168). While I do not agree with Stuckey’s pessimistic reading of Smith’s work, it should also be noted that Stuckey fails to include *The Autograph Man* along with what she calls “Smith’s two other major works” (168), and does not consider Smith’s work outside of the framework of an “optimistic” versus a “pessimistic” commentary on multiculturalism.

issues at stake in the question of fiction's value in the contemporary context of global capitalism and simulated reality, including, perhaps most significantly, literature's ability to represent—and, by extension, to incite in the reader—affect and human emotion. Underlying the question of the morality of the novel, raised by Wood, is the expectation of fiction's ability to produce empathy for others. The argument for the novel's particular ability to create empathy for others is part of a broader argument for the ethical value and significance of the aesthetic. These arguments are tied to a discourse of aesthetics that can be traced back to Kant, through writers as varied as the Earl of Shaftesbury, Frances Hutcheson, Hegel and Adorno, and that has been revived in recent years by authors including Elaine Scarry, Peter De Bolla, and Denis Donoghue.⁷³ The critical concern with aesthetics, and specifically, the ethical or moral value and significance of the aesthetic, has again become relevant to literary study, after having fallen out of fashion over the course of the twentieth century. While literature is frequently excluded from discussions of the ability of the aesthetic to expand our capacity for moral judgment,⁷⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah argues, in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, that stories enable “the sort of imaginative engagement [...] that speaks from some place other than your own” (85). In Appiah's view, it is the very medium of language and narrative that

⁷³ Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) arguably initiated this renewed interest in the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, and there was a proliferation of books on aesthetics in the early twenty-first century, including Peter De Bolla's *Art Matters* (2001) and Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty* (2003).

⁷⁴ Kathleen Wall notes “the difficulty literature poses in discussions about aesthetics” and summarizes the problem as follows: “With the exception of a few texts, literature is invariably representational; indeed, Habermas suggests that the novel in particular is implicated in the development of a public sphere. Its medium is language, not pain or notes – the same medium that constitutes our social lives. Unlike music and the fine arts, literature does not appeal in obvious ways to our senses. Consequently, while aesthetics seeks to provide principles that can apply to any work of art, literature remains a problematic instance” (780).

facilitates our “imaginative engagement” with the lives of others, which is, in turn, a process that has the potential to lead to empathy for others.

Attending to characterization, as Wood suggests, as well as to the form and structure of narrative itself is therefore crucial to a reading that seeks to engage with the relationship between the ethics and aesthetics of the novel and its ability to create empathy. While Wood, in privileging realism, character development, and affect as the most important qualities of fiction, suggests that the use of comic and ironic elements in characterization risks or leads to caricature, rather than character, and thus denies the human, affective element of fiction, I would suggest that a broader understanding of realism and characterization is required to read what might be tentatively called Smith’s experimental realism. Expectations of literary realism such as Wood’s are based on an understanding of realism that derives from the association of seriousness—the novel’s ability to show “tragedy or anguish,” as Wood notes—with an ethical perspective, yet I would argue that it is Smith’s experimentation with the conventions of the realist novel and with comic characterization that create an ethical and innovative expansion of the novel form. Through her experimentation with the novel form in each of her three novels, Smith queers the narrative norms of realism and postmodernism, as well as challenges and revises expectations of “postcolonial” and “multicultural” fiction. Queering, then, as a textual practice, is a formal and an ethical challenge to narrative and literary norms.

“A Consequence of Living”: Characterization and Connection in *White Teeth*

The question of Smith’s comic characterization is also, as Wood argues, an ethical question, and each of Smith’s novels engages with the ethics of form, characterization,

and narrative, creating a body of fictional work in which the issue of the morality of the novel, or the relationship between ethics and literary aesthetics is foregrounded. In *White Teeth*, as well as in *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty*, comic and ironic elements are balanced by a deeply compassionate, empathetic, and ethical perspective. Two of the primary means through which Smith creates her comic characters, as well as allows a deeply invested, ethical perspective to emerge, are dialogue and free indirect discourse. While the narrative voice primarily maintains an ironic perspective on the various characters, each character's comic failings are balanced by a compassionate view in which empathy is created. Rather than creating rationalist, realist characters whose lives and views are coherent—characters that would align with a liberal individualist view of the subject—Smith creates characters whose views and ways of being are paradoxical, incoherent, and flawed. And it is these very failures and flaws that simultaneously challenge the liberal individualist narrative that underlies the discourses of rationalism, capitalism, and multiculturalism, and expand the possibilities for realist narrative and the novel form.

In *White Teeth*, Samad Iqbal, through his disillusionment with his experience as a first-generation immigrant in London, has become rigid in his religious views, yet repeatedly acts in ways that contradict his stated piety, including, perhaps most obviously, in his affair with the white English schoolteacher, Poppy Burt-Jones. Even in the comic portrayal of his flaws, however, the narrative also creates empathy for him, disallowing a simplistic characterization that would lead to caricature. When Samad meets Poppy for the first time outside of their interactions at the children's school and with the intention of beginning an affair, they are accosted on the street by a woman

named Mad Mary, whom the narrator describes as “a black voodoo woman with a red face [...] who performs her spells from a garbage can in West Hampstead,” one of “the Mad,” bred by the city, who “flaunted their insanity” and “were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking sense when you least expected it” (146). The narrative voice, dialogue, and free indirect discourse from Samad’s perspective are exemplary in this passage for the balance of humor and seriousness between the comic perspective of the narration and the more deeply felt register of recognition and connection that is expressed through Samad’s perspective and speech. Their encounter begins with Mad Mary spitting on Samad and asking: “You, sir! You . . . lookin’ . . . at . . . some . . . ting?” and continues as follows:

Suddenly she was screaming. “BLACK MAN! DEM BLOCK YOU EVERYWHERE YOU TURN!”

“Please,” stuttered Poppy, clearly terrified. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“BLACK MAN!” (She liked to speak in rhyming couplets.) “DE BITCH SHE WISH TO SEE YOU BURN!”

“We are minding our own business—” began Samad, but he was stopped by a second projectile of phlegm, this time hitting him on the cheek.

“*Tru hill and gully, dem follow you dem follow you, Tru hill and gully, de devil swallow you ‘im swallow you.*” This was delivered in a kind of singing stage whisper, accompanied by a dance from side to side, arms outstretched and Hoodoo stick resting firmly underneath Poppy Burt-Jones’s chin.

“*What ‘as dem ever done for us body bot kill us and enslave us? What ‘as dem done for our minds bot hurt us an’ enrage us? What’s de pollution?*”

[...]

Mad Mary sucked her teeth and turned her attention once more to Samad. “WHAT’S DE SOLUTION?”

“I don’t know.”

Mad Mary slapped him around the ankles with her stick. “WHAT’S DE SOLUTION, BLACK MAN?” (148)

The humor of this encounter—the comic portrayal of Mad Mary by the narrative voice, describing her fondness for speaking in rhyming couplets, as well as the dancing, theatrical delivery of her lines—is balanced by a shift to Samad’s perspective and his view of Mad Mary:

Mad Mary was a beautiful, a striking woman: a noble forehead, a prominent nose, ageless midnight skin and a long neck such as queens can only dream about. But it was her alarming eyes, which shot out an anger on the brink of total collapse, that Samad was concentrated on, because he saw that they were speaking to him and him alone. [...] Mad Mary was looking at him with *recognition*. Mad Mary had spotted a *fellow traveler*. She had spotted the madman in him (which is to say, the *prophet*); he felt sure she had spotted the angry man, the masturbating man, the man stranded in the desert far from his sons, the foreign man in a foreign land caught between borders . . . the man who, if you push him far enough, will suddenly see sense. Why else had she picked him from a street full of people? Simply because she recognized him. Simply because they were from the same place, he and Mad Mary, which is to say: *far away*. (148-9)

Following this shift to Samad’s perspective, the encounter changes dramatically, as Samad actually answers Mad Mary’s question:

“*Satyagraha*,” said Samad, surprising himself with his own calmness. Mad Mary, unused to having her interrogations answered, looked at him in astonishment. “WHAT’S DE SOLUTION?”
 “*Satyagraha*. It is Sanskrit for ‘truth and firmness.’ Gandhi-gee’s word. You see, he did not like ‘passive resistance’ or ‘civil disobedience.’” (148)

Samad explains how Gandhi, through the concept of “*satyagraha*,” “wanted to show what we call weakness to be a strength” and “understood that sometimes not to act is a man’s greatest triumph” (149). And, as Mad Mary mutters profanities and a small crowd gathers, Samad accesses the “*manqué* preacher” within him, and states “Believe me, I understand your concerns, [...] I am having difficulties myself—we are all having difficulties in this country, this country which is new to us and old to us all at the same time. We are a divided people, aren’t we?” (149) And then, after touching Mad Mary,

“[v]ery lightly, on the shoulder,” something that “no one had done to Mad Mary for well over fifteen years” (149), Samad continues:

“We are split people. For myself, half of me wishes to sit quietly with my legs crossed, letting the things that are beyond my control wash over me. But the other half wants to fight the holy war. Jihad! And certainly we could argue this out in the street, but I think, in the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth and your solution—it is not my solution. [...] Truth and firmness is one suggestion, though there are many other people you can ask if that answer does not satisfy.” (150)

While Samad’s dialogue in this encounter addresses Mad Mary’s “concerns” with thoughtfulness and potential insight, the seriousness of his response is balanced by the comic characterization of Samad, in his view of himself as a great orator—“[a] know-it-all, a walker-and-a-talker” (149)—as well as his self-perception of heroism, as he compares himself with his ancestor, Mangal Pande, whom Samad, against all historical accounts, believes heroically initiated a rebellion against the British: “Samad, increasingly given to visions, saw that great-grandfather of his, Mangal Pande, flailing with a musket; fighting against the new, holding on to tradition” (150). While it could be argued that the comic portrayal of Samad and Mad Mary by the narrative voice undercuts the seriousness of the encounter, it is rather the very comedy of the characterization that brings into view the tragedy that underlies their encounter—the tragedies of slavery, displacement, and diaspora—as well as the potential for recognition and connection through and across difference. Significantly, while Samad sees “recognition” in Mad Mary’s face, and feels their connection, he does not romanticize or essentialize that connection and offers the more realistic view that any individual “solution” also depends on one’s individual “past” and “truth.” The ethics of this encounter are complex, as they simultaneously offer “recognition” as a basis for common connection among human

beings, as well as highlight the importance of recognizing difference in creating adequate solutions for the present.

In a later section of the novel, Samad's seemingly positive perspective in the above passage has altered and become more bitter, more despairing, as he describes his deep distress to Irie over what has become of his sons: while Magid, whom Samad sent to Bangladesh in hopes of strengthening his connection to his Muslim roots, has become "a pukka Englishman, white-suited, silly wig lawyer," Millat, who stayed in Willesden, has become a "fully paid-up green-bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist" (336). Samad articulates his despair to Irie, and it is a despair that is shown to be one of the first generation:

"These days, it feels to me like you make a devil's pact when you walk into this country. You hand over your passport at the check-in, you get stamped, you want to make a little money, get yourself started . . . but you mean to go back! Who would want to stay? Cold, wet, miserable; terrible food, dreadful newspapers—who would want to stay? In a place where you are never welcomed, only tolerated. Just tolerated. Like you are an animal finally housebroken. Who would want to stay? But you have made a devil's pact . . . it drags you in and suddenly you are unsuitable to return, your children are unrecognizable, you belong nowhere." (336)

After Irie interjects a comforting: "Oh, that's not true, surely," Samad continues:

"And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie . . . and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?"

As Samad described this dystopia with a look of horror, Irie was ashamed to find that the land of accidents sounded like *paradise* to her. Sounded like freedom. (337)

In this contrast between the first and second generation, between Samad's dialogue and Irie's thoughts, the narrative voice steps into the background to allow the two

perspectives to play against each other—to show Samad’s despair, and Irie’s perspective, in which to be unbound by essentialist or deterministic narratives about roots seems “like freedom,” and to create empathy for both. For although Irie’s perspective is completely different from Samad’s, she does not challenge him, but rather “squeezed his hand and nodded vigorously, trying to ward off his tears. What else could she tell him but what he wanted to hear?” (337). Like Samad in his encounter with Mad Mary, Irie is positioned in this encounter as an interlocutor—a listener who takes the other’s concerns seriously and attempts to respond with empathy and compassion. It is in such encounters that the comic characterization is balanced with thoughtful consideration of the various issues of “multiculturalism”—which are, as the narrative shows, more deeply rooted, more historically engrained, and more complex than simplistic narratives of “diversity” would suggest.

One of the more comic elements of the novel is the portrayal of the Chalfen family, white English liberals with whom Irie, Millat, and Magid become involved. Perhaps the most comic character is the mother, Joyce, whom Wood refers to as the perfect liberal, “who believes she is right about everything,” and whose beliefs about others are revealed to be less about actual acceptance and more about one’s own idea of oneself, showing how “tolerance” supports a view in which others remain “other” to dominant liberal notions of normalcy.⁷⁵ Because of Joyce’s interference in Millat’s life in

⁷⁵ Dialogue and free indirect discourse from Joyce’s perspective are part of the novel’s critique of white liberal discourse, including, for instance, in the following passage, in which Neena, Alsana’s niece, and her girlfriend Maxine go to dinner at the Chalfen’s:

Now, it wasn’t that Joyce was a homophobe. She liked gay men. And they liked her. She had even inadvertently amassed a little gay fan club at the university, a group of men who saw her as a kind of Barbra Streisand/Bette Davis/Joan Baez hybrid and met once a month to cook her dinner and admire her dress sense. So Joyce couldn’t be homophobic.

particular, Alsana sees Joyce as an enemy, one who is taking her sons away from her. One day Joyce pays Alsana a visit and Alsana, having ignored Joyce for as long as possible, allows her to come in after she says, through the front door, “I’m not here for my health. Whether you want me to be *involved* or not, I *am*, you see? I *am*” (363). And despite Alsana’s irritation about Joyce’s interference in the lives of Millat and Magid, it is Joyce’s use of the word “involved” that makes Alsana pause her work to reflect:

Involved. At least that was the right word, Alsana reflected [...]. Sometimes, here in England, especially at bus stops and on daytime soaps, you heard people say “We’re *involved* with each other,” as if this were a most wonderful state to be in, as if one chose it and enjoyed it. Alsana never thought of it that way. *Involved* happened over a long period of time, pulling you in like quicksand. *Involved* is what befell the moon-face Alsana Begum and the handsome Samad Miah one week after they’d been pushed into a Delhi breakfast room together and informed they were to marry. *Involved* was the result when Clara Bowden met Archie Jones at the bottom of some stairs. [...] Involved is neither good nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, of empires and expansion, of living in each other’s pockets . . . one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved. [...] Alsana was no dummy when it came to the Modern Condition. She watched the talk shows, all day long she watched the talk shows—*My wife slept with my brother. My mother won’t stay out of my boyfriend’s life* [...] The years pass, and the mess accumulates and here we are. Your brother’s sleeping

But gay women . . . something confused Joyce about gay women. It wasn’t that she disliked them. She just couldn’t *comprehend* them. Joyce understood why men would love men; she had devoted her life to loving men, so she knew how it felt. But the idea of women loving women was so far from Joyce’s cognitive understanding of the world that she couldn’t *process* it. The idea of them. She just didn’t *get it*. God knows, she’d made the effort. During the seventies she dutifully read *The Well of Loneliness* and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (which had a small chapter); more recently she had read and watched *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, but none of it did her any good. (288-9)

Joyce, after sitting in silence, “staring at the two of them over the first course,” ends up blurting out: “Do you use each other’s breasts as pillows?” (290), and, in her self-certain liberal fashion, goes on to say: “It’s just, in a lot of Indian poetry, they talk about using breasts for pillows, downy breasts, pillow breasts. I just—just—just wondered, if white sleeps on brown, or, as one might expect, brown sleeps on white? Extending the—the—the—pillow metaphor, you see, I was just wondering which . . . way . . .” (290)

In a similarly comic and oblivious way, when Joyce first meets Millat, she says, referring to her son Oscar: “You’ll stay for dinner, won’t you? [...] Oscar really wants you to stay. Oscar loves having strangers in the house, he finds it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers! Don’t you Oscar?” (271). Both of these passages highlight the racist and homophobic assumptions that underlie Joyce’s “liberal” viewpoint.

with my ex-wife's niece's second cousin. *Involved*. Just a tired, inevitable fact. Something in the way Joyce said it, *involved*—wearied, slightly acid—suggested to Alsana that the word meant the same thing to her. An enormous web you spin to catch yourself. (363)

The interaction between Joyce and Alsana in this encounter is based on a shared concern for Alsana's sons and, as in Samad's encounter with Mad Mary and Samad's conversation with Irie, it is shared concerns that create connection across different—and even antagonistic—perspectives. In these moments of connection across difference, the narrative exposes the way in which it is recognition of the other's humanity—in all of its flaws and failures—that enables such connection. Each of these conversations is also ultimately a conversation about belonging: Mad Mary's commentary on the impossibility of belonging to a nation that has historically enslaved Africans and colonized Indians; Samad's expression of an immigrant's hopes and disillusionment for belonging to the colonizer's nation; and Alsana's consideration of what it means to be “involved” in each other's lives in “the mess” of the contemporary world. Each conversation simultaneously highlights what might be called each character's comic flaws and the seriousness of their concerns about how to live with each other in the “involved” state of the postcolonial, multicultural world. While each passage balances comic characterization with serious dialogue and introspective free indirect discourse, the narrative also uses repetition and italicization to highlight the difficulties and possibilities of connection across difference: Mad Mary's repetition of “WHAT'S DE SOLUTION?”, Samad's repetition of “Who would want to stay?”, and Alsana's repetition of the word “involved” each suggest the need for reflection upon these questions, as well as demonstrate that simplistic understandings of “diversity” and the myth of “Happy Multicultural Land” (384) are not

adequate to the complexities and realities of everyday, lived, human experience in an increasingly connected world. The use of italics, like the use of repetition, both of which are characteristic of Smith's style throughout the novel, creates emphasis that is simultaneously comic and critical, offering insight and demanding reflection: the italicization of the words "*recognition*," "*fellow traveler*," "*prophet*," "*far away*," "*belonging*," "*accident*," "*paradise*," and "*involved*" is at once comic, as it creates a sense of drama verging on melodrama⁷⁶ in each character's dialogue and perspective, and reflective, as it highlights unresolved issues of diaspora, migration, community, and belonging in the postcolonial, multicultural world. While Wood characterizes this style as "hysterical" in its comic elements, and thus lacking the seriousness necessary for the moral responsibility of the realist novel, I am arguing that Smith's use of comic elements functions as an experimental and ethical engagement with the norms of the realist novel so as to enable reflection, rather than as mere enforcement of normative morality. In this way, Smith queers narrative norms so as to engage more deeply with the ethical potential of the realist novel. Smith's characters, rather than being caricatures, are flawed and it is in allowing for these flaws—sometimes comic, sometimes tragic—that Smith challenges the rationalist basis of the coherent liberal individual that underlies normative notions of

⁷⁶ Melodrama is a useful term here to characterize the exaggeration of the comic and tragic elements of characters and situations in Smith's novels. However, whereas in conventional melodrama, the exaggeration of certain character traits, often realized in stereotypes, and the creation of sensational situations or conflicts among characters is supposed to lead to heightened emotional responses in readers, Smith, as I am arguing, experiments with comic, dramatic, and melodramatic elements, playing with the conventions of the realist novel, so as to produce reflection, rather than simple moral lessons. One of the most accomplished practitioners of melodrama, filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, is an excellent example of how the conventions of melodrama can be used for the purposes of queering normative ways of thinking and being in the world, and to challenge the conventions of narrative and realism so as to produce reflection, rather than simple emotional responses or moral lessons.

character development, and allows for an ethical expansion of empathy in the realist novel.

“A Certain Commitment”: *The Autograph Man* and the Ethics of the Everyday

She hopes for nothing except fine weather and a resolution. She wants to end properly, like a good sentence.

- Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man*

Smith’s attention to structure in *White Teeth* is highlighted by the careful division of the novel into four sections, each of which is titled by the name (or names, in the case of the fourth section) of a particular character, two dates, indicating a past and present time in the lives of those characters and, in most cases, their ancestors, addressing histories and presents that are intertwined throughout the five chapters of each section. With titles playfully referencing popular culture (such as “The Miseducation of Irie Jones”) and highlighting the notion of “roots” in discourses of ethnicity and race (several chapters are titled “The Root Canals of” a particular character), the structure of the novel supports its comic tone and its exploration of “multicultural” issues. While in *White Teeth*, the connection between structure and content is easily made, in *The Autograph Man*, the relationship between form and content is perhaps more complex, if not simply more unusual. Also structured in four sections, *The Autograph Man* begins with a Prologue, set in the past of the protagonist Alex-Li’s childhood, when he is twelve and his father takes him and his friends to a wrestling match, where he meets a boy who becomes one of his close friends, and where his father suffers a heart attack and dies. The next two sections, which comprise the bulk of the book, are structured, respectively, by

two different spiritual paths, the Jewish Kabbalah and the Zen path of realization, and are entitled “Book One: Mountjoy, The Kabbalah of Alex-Li Tandem” and “Book Two: Roebling Heights, The Zen of Alex-Li Tandem.” The final section of the novel is a three-page epilogue, a Kaddish for Alex-Li’s father, which simultaneously resists closure as it circles back to the novel’s beginning, offering the potential for healing from grief, as well as a meditation on human mortality.

After the novel’s prologue, Book One begins with Alex waking up after a seventy-two hour drug-induced haze and, deciding that the “[n]on-violent light” (45) of the day holds no threat to him, he opens his blinds and sees his neighbourhood, awash in morning light, a view that brings the holy into the everyday:

On the horizon a spindly church steeple had been etched by a child over a skyline perfectly blue and flatly coloured in. To the left of that sat the swollen cupola of a mosque, described with more skill. So people were off to see God, then, this morning. All of that was still happening. Alex smiled, weakly. He wished them well. (46)

This first encounter with the adult Alex in Book One raises two of the novel’s primary themes: its concern with worship and the path to God and self, as well as the mediated nature of perspective and reality in postmodernity, as, to Alex, the view from his window looks like a drawing, not reality. The flaws and failures of Alex’s perspective are central to the ethics of the novel, as his failure to connect with others is one of the results of his flawed perspective, which is, the novel suggests, the result of the mediated nature of reality and human interaction in the postmodern world.

Alex’s flawed perspective is also connected to his spiritual path, as faith and the question of one’s relationship with the divine are also at issue in the novel, at the level of form, as well as at the level of content. One evening, Alex joins his friend Adam in a

spiritual practice, involving marijuana and the Kabbalah, which allows Adam to feel his connection with the divine, but leaves Alex in his typically disconnected state. As Alex looks at the paintings on Adam's walls of "a crude Kabbalistic diagram, ten circles in strange formation," "known as the Path of the Spheres,"⁷⁷, as well as the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, "The Path of Letters" (95), the following passage highlights Alex's ambivalent pursuit of the spiritual path:

As far as this sort of thing goes, they were done very well, Adam having a real ability with a paintbrush. Staring at them for hours in silence, though: that takes a certain commitment. The Journey to God. It is very long. It is quite dull. And always at the moment when Alex was feeling ready to switch on the television and give it up, Adam would begin to visualize his spine as a palm leaf. Off he would go from there, travelling through the spheres, losing himself. But for Alex there was no merging, no loss of self. He didn't understand this idea of unity in nothingness. That sort of thing was beyond him. He felt no magic. Just the thick useless marijuana fug, staring at the letters, sensing nothing much, except vague anthropomorphisms: didn't that one look like a man waving his fist? A crown? Half a menorah? A table? A sleeping foetus? A long-haired sprite? (96)

Throughout the novel, Alex's spiritual ambivalence is in conversation with the spirituality of his friends, and in particular with Adam's personal, devotional relationship with God. The search for God is always, the narrative suggests, also a search for self, and thus the question of identity is also necessarily a spiritual question, as this description of Alex's consideration of his friend demonstrates:

Adam laughs and disappears and Alex looks after him, at the space where Adam has been. He feels a deep love. Also a kind of awe, something like: now, wait an ugging minute, *how did that happen?* Handsome, bright, enlightened, thin – what happened to that fat weird

⁷⁷ These are described as representing, simultaneously, "the ten holy spheres, each containing a divine attribute," "the ten branches on the tree of Life, each showing an aspect of divine power," "the ten names of God, ten ways in which he is made manifest," "the ten body parts of Adam, the first man," "The Ten Commandments," "ten globes of light from which the world was made," and "the ten faces of the king" (93).

freak Black Jew kid? Who lurched from one ill-fitting ‘identity’ to another every summer; going through hippiedom, grunge, gangsta-lite, various *rootsisms* (Ebonics, Repatriation, Rastafarianism), Anglo-philias, Americanization, afros, straightened, corn-rowed, shaved, baggy jeans, tight jeans, white girls, black girls, Jew girls, Goy girls, conservatism, Conservatism, socialism, anarchism, partying, drugging, hermiting, schizing, rehabbing – how did he get from there to *this*? How did he get so *happy*?

Adam will say *God*, of course. [...] Yes, Adam will say God. Alex, on the other hand, is more inclined to say *weed*. Alex favours the argument: *marijuana*. Maybe, in truth, it is a split between the two, something like 60/40. (129)

As in *White Teeth*, the italics in this passage create a simultaneously comic and contemplative perspective, as the italicized words suggest that happiness and spiritual ease can arise from marijuana, as well as a consistent, devotional, and individual relationship with God. While passages like these seem to poke fun at the spiritual path and question the very possibility of a connection with the divine in an arguably postmodern way, the narrative reveals Alex’s inability to form or sustain connection—human or divine—as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of postmodernity. While Alex seems to flounder without direction, the structure of the novel balances his seeming inability to connect and find meaning in his life by suggesting that Alex-Li, like any other human being, is always already on a path of meaning and connection. In Books One and Two, each chapter is structured by one aspect of the spiritual path: in the first, each chapter is titled after one aspect of God, such as presence, foundation, eternity, beauty, and in the second, each chapter is a step on the Zen path of realization, beginning with “The Search for the Bull,” and moving through steps including perceiving, catching, and taming the bull, before the final steps of realization, “Both Self and Bull Transcended,”

“Reaching the Source,” and “In the World,” steps that correspond in subtle ways to Alex’s wordly path.

While Alex’s wordly pursuit, at the level of plot, is of Kitty Alexander’s autograph, the structural framing of the two main parts of the novel by the Jewish Kabbalah and the ten steps on the Zen path toward enlightenment suggest that Alex’s worldly path is underwritten by his spiritual path. Although at the level of plot, Alex’s path in the novel seems to be a simple pursuit and attainment of Kitty Alexander’s autograph—and, as it turns out, of Kitty Alexander herself—it is his path to himself and toward a more meaningful existence that underlies the narrative. As noted, the failure of Alex’s perception is a primary means through which the critique of postmodernity, as well as the possibility for meaning in an increasingly simulated world, is staged. The first passage of Book One, above, and his experience with Adam and his paintings highlight Alex’s well-wishing to those on a spiritual path, as well as his own seeming inability to connect to the spiritual in the everyday, and this is primarily portrayed as a problem of vision, as Alex sees his neighbourhood as if it were “etched by a child,” and can only see “vague anthropomorphisms” in Adam’s paintings. The failure of Alex’s vision is not only a failure to connect to the divine in everyday life, it is also a failure to recognize beauty in the world. Alex’s confused sense of beauty and the divine in the world is described in the following passage:

Alex believed in that God chip in the brain, something created to process and trigger wonderment. It allows you to see beauty, to uncover beauty in the world. But it’s not so well designed. It’s a chip that has its problems. Sometimes it confuses a small man with a bad moustache and a uniform for an image of the infinite; sometimes an almond-eyed girl on a big screen for the stained-glass window in a church. (119)

Alex's confusion is not only aesthetic, but also spiritual, and it is not a confusion confined to just Alex, as his obsession with the seemingly divine perfection of Kitty Alexander—the “almond-eyed girl on a big screen”—is juxtaposed with almost an entire nation of people being convinced by Hitler's campaign. This juxtaposition suggests the social and political problematics of the aesthetic, a suggestion that will be further developed in *On Beauty*.

At issue in Alex's pursuit of a more meaningful existence and sense of self is his relationship with his girlfriend, Esther, and the narrative highlights the difficulty of establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships in the media-saturated postmodern world, particularly in a world dominated by the images and narratives of Hollywood's culture machine. Alex's attachment to Esther is described in the following terms: “she was as familiar to him as Mountjoy. He was capable of thinking of her in that very way – as a kind of wallpaper that he did not notice until a spotlight is thrown on it” (99). And it is the “spotlight” of other people's admiration of her beauty that enables Alex to see her clearly again: “if a friend of Alex from some unconnected world – work, college – met her for the first time and commented on her beauty, only then did he re-realize it. Re-realize? But what other word for it?” (99). Alex's view of love is one that objectifies the object of desire, a view that is facilitated by the image-making machine of Hollywood cinema:

He didn't believe in therapy; he could do it himself. Yes, he imagined his love on a screen in front of a preview audience; he saw them watching her and ticking the boxes. Yes, he wanted his love at a distance, physically close but in some other way hard to reach. The stranger's initial impression of his love – as an African princess, or the look-alike of this or that actress – appealed to him in a way that her various realities could not. He wanted to meet her for the first time, over and over. He wanted to

always be at the beginning of the movie – not in the car park but in the classroom. He was in awe of her beauty and he never wanted to lose that awe. Yes, Doctor, yes. I want to be her fan. (99-100)

Alex's desire to objectify Esther is part of his problematic aesthetics—an understanding of beauty that fails to see the humanity of women. When Adam asks Alex to explain his obsession with Kitty, Alex responds by explaining his problematic understanding of beauty and of women:

'She is the most beautiful thing,' says Alex sheepishly, 'that I have ever seen. That's it. I know that doesn't mean anything to you.'

'I think beauty, real beauty, is the realization of the divine on earth. A fresh-cut lawn. A canyon. A clean crack in the pavement. You're just talking about sex.'

'Look, I like trees too,' sighs Alex. 'And mountains. I like all that stuff. But all I'm saying is that *beauty in women* is the realization of the divine in *human* life.' (137)

Alex's belief that the divine is realized in humanity through female beauty is shown, through Alex's relations with both Esther and Kitty, to be an aesthetic fallacy and ethical failure, as it only leads to an objectification of women, through which women's humanity is denied, while their beauty is worshipped.

When Alex meets Kitty, his fantasies about her encounter her real, actual, living self, and even while Alex tries to maintain fantasies of her, she refuses to conform to his ideals and cinematic projections. Discovering that Kitty has been living secluded from the world because of her obsessive and deceitful manager, Alex concocts a rescue fantasy in which he will save her and, while his plan ultimately works out—he sells her autograph and various memorabilia for her, giving her financial security so that she can live how she wants to—she refuses to allow his cinematically-derived melodramatics:

It is 5 a.m. In a passionate, dramatic gesture, he stands up in his grey underwear that refuses to conform to the passion and drama of the moment

(stuck all to one leg and disappearing up the back) and tells her that she must come with him and leave this place because there's no other way for her to be free, and besides, he has a plan. He's been thinking of this speech for an hour in the dark.

'We talk at breakfast, hmm?' she says as neutrally as she can, turning to find him kneeling by her side in an artificial panic, and with a cast to his face that she has played opposite, many times. 'We sleep now. It's terribly late – too late to play a B-movie.'

She rolls away from him and grips the coverlet. Her fingers have gone cold. Even when making those films, even as a know-nothing girl, she had slept badly on the suspicion of just how many of these people, these movie-goers, take a line, take a look and use it on a loved one. (310)

Kitty's concern that the lines she delivered in her films would be used "on a loved one" is played out in two arguments between Alex and Esther, the first of which occurs when Esther finds another woman's stockings in Alex's couch and she tells him: "don't use the phrase *innocent explanation*. Or, *she's just a friend*. Don't tell me you'd *never do anything to hurt me*. Please. Please try not to say anything you've heard on television" (350). And, in a later argument about the same thing, Alex has the urge to touch her, "to draw her into him. To save them both from all this second-rate dialogue, the stuff that love engenders, the stuff of lovers" (398-9). As the argument continues, the narrator describes a bleak view of relationships: "And nothing about this argument was news. They had been performing variations on it for the last six years. It ran and ran. This is what relationships *are*; stage shows that run and run until all life is drained from them and only the gestures remain" (399).⁷⁸ The emptiness of conversation, of gestures, and of

⁷⁸ In another passage, the repetitions that relationships enact are described humorously in an interaction between Lovelear and Dove, two of Alex's colleagues:

He was so familiar with the dialogue between Lovelear and Dove that he no longer heard the specific words themselves but only their vibrations, their constant ringing bass note. He knew, for instance [...] that underneath the words, ugly and amateurish, there was a beautiful elegy going on which never changed. Every conversation between these two men was actually the same conversation, different words, same meaning. A sort of modern Kaddish, a religious chant:

relationships themselves is a central concern of the novel, one that does not resolve.⁷⁹

When Alex asks Esther, dramatically: “Loudly. Repeatedly. Is this it? Is this it? The End?,” she responds: “‘We’re both still alive, still here,’ [...] ‘The end looks more . . . bloody. Dagger, vial of poison, all of that. You know the drill. We’re all right for today, OK? Beyond that – I just don’t know, Tandem. We’ll have to see, really’” (399-400).

Ultimately, it is Alex’s confrontation with the reality of human mortality that alters his perspective and raises the possibility for a transformed sense of self and authentic relations with others. In the chapter “Reaching the Source,” the final step of realization before the realized being engages with the world from an enlightened perspective, Alex arises one night from a dream and goes to his room, where Esther and Kitty are sleeping, and, in a complicated passage, he recognizes their mortality:

You watch too many films is one of the great modern sentences. It has in it a hint of understanding regarding what we were before and what we

LOVELEAR: *I am an American, in this world and the next, and you are not, and will never be.*

DOVE: *You are an American, in this world and the next, and I am not, and will never be.*
(105)

⁷⁹ Jonathan Sell, in an article entitled “Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?,” argues that Smith, in *White Teeth*, “represents a break from the traditional retrospection of postcolonial writers” and “offers a more positive model of identity,” one in which “identities [...] are no longer hung-up on historical injustices or immersed in sombre, unproductive introspection” (33). In *The Autograph Man*, Sell argues, “for Smith the issue of identity in a multicultural society has become a non-issue; or, if it is an issue at all, it is so only on the plane of the individual where, divested of cultural significance, emancipated from history, identity is an index of personal individuality, not of racial, ethnic or cultural affiliation, and comprises an endless series of reinventions” (34). Aligned with what Sell calls “Smith’s metaphysics of chance” (35), and in opposition to essentialist notions of identity, gesture functions as a temporary representation of identity, through which “identity becomes a socially pragmatic strategy” (37). This notion of “identity as gesture” is one in which “[i]dentity is not a straitjacket we are corseted into by history; it is a space we can play in and whose contours change from one moment to the next in response to the subject’s relation to the context he or she happens to be in at any particular time” (37). While Sell’s argument attends to Smith’s concern with the postmodern understanding of identity as fluid and constructed, it is important to also attend to the way in which her novels reflect upon questions of belonging, community, and ethics in relation to identity. Such reflection, I am arguing, challenges a simplistic understanding of Smith’s work as a postmodern celebration of identity as “a space we can play in.”

have become. Of few people has it been more true than Alex-Li Tandem, Autograph Man extraordinaire. And therefore, suitably, *rightfully*, his first thought was: *they're dead*. That's it. They're dead. That idea (though it passed through him quicker than the sentence can be said) hollowed him out. It wrestled him and won. And then the next second: *No, no, of course they're not*. Parents will know this feeling, the before and the after. The horror, the climb-down from the horror. But after this, at least for Alex, there is the extension. The extension is lethal. It understands that this is just a time lapse. Because there was nothing wrong with that diagnosis except time.

They were not.

But they would be.

All his people, all his loves. (391)

It is in this moment, in this realization of human mortality that Alex “reaches the source” and his understanding—his perspective—shifts. After this moment of realization, Alex “said his Kaddish without gesture or formality – just a wet song into his hands” (392). The next day, Alex “feel[s] something like renewed hope” and, after resolving the sale of her autographs with Kitty and finding not resolution, but “suspension” (400) with Esther, Alex goes to meet a rabbi about his father’s Kaddish, which his friends have urged him to perform, and which serves as the novel’s epilogue. The rabbi describes Kaddish as an “informal” prayer that “is being *cried out for* by the people as a *need*, as a human need” (403-4). It is not only informal, but “intimate,” a “one-on-one” conversation that the rabbi describes as “*quality time*” (404), a “gift” that is being given to the dead (403), and “an acceptance of divine judgement” (405). In response to the rabbi’s description, Alex argues that he doesn’t “*feel* anything” (404) and, moreover, that he doesn’t accept it—he doesn’t accept the loss of his father’s death, stating: ““It doesn’t work for me. To me, it’s obscene. All the suffering’” (407). The rabbi tells Alex it’s okay and instructs him to just show up and perform the Kaddish, as a gift.

Later that day, in the chapter “In the World,” Alex discusses his concern about his lack of feeling with Adam, stating: ““To me it’s a gesture, you know? Nothing more”” (410), and then decides that meditation and prayer are “beyond him, no, more than that: he didn’t want them. He wanted to be in the world and take what came with it, endings local and universal, full stops, periods, looks of injured disappointment and the everyday war. He *liked* the everyday war. He was taking that with fries. To go” (410). This passage seems to suggest that Alex remains unchanged, his perspective decidedly entrenched in a postmodern, consumer-capitalist (“with fries”), liberal individualist view of “the everyday war” of human existence, and he argues for a seemingly pleasure-seeking, materialist understanding of goodness, stating that the only good is “*feeling good*. [...] that’s what good *is*. [...] It’s not a symbol of something else. Good has to be felt. That’s good *in the world*” (411). However, the narrative structure and narrative voice balance Alex’s dialogue, suggesting that Alex’s decision to be “in the world” is part of his spiritual path, an ethical engagement with the everyday from a place of realization. And as “sunshine hit the blinds and divided the room into paragraphs of dusty light and sentences of shadow,” the narrator notes: “If anything is going to make you religious, it’s this stuff. Timing. Coincidence,” while a shift in Alex’s perspective is described as follows: “His mind was now – as the teachers like to say – elsewhere. The sun had washed the wall and made things look different. Feel different. That’s the problem with the sun” (412).

Part of Smith’s experimentation with the novel form is her refusal to write endings—endings that satisfy a reader’s desire for closure, endings that conform to linear, coherent norms of narrative and character development. Part of a critique of such norms

is established in the narrative of *The Autograph Man*, as Alex watches his favourite Kitty Alexander movie for the umpteenth time, and the narrator notes: “It is called a happy ending. The miracle of cinema is how rarely the convention of the happy ending is broken. The bigger miracle is that the convention of the ending is never broken at all” (162). The novel has no ending, only an epilogue that is Alex’s Kaddish for his father. And it cannot be definitively said whether Alex achieves any sort of realization, or whether his relationship with Esther can be healed. There is a hint in the narrative, that Alex’s way of seeing—an important trope about vision, aesthetics, and ethics that will be further developed in *On Beauty*—has changed over the course of his search: when he returns from New York, his view of Mountjoy (to which he has compared Esther, in its familiarity) is changed: “The trees, newly cut back, thrust their twisted fists into the air. Alex could see that it was Mountjoy, only it was outlined and strange to him, more sharply defined, as if he had just left an optician” (329). And perhaps it is this subtle, potential shift in perspective, by which things seem “different” and “strange,” that is held out, offered by the narrative, as a gift—not closure, nor conclusion, but an offering and an invitation, an ethical gesture of engagement in the world.

“The Ever Present Human Hint”: *On Beauty* and the Limits of Liberalism

If *The Autograph Man* begins to address the ethics of aesthetics and perception, and, in particular, how aesthetic conceptions of beauty have the potential to objectify and dehumanize when used in relation to human beings, *On Beauty* can be read as a full and focused engagement with these issues. Through the varied opinions of its characters, the novel stages a conversation about aesthetics and, underlying this conversation, is also a

critique of the often-misguided liberal notions upon which aesthetic ideologies are based. Howard, for instance, is the quintessential liberal academic, an Art History professor whose notions of art are based on a Marxist and post-structuralist critique of “genius” and of the work itself. One of Howard’s students, Victoria Kipps, the daughter of his academic rival, Monty Kipps, and the former love-object of his son Jerome, describes his class using the “shorthand” of “tomatoes,” invented by Wellington students:

‘But *your* class – your class is a cult classic. I *love* your class. Your class is all about never *ever* saying *I like the tomato*. That’s why so few people take it – I mean, no offence, it’s a compliment. They can’t handle the rigour of never saying *I like the tomato*. Because that’s the worst thing you could ever do in your class, right? Because the tomato’s not there to be *liked*. That’s what I *love* about your class. It’s properly intellectual. The tomato is just totally revealed as this phoney construction that can’t lead you to some higher truth – nobody’s pretending the tomato will save your life. Or make you happy. Or teach you how to live or *ennoble* you or be *a great example of the human spirit*. Your tomatoes have got nothing to do with *love* or *truth*. They’re not fallacies. They’re just these pretty pointless tomatoes that people, for totally selfish reasons of their own, have attached cultural – I should say *nutritional* weight to.’ (312)

The view of art upheld in Howard’s class, in which the notion of the value of the work of art is critiqued in a rather cynical way, is an anti-aesthetic perspective that the novel challenges and reveals to be an ethical failure. While students like Victoria and Howard’s own daughter Zora are portrayed as eager undergraduates, enthusiastic about critical theory and critique for the sake of critique, the novel consistently questions this perspective and suggests its moral and ethical emptiness.

A staged critique of the academic culture that thrives in a class such as Howard’s—a class that most of us in the humanities recognize—occurs in a passage describing the experience of a student named Katie, who only appears this one time in the novel, in Howard’s class on Rembrandt. Katie’s passionate enthusiasm for art and

literature are described as the narrator notes: “Katie is proficient both in the arts and science, but her heart – if this makes sense – has always resided in the left side of her brain. Katie loves the arts” (249). The narrator describes how Katie “used to dream about one day attending a college class about Rembrandt with other intelligent people who loved Rembrandt and weren’t ashamed to express this love,” and yet “[a] lot of the time she felt the professor to be speaking a different language from the one she has spent sixteen years refining” (250). Katie prepares for class, studying the two pictures that will be discussed, one of which, *Seated Nude*, “makes Katie cry” (251). In this picture, of “a misshapen woman, naked, with tubby little breasts and a hugely distended belly”—a picture that initially “shock[s]” Katie and, the narrator notes, has “repulsed” “[m]any famous men”—Katie begins “to notice all the exterior, human information, not explicitly *in* the frame, but implied by what we see there”:

That loose belly that has known many babies, that still fresh face that has lured men in the past and may yet lure more. Katie – a stringbean, physically – can even see her own body contained in this body, as if Rembrandt were saying to her, and to all women: ‘For you are of the earth, as my nude is, and you will come to this point too, and be blessed if you feel as little shame, as much joy, as she!’ This is what a woman *is*: unadorned, after children and work and age, and experience – *these are the marks of living*. So Katie feels. And all this from cross-hatching (Katie makes her own comics and knows something of cross-hatching); all these intimations of mortality from an inkpot! (251-2)

The next day Katie arrives at class “excited” and “determined this time, *determined* to be one of the three or four people who dare speak in Dr Belsey’s class,” and, in a hilariously apt parody of post-structuralist, anti-aesthetic discourse, Howard begins the class by saying “‘What we’re trying to . . . *interrogate* here [...] is the mytheme of artist as autonomous individual with privileged insight into the human” (252). Student

observations—made by Victoria, a student named Mike (“the young man with the T-shirt that says BEING on one side and TIME on the other”), and Zora—include: “Its subject *is* painting itself. It’s a painting about painting” and “I don’t understand how you’re using ‘painting’ there?” and “You’re already assuming the etching is merely ‘debased painting’. So there’s your problematic, right there,” and, ultimately “the class escapes Katie” (253). By using Katie’s perspective, first leading the reader through Katie’s encounter with the art object, an encounter that allows for a *human* reaction, that allows for emotion and identification and ultimately arrives at a feeling of connection and connectedness that is based on the shared mortality of all human beings, the narrative demonstrates the hollowness, the meaninglessness of the class’s discussion.⁸⁰ In contrast to Katie’s honest, unmediated encounter with the art object, the class discussion—a discussion that fails to address the art object itself—is shown to be an empty argument posing as thoughtful critique and this, the narrative suggests, is a failure of liberal academic discourse.

⁸⁰ Kathleen Wall’s analysis of Howard’s art class also notes the way in which the language of Marxist and post-structuralist theory facilitates a critical dialogue that does not attend to the work itself, and argues: “This is not to say that interrogating what we value and why we value it isn’t a crucial part of the conversation about beauty and art, simply that one ought to *see* what one is interrogating” (768). Wall notes that each character “can be described in terms of his or her attitudes toward beauty,” and argues that, “in turn, these attitudes have their corollary in the character’s ethical conduct” (763). In her analysis of Howard, Wall describes the way in which the academic de-centering of the human leads to unethical conduct in the world: “How does a man who believes the human isn’t central conduct himself in the most intimate relationships? The answer is – selfishly and cynically” (769). Whereas Scarry’s essay emphasizes the “long tradition of experiencing beauty as a ‘greeting’” and how “such greeting ‘incites deliberation’ and ‘invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation’,” Howard, Wall explains, both “metaphorically and literally [...] keeps turning away from the act of deliberation or the movement beyond the self, choosing to hide instead in questions, in the process of interrogation” (770). Significantly, Wall argues that Howard’s objectification of women precludes the ethical possibility of aesthetic appreciation. Citing Scarry, Wall notes: “Something seen as an object – even an aesthetic object – no longer has the potential to evoke a profound response that is a measure of our ability to respond to something beyond ourselves” and argues: “Because [Howard] has rejected the idea of the aesthetic as greeting and incitement to self-reflection, the beautiful has simply become reified” (773).

In another passage that reveals the emptiness of what poses as “critique” in academia and its effect on one’s sense of self, Zora, who is one of Wellington’s brightest students, is waiting for her poetry class outside of The Bus Stop, a Moroccan restaurant and “Wellington institution” (211) that hosts a bi-monthly Spoken Word night, and she feels the emptiness of being alone, and her need for people to ground her in her projected personality:

She found it difficult, this thing of being alone, awaiting the arrival of a group. She prepared a face – as her favourite poet had it – to meet the faces that she met, and it was a procedure that required time and forewarning to function correctly. In fact, when she was not in company it didn’t seem to her that she had a face at all . . . And yet in college, she was famed for being opinionated, a ‘personality’ – the truth was she didn’t take these public passions home, or even out of the room, in any serious way. She didn’t feel that she *had* any real opinions, or at least not in the way other people seemed to have them. Once the class was finished she saw at once how she might have argued the thing just as viciously and successfully the other way round; defended Flaubert over Foucault; rescued Austen from insult instead of Adorno. Was anyone ever genuinely attached to anything? She had no idea. It was either only Zora who experienced this odd impersonality or it was everybody, and they were all play-acting, as she was. (209-10)

While waiting for “real people,” Zora feels “existentially light” and thinks about “possible topics of conversation, a ragbag of weighty ideas she carried around in her brain to lend herself the appearance of substance” (210). Zora, who is influenced by her father’s liberal adherence to Marxist and post-structuralist theory, is shown to have the same ethical failure that arises from the aesthetic fallacy through which the beautiful is objectified. While Howard has an affair with the startlingly beautiful Victoria, Zora fails to see Carl—a talented street-poet who is invited to join her poetry class—as a human being, treating him simultaneously as a “case” in her petition for allowing non-Wellington students to attend Wellington classes and as an object of desire. Her

passionate engagement with the university's debates—headed by her father and Monty Kipps, in rival camps—about allowing non-Wellington students to attend Wellington classes is revealed to be based on her desire for Carl; rather than advocating for his place in the university because of her true belief in his talent and in the justice of his being able to attend, she objectifies Carl and her passionate liberal position is shown to be as empty as the “opinions” and arguments she makes in her classes. Her liberal crusade is shown to be self-serving, empty, in the service to her own desires, and damaging, in that it fails to see its subject as a human being: liberal discourse, in this instance, suffers the same ethical failure as aesthetic discourse applied to human beings, as it results in objectification.

While Howard and Monty battle it out in the public sphere of the university—Howard's liberalism versus Monty's conservative critique of liberalism—Kiki and Carlene, their wives, slowly become friends, and their friendship not only challenges the binarism of their husbands' ideological stances, it also suggests an alternative ethics and aesthetics.⁸¹ While it is possible to read Kiki and Carlene's friendship as positing an

⁸¹ The notion of an alternative aesthetics has been suggested by several critics in their analysis of *On Beauty*. Ulka Anjaria, in her essay “*On Beauty* and Being Postcolonial: Aesthetics and Form in Zadie Smith,” notes the “impasse” in considerations of “what role aesthetics might play in coming to terms with the inherently fractured nature of postcolonial belonging”—an “impasse [that] is more generally reflected in a critical silence in postcolonial theory surrounding issues of form and aesthetics” (35). Anjaria argues that *On Beauty* demonstrates “an alternative aesthetic world of what might be called ‘black beauty’” that is both “outside the centripetal pull of canon formation” as well as “outside the radar of [...] anti-aesthetic theories” (43), and suggests: “Postcolonial theory has made the argument for the inextricability of politics from the domesticated space of the novel as a partial response to the complicity of aesthetic normalization with colonial rule. [...] Smith's novel reasserts the partial autonomy of domestic life as a counter to its unthinking politicization, suggesting that a rejection of the aesthetic can be as destructive to an individual life as a wholehearted capitulation to it. It is in this that the novel makes its most radical claim for redemption of form and aesthetic sensibility in a postcolonial world in which the complicity of aesthetic norms with power and oppression has been so thoroughly exposed” (48-49). Susan Alice Fisher's “‘Gimme Shelter’: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*” provides an excellent analysis of the novel, in which she argues that Smith “urges us to reject binary paradigms and to connect across socially constructed differences so that we can see the full beauty of humanity” (107). Suggesting that “Smith signals the dangers of binary and

alternative—and specifically female—ethics that, as Susan Alice Fisher argues, “moves beyond the ideological stalemate that the men present” (110), to read the novel as aligning binary thinking with men and ethical relations, based on connection, with women would be to ignore the way in which Zora and Victoria, for instance, participate in dehumanizing acts, based on aesthetic fallacies.⁸² However, her relationship with Carlene does facilitate Kiki’s contemplation of aesthetics in a way that challenges Howard’s anti-aesthetics, and suggests, as in Katie’s contemplation of Rembrandt, the significance of *love* as the ethical component of aesthetics. In their first visit, Carlene asks Kiki if she likes her painting, by Hyppolite, of Maitresse Erzulie, a voodoo goddess whom Carlene describes as representing “love, beauty, purity, the ideal female and the moon” as well as “the *mystere* of jealousy, vengeance and discord” (175). When Kiki attempts “to remember a thesis of Howard’s, which she now wished to reproduce as her own for Carlene,” stating, uncertainly: “‘Because . . . we’re so binary, of course, in the way we think. We tend to think in opposites, in the Christian world. We’re structured like that – Howard always says that’s the trouble’,” Carlene offers a response that moves away from a theoretical perspective to a simpler, more direct encounter, stating: “‘That’s a clever way to put it. I like her parrots’” (175). Kiki, relieved, responds, “ ‘Good parrots. So, does she avenge herself on men?’,” a question that leads into a conversation in which “‘little mutual revelations reminded them of their common ground, and in this they walked

dehumanizing ideological divides” (109), Fisher argues that while “Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps represent the destructive divisions in the American academy and society” (109), the friendship between Kiki and Carlene allows them to “step outside their husbands’ limiting ideologies” (116).

⁸² Zora, as noted, objectifies Carl, both in her desire for him, and in her liberal petition for his inclusion in the university, while Victoria, perhaps more disturbingly, objectifies herself and her sexuality: in her sexual relations with Howard, she acts out pornographic fantasies in which she functions simply as the object of desire, in an alienated relationship with both herself and with Howard.

around leisurely, steering clear of anything that might prove an obstacle to easy movement” (178). The image of Erzulie, and their appreciation of it, enables direct connection with the art object, one that values its human (and, since she is a goddess, divine) elements, and, as Fisher argues, allows Smith “to envisage a world where the beauty of human connection valued by Carlene and Kiki can displace the destructive ‘binary’ paradigms that their husbands foment with their culture wars” (113). Rather than presenting a gendered alternative aesthetics, however (which would, unhelpfully, reproduce gendered binaries), this passage, as well as Kiki’s actions, as she begins to assert herself outside of Howard’s narrow ideological stance, suggest the way in which theory itself—and, in particular, liberal anti-aesthetic theories derived from Marxist and post-structuralist thought—functions to objectify and depersonalize art objects that might otherwise enable human connection and remind us of our “common ground.”

Kiki’s transformation over the course of the novel is perhaps the most complex challenge to liberalism, as it simultaneously deconstructs Howard’s failure to treat his own wife in an ethical way, and exposes the emptiness of his aesthetic opinions. Like Esther in *The Autograph Man*, Kiki confronts Howard’s failure of vision and understanding, his inability to see her clearly, which, the novel suggests, is the result of an aesthetic fallacy, which leads to objectification and ethical failure. While Kiki has gained a significant amount of weight, which Howard suggests, in a particularly painful moment, is the reason for his infidelity, others, including Claire and Victoria (with whom Howard has affairs), comment on her extraordinary beauty, demonstrating that it is Howard’s perspective that is at fault. Smith’s representation of Kiki has been debated by

critics as either reinforcing or challenging stereotypical images of black women,⁸³ yet it is Kiki's relationships with herself and with others over the course of the novel that are suggestive of an ethics and aesthetics that emphasize human connection. While in the beginning of the novel, Kiki has unquestioningly followed Howard's opinions and tastes, and allowed him to make decisions that include not having representational paintings in the house or celebrating Christmas, her thinking begins to change as she starts to question the ways in which Howard's views lead to dehumanizing relationships with the world and with others. At Carlene's funeral in London, Kiki at first views the church with "indignation," believing cynically that by holding the funeral in an ugly and uncomfortable church, "Monty wanted to prove he was a man of the people, as powerful men so often like to do – and at his wife's expense" (285). Then almost immediately, Kiki realizes the truth: "Here, in Willesden Green, in the little local church she had loved, Monty had brought the woman he loved, before a congregation who cared for her" (286). Kiki then "chastised herself over her first, typically Belseyian opinion," and wonders: "Had she become unable to recognize real emotion when it was right in front of her?" (286). Later in the novel, Kiki articulates a scathing critique of Howard's liberal position, arguing that he is "terrified of anyone who believes anything," noting that he can barely look at his own son, Jerome, because he is a Christian, and stating "we can't talk about

⁸³ Fisher, for instance, argues that Smith's "insistent descriptions of Kiki" function to "[link] her to others texts by African American women writers and, through these connections, [allow] Smith to undercut the stereotypes she sets up and to re-envision beauty—particularly that of black women" (111). Kiki can therefore "be read less as a stereotypical black earth mother, as white Wellington sees her, and more as a powerful woman who is defining her own reality away from the paradigms of racist and sexist America" (114). Tracey Walters argues that Smith uses the "mammy" stereotype in her representation of Kiki, suggesting that "Kiki's fat black body stands at the margins of white America's standard of beauty" (130), and arguing that "Smith shows how stereotypes in literature can also be used as a satirical device to expose racism, sexism, and other biases" (127).

anything seriously, everything's ironic, nothing's serious" (393). Further, she shows the dehumanizing effects of Howard's so-called opinions:

' . . . it's like after 9/11 when you sent that ridiculous e-mail round to everybody about Baudry, Bodra – '

'Baudrillard. He's a philosopher. His name is Baudrillard.'

'About simulated wars or whatever the fuck that was . . . And I was thinking: *What is wrong with this man?* I was *ashamed* of you. [...] this is *real*. This life. We're really here – this is really happening. Suffering is *real*. When you hurt people, it's *real*. [...].' (394)

Although Kiki stays with Howard after finding out about his affair with Claire, when she discovers his affair with Victoria, near the end of the novel, she leaves him. Just as Kiki undergoes a kind of transformation over the course of the novel, beginning to question and openly challenge her husband's opinions, the novel's ending holds out the possibility of reconciliation, as well as of transformation for Howard. It ends during a presentation Howard is giving on Rembrandt, in which he realizes he has forgotten his notes, and ends up flipping through each image until he reaches the last one, *Hendrickje Bathing*. Howard enlarges the image until "[t]he woman's fleshiness filled the wall" and the novel ends:

He looked out into the audience once more and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled. Howard looked back at the woman on the wall, Rembrandt's love, Hendrickje. Though her hands were imprecise blurs, paint heaped on paint and roiled with the brush, the rest of her skin had been expertly rendered in all its variety – chalky whites and lively pinks, the underlying blue of her veins and the ever present human hint of yellow, intimation of what is to come. (443)

The novel thus concludes with the recognition of the inevitability and universality of human mortality—"intimation of what is to come"—and with the potential for forgiveness (on Kiki's side), transformation (in Howard) and connection between them. And this potential, this offering, is held out by the aesthetic work as a gift of love. Rembrandt's painting of his beloved suggests, in this final passage of the novel, the gift

of human connection offered by the work of art, as well as how “all these intimations of mortality,” as Katie recognized in her aesthetic encounter, enable us to recognize, accept, and love each other, in our common humanity.

“Fine Attention”: Toward an Ethics of Reading

Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions, and some of the most interesting experiments of which it is capable are hidden in the bosom of common things.

- Henry James “The Art of Fiction”

While Wood claims Dickens as the primary influence on the contemporary style of writing of Smith and her contemporaries, it is E.M. Forster whom Smith frequently refers to as one of her favourite writers, “to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other,” as she states in the preface to *On Beauty*. In an article published in the *Guardian* in 2003, entitled “Love, Actually,” Smith theorizes Forster’s ethical, experimental engagement with the novel form, arguing for the value of his work and its ability to create empathy for other human beings, even—and perhaps especially—for those of us who are flawed, imperfect, and fail to know ourselves fully or even accurately. Smith’s argument for the ethical import of Forster’s work engages in a critical conversation about aesthetic value, and, specifically, about the ethical value of the novel form. Theorizing Forster’s “empathic efforts” in his creation of characters who are “always in a muddle,” and whom she describes as “chaotic, irrational human beings,” Smith argues for the “muddle” as “a deliberate ethical strategy” that contests a positivist, rationalist (and, I would argue, liberal individualist) understanding of the human as the basis for ethics. Comparing Forster to Austen, whose work greatly influenced his own,

Smith notes how “Austen’s positivist protagonists read situations, refine them, strip the irrelevant information from the significant, and proceed accordingly. They are good readers and as James Wood has noted, they encourage good reading from others. This is the great, humane basis of the English comic novel.” While such novels are based on the Aristotelian notion that “the training and refinement of feeling plays an essential role in our moral understanding,” Forster’s novels demonstrate “how hard it is to will oneself into a meaningful relationship with the world” and Forster “lends his empathy to those who fail to do so.” And thus, as “a study of the emotional, erratic and unreasonable in human life,” the muddle suggests “the belief that the true motivations of human agents are far from rational in character.”

Smith also connects the form of Forster’s novels to his ethics, noting how “his narrative structure is muddled also; impulsive, meandering, irrational.” Smith argues that it is in these “empathic efforts” that Forster “allow[s] his books to get all bent out of shape.” Believing that literary style is “akin to morality,” Forster felt that clarity of construction, “vivid characterization,” and “satisfactory patterning of the plot” were ethical failures, and his novels, in accordance with the tradition of the English comic novel, suggest that “consistency and moral enthusiasm” can lead to inflexibility and narrow-mindedness. Thus, in his portrayal of—and empathy for—“muddled” characters, Forster “[suggests] there might be some ethical advantage in not always pursuing a perfect and unyielding rationality.” Forster’s structure, Smith argues, echoes his “lack of moral enthusiasms,” noting that “his endings, in particular, are diminuendos, ambivalent trailings off, that seem almost passive.” As such, Smith argues, Forster’s “muddled style” suggests an alternative ethics, one in which “there are some goods in the world that

cannot be purely pursued rationally, we must also feel our way through them.” This, Smith notes, is a familiar “ethical procedure” in English literary thought, one which she traces to Keats’ notion of “Negative Capability”—“when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Forster’s muddle, Smith argues, is a narrative recasting of Keats’ ethical strategy, and, while she acknowledges that “Negative Capability is one of the creakiest concepts in the literary theory closet,” she also argues that it contains “a serious vision [...] of the truth of human relations,” one which “was complicated and made richer by the Freudian influence.” Forster, Smith notes, “is of the first literary generation to inherit the idea that our very consciousnesses are, at root, faulty and fearful, uncertain and mysterious” and, because of this, he “ushered in a new era for the English comic novel, one that includes the necessary recognition that the great majority of us are not like an Austen protagonist, would rather not understand ourselves, because it is easier and less dangerous.”

Smith argues that, in contrast to the rationalist self-understanding achieved by Austen’s characters, Forster posits “a mystic’s awakening to the world” and his “innovation” was that “he allowed the English comic novel the possibility of a spiritual and a bodily life, not simply to exist as an exquisitely worked game of social ethics but as a messy human concoction.” Forster, Smith argues, “expanded the comic novel’s ethical space,” “unbalancing its moral certainties,” and “letting more life in.” Smith situates her reading of Forster’s novels in opposition to a tradition in literary theory and criticism in which, following FR Leavis, the novel has been treated “with circumspection; as if it were not quite a novel, but rather a piece of social history, or an example of moral philosophy, or a mission statement, or a piece of public policy.” Recognizing that the

“emotive quality” of the novel was an anomaly in the university, literary study, as Smith notes, has “resolved not to speak of it much,” and has instead ensured that the novel “be treated rigorously and made relevant.” This is an academic context in which the notion of “value” has fallen out of fashion, the same context in which, as I have discussed, Gayatri Spivak has argued that literary critics have lost sight of the specificity and value of literary critical work. The notion of the value of literature and literary study has recently been taken up again by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, who has argued, “that literature is one of the places (when we read attentively) that we can have truly altruistic instincts, ‘genuine acknowledgement of the otherness of the other’.” While Nussbaum’s claim, her stake in what Smith describes as “the disputed mountain of literary theory,” is: “‘Great novels show us the worth and richness of plural qualitative thinking and engender in their readers a richly qualitative way of seeing’,” Smith posits her own claim, based on Henry James’s notion of “fine awareness,” Forster’s “muddle,” and Keats’ “Negative Capability,” a claim for an ethics of reading, which is: “When we read with fine attention, we find ourselves caring about people who are various, muddled, uncertain and not quite like us (and this is good).” It is in alignment with these claims of Nussbaum and Smith that I also read the claims of Gayatri Spivak, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Ngũgĩ wa-Thiongo, theorists who have, in the first decade of the new millennium, made claims for the unique significance of literature and literary study, claims that invite the possibility for speaking about notions of “value,” of “good,” and even, as Smith suggests, of “love” back into our conversations about literature. It is what Smith calls the “deep, experiential understanding of the bond between the ethical realm and the narrative act” that enables the possibility that we will, through our reading, become, as James argues, “richly

responsible,” and this, Smith suggests, “is the good that novels do, and the good that they are.”

Conclusion: “Nowhere If Not Here”: The Utopian Potential of Queer Narrative Form

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.

– Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation”

What we write about fiction is never an objective response to a text; it is always part of a bigger mythmaking — the story we are telling ourselves about ourselves. That story changes.

– Jeanette Winterson, NYT Book Review (Jan. 29, 2012)

As we have seen, questions of human collectivity and “a global approach to politics” (Chakrabarty “Four Theses” 222) are at issue in current considerations of postcolonial studies and its purpose and aims for the present and future in the contexts of globalization and climate change. The novel, I have been arguing, offers a site in which to challenge the values of liberal individualism and heteronormativity that underlie the narratives of progress, consumer capitalism, and development that have structured dominant modes of thought throughout the modern era. While Nancy Armstrong has convincingly shown that since its beginnings in the eighteenth-century, the novel’s primary task has been “the project of universalizing the individual subject” (10), and Susan Lanser has argued that when we attend to “the discursive project of regulating sexual subjectivity through the novel” (501), it becomes clear that “narrative form can function as sexual content, a reminder that both the history of the novel and the history of sexuality remain incomplete without attention to fictional form” (502), I argue that queer experimentation with narrative in the global novel form produces an ethical challenge to the limiting concepts of both liberal individualism and heteronormativity. Each of the

novels I examine in this study queers narrative form, and the form of the novel itself, to show the failure of the liberal individual subject, and to imagine alternative ways of being and understanding what it means to be human. This challenge to the liberal individual subject, a subject that is also fundamentally heteronormative, also queers the ideology of individual fulfillment that underlies the narratives of modern capitalist culture. In place of the heteronormative individual as the model of the human, a model that relies on notions of separation, competition and abjection, these novels imagine the human as inherently interconnected, and offer an ethical perspective that understands connection as the fundamental ground from which we engage with each other, our selves, and the planet.

The possibility of understanding of human beings as connected, and thus as collective, Armstrong has shown, was raised in gothic Victorian fiction only to be classified as monstrous. During the Victorian period, “what came to be known as British realism” effectively “proceeded to rationalize the residual elements of sensibility by ascribing them to a protagonist’s naivete or neurosis” (22) so that by the end of the nineteenth century “English readers had grown accustomed to the idea of living as modern individuals in the shadow of a collective that they could no longer imagine to be made of individuals like themselves” (23). In this way, Victorian fiction dismantled the possibility of understanding humanity as collective, rendering collective forms of being monstrous and abject. In the context of contemporary understandings of how human beings have affected the planet since the beginning of the modern era, I argue that our understanding of the human itself is shifting, and that the novel is a significant site in which this shift is facilitated. Understanding human beings as a geological force not only transforms our understanding of the history of the modern era—the history of industrial

and capitalist development and colonialist expansion—but also enables a transformation in our understanding of human beings as liberal individual subjects toward an understanding of human beings as fundamentally collective. This, I am arguing, is an ethical shift based in part on the science of climate change, which understands how human beings are fundamentally connected not only to our environment, but also with each other, and it is also, these novels suggest, an ethical challenge to the liberal individual subject, as we come to recognize the failure of this concept of the human and begin to seek new ways of understanding human being.

This dissertation suggests that literature, specifically the novel form, offers a valuable site in which to imagine ethical possibilities for what Krishna calls “a better tomorrow” (172). This task, I argue, is one of dismantling not only the “violent planetary consciousness” (Krishna 172) that is the result of colonialist and capitalist ways of thinking, but also the values of liberal individualism and heteronormativity that have structured dominant understandings of the human since the beginning of the modern era. The ethical project that I identify in the novels of Aidoo, Roy, Mootoo, and Smith is therefore not only a challenge to the liberal individual, but is also fundamentally queer. While Armstrong notes that the work of the novel has been to transform and align individual desire with the good of the community, using the nuclear family as the model of social order, the novels in this study show the failure of the nuclear family to adequately represent human connection and collectivity. Each of the novels I have examined here suggests the ethical potential of alternative kinship relations that challenge liberal individualism and heteronormativity so as to redefine notions of the human, selfhood, collectivity, belonging, and home. Whereas in the Victorian period, the

imagining of alternative kinship relations in literature functioned to uphold the status quo by presenting such alternatives as monstrous, these novels present alternative kinship relations and an understanding of human beings as inherently connected as genuine alternatives to the liberal individual and heteronormativity. Through queer narrative form, these authors challenge the novel's function in upholding the liberal individual subject of capitalism, nationalism, and domestic ideology to begin to write selfhood and the human otherwise.

As I have been suggesting, heteronormativity is fundamentally connected to the liberal individualist values that structure the global cultural norms of the contemporary world. As noted, it is not only colonialism, but also liberal individualism and heteronormativity that are part of the "violent planetary consciousness" informed by the narratives of competition, separation, and abjection that also sustain consumer capitalism. The utopian potential of queer experimentation in narrative challenges what Armstrong describes as "the fantasy of the liberal individual" (153) so as to emphasize connection as the fundamental characteristic of the human—an emphasis that may not only challenge the liberal individual, but also, as Armstrong notes, signal its extinction. I am suggesting that in light of the destruction of the planet that has occurred in the same time period as the rise of the liberal individual, the extinction of that individual may be necessary to imagining the human otherwise for the sake of the planet. The ethical potential of the novel therefore lies not only in its ability to allow us to step outside of our selves, an affective strategy that facilitates empathy for others, but also in its ability to queer the norms of liberal individualism so as to suggest our fundamental interconnectedness. Experimentation with the novel form, in each of the novels I address, emphasizes

connection with others so as to challenge linear, developmental understandings of history and humanity that underlie capitalist, nationalist, and liberal individual conceptions of selfhood. To emphasize interconnection is to offer a potentially transformative and ethical understanding of being in the world, which transcends the limiting logic of liberal individualism, historicism, and capitalism, all of which are based on separation.

Aware of ourselves as a geological force, as the driving force of the Anthropocene era, and aware of how our actions influence the earth itself, we are now also in a position to redefine the human. Just as the human being—the liberal individual of capitalism—was constructed historically in the novel, so too does the novel now offer a unique and important site in which the human might be reinvented. Literary studies are therefore also offered the task of participating in imagining human being in alternative ways. Gayatri Spivak has argued that “[t]he ethico-political task of the humanities has always been rearrangement of desires” (*OA* 3), and she suggests that it is therefore the “role of the humanities,” through “the empowerment of an informed imagination” (2), to articulate ethical ways of engaging in the world. Defining the imagination as “the ability to think absent things,” Spivak argues that the literary is “the terrain where the ability to think absent things has free reign” (4). Literature thus provides “the terrain” in which to imagine human being otherwise, offering possibilities for what Krishnan calls “other ways of seeing and saying” (266). To challenge our ways of seeing and to destabilize the comfort of our notions of home is part of the ethical task of the humanities, a task in which the novels I examine in this study are already involved. In the context of anxieties about “futures that we cannot visualize” (Chakrabarty “Four Theses” 211), literature’s “ability to think absent things” offers a site in which to imagine alternatives for the future

that we might begin to build in the present. The queer ethical project of these novels is one that challenges the liberal individual subject and heteronormativity so as to revise our understandings of human being, and to imagine the human otherwise—as planetary, futural, and connected. And, to borrow from Smith, the ethical project of reimagining human being takes place “nowhere if not here,” in the novel form.

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