

Flows, Routes and Networks: The Global Dynamics of Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell

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Abstract

The notion that we have entered a global age of human relations has been the driving force behind many of the most persuasive cultural inquiries published over the last few decades, including fictional ones, into the conditions of contemporary existence, perhaps the most prominent of these being Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000). In the era of mass migrations, proliferating media technologies and the deterritorialised movements of labour and capital, it has become increasingly necessary to speak of identity and citizenship in terms of 'flows', 'routes' and 'networks' that cut across the traditional boundaries of the nation-state. Though it is through various cultural productions that such transformations are at once performed, symbolised and comprehended, discussions about how these changes have impacted on modes of literary representation have largely been framed by the older discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism, which anticipate present circumstances while arguably offering rather limited perspectives on them.

This text-focused thesis explores in detail the narrative strategies and thematic concerns of three British writers who have risen to prominence since 1990 – Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell – whose work announces literary developments that may be attributed to the fluidity and multiplicity of millennial relations and the phenomenon of globalisation. Informed by broader debates about multinational capitalism, transnational culture, and the emergence of new cybernetic infrastructures, this research argues that recent novels such as *Lemprière's Dictionary* (Lawrence Norfolk), *Transmission* (Hari Kunzru) and *Ghostwritten* (David Mitchell) demonstrate an aesthetic consciousness of new patterns of human interaction and geo-historical interconnectedness that is substantially different from the conceptual coordinates mapped in the fictions of a previous generation. The work of these three important authors has yet to enter fully into the mainstream of critical discussion, and the present study represents the first sustained critical contextualisation of their fiction. Following an introductory

chapter that, firstly, provides a wide-ranging analysis of globalisation understood as a constellation of multidimensional processes and, secondly, considers how these material transformations articulated themselves in the cultural context of Britain in the 1980s and '90's, this thesis engages in close readings of the selected authors' complex fictions over three extensive chapters.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of this thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

James Green

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Working: Globalisation and Literary Context

'Globalisation', as simultaneously a periodising term, an ideological project, a description of current geopolitical relations, and a conjunction of wide-ranging historical and theoretical developments, has become a key concept for understanding the complex transformations reshaping the social, political, economic and cultural spheres at the beginning of the new millennium. Rapidly filtering into, and crossing between, both the academic and popular consciousness since the latter half of 1980, the term at once seems to incorporate, render obsolete and open new vistas on the discourses that dominated critical theory in the 1980s and '90s. Yet in comparison with the more sustained treatments of globalisation elsewhere, particularly in the field of the social sciences, there has been relatively little discussion of how these decisive changes have articulated themselves in the context of literature. The relationship between shifting sociocultural and literary currents is rarely isomorphic, but if there has indeed been a profound shift in the constitution of modern Western societies – and the explosion of academic interest in globalisation as the pre-eminent way of framing disparate social, economic, political and cultural trends implies that it does have an empirical reality – then what kind of literature is emerging to give narrative shape to these changes? In broad terms, the contentions of my thesis are thus twofold. Firstly, that the complex of interrelated process brought together under the sign of globalisation opens up new frames of reference for the reading of fictional texts; second, that these new patterns of human interaction, interconnectedness and awareness intersect with several reorientations in the form and content of the work of contemporary British novelists since 1990, broadly characterised as both a development of and a shift away from the preoccupations of postmodernism combined with an awareness of concerns raised by postcolonialism. The following

chapters seek to address how the issues bound up with what might be termed the 'worlding' of British society and culture – its increasingly diverse demographic basis, its changing geopolitical situation, or its imbrication with the fluid topographies of the global market and media system, to name just a few aspects of this process – have been both routed through and engaged with by recent literary texts.¹

By its very nature, globalisation insists on the supposedly unprecedented character of the present moment – suggesting that the new regimes of technocapitalist production and exchange, as well as a changed political constitution, demand a fundamental revision of the conceptual frameworks through which we make sense of the world. It also functions retrospectively, re-situating the long story of Western modernity in a more complex global configuration that acknowledges its location within a meshwork of cultural exchanges and crossings, flows of interaction and mutual articulation, which unfold modernity's static synchrony to reveal multiple affiliations and temporalities. Whether or not globalisation is seen as inaugurating a decisively new *episteme* that has broken even from the immediate past – and the rhetoric of novelty obscures an array of historical precedents and parallels – there is perhaps little dispute that world space is now linked in ways that are both more extensive and more intensive than in the past. The mobility and motility of culture – frequently understood in terms of 'networks', 'flows' or 'routes' – in the era of mass migration and electronic communication make the linkages between culture and geography ever more indeterminate and difficult to sustain, though the connection between the two remains as a potent perceptual commonplace. This is to suggest that globalisation involves new and unprecedented forms of cultural intermingling and interconnection, but also that it has, to borrow the words of Imre Szeman, 'produced the conditions that might permit us to rethink culture in a larger historical frame, a process that would allow us to see that the concept of culture

¹ The term 'worlding' is drawn from Gayatri Spivak, who adapted it from Martin Heidegger. See Spivak's 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 262-80. Although Spivak uses the term more specifically to refer to the representational practices by which cultures creatively constitute meaningful worlds, my use of the term is intended to suggest a simultaneously material and imaginative remapping of world space that is global in orientation.

has *always been other* than what it claimed to be'.² Far-flung parts of the globe have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner, such that geographically distant localities may be rapidly affected by developments in other parts of the world. Consequently, the conditions and processes bound up with the concept of globalisation make it possible to imagine the world as a single global space, though by no means an entirely integrated or unified one, which is striated by the intersecting trajectories of technological, economic, social and cultural forces operating together on a truly planetary, rather than merely transnational, scale. On this new plane of interaction and communication, it becomes possible perhaps for the first time in history to imagine humankind as at once one and many, an ontological matrix connected by the networks of global exchange.

What these changes mean for the production and study of literature and culture more generally remains at an early stage of development. The overwhelming emphasis within globalisation discourses has been on the impact of media and telecommunications technologies, popular culture and consumer culture; forms that reflect contemporary mass experience, rather than the traditional objects of literary study and humanistic research. In addition, as the study of 'literature' has expanded to encompass different forms of cultural expression and the tools of literary theory have proliferated into a range of disciplinary contexts, the question of what is the appropriate object of literary analysis becomes ever more insistent. These concerns are, of course, hardly new: the past few decades have given rise to significant interrogations of the political, social and cultural role of the literary text, alongside probing self-reflections on the institutional foundations of literary studies. Indeed, the critical debates that continue to circulate, albeit less urgently, around the idea of postmodernity – as well as the issues raised by postcolonial criticism, such as cultural imperialism, diasporic modes of subjectivity, or global shifts in political power – may be seen as anticipating current discussions about globalisation in complex ways. Similarly, from a contemporary standpoint, the rise of academic discourses concerning the nation during the 1980s now appear as symptoms of the passage towards the

² 'Culture and Globalisation, or, The Humanities in Ruins', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.2 (2003), 91-115 (p. 92). Italics in original.

contemporary refigurations of the relationship between culture and geography. Yet if what globalisation represents is less the emergence of a coherent new group of theories than the extension and intensification of an array of ongoing problems within modernity itself, it has nevertheless produced the conditions through which it may become possible to re-situate culture – and the awkward conceptual object that we term ‘the West’ – within a larger spatio-historical framework. That there have been, with a few notable exceptions, relatively few attempts from within the Western academy to examine the intercultural dynamics of the literary as part of a networked field of global forces, bespeaks the gap that still exists between the literary theoretical and the global.³

These issues notwithstanding, it is neither the intention of my thesis to analyse the impact of globalisation on the cultural construction of the literary, nor to produce a synoptic overview of the world-system in which British fiction is produced and received, an undertaking that would be beyond its scope as well as this writer’s own field of expertise. Instead, keeping in mind that global forces are always articulated with and through local contextualities, this project’s more modest aspirations are to explore how the constellation of processes bound up with what Martin Albrow terms ‘globality’, particularly the consciousness of the world as a single, heterogeneous and densely interrelated field of entwined narratives and temporalities, have percolated into British society and culture.⁴ As I will flesh out in greater detail later in this opening chapter, the last twenty-five years have seen enormous transformations in the constitution of British society, which, under a range of both internal and external pressures, has pluralised and diversified to the extent that Britain is now perhaps best understood as a site of shifting cultural interfaces stretching around the globe rather than a bounded receptacle for identity. This is to suggest that Britain has undergone a marked shift from an insular, centralised culture to a global, decentralised culture complex, a process that has accelerated during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The effects of

³ Some comparatively recent examples include Timothy Brennan’s *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997); Emily Apter’s *Continental Drift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Neil Lazarus’s *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴ See *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

mass migration; changed modes of capitalist accumulation, commodification and exchange; and the proliferation of communication and information technologies, have all contributed to a general shift in the West's imagination of space.

Furthermore, Lars Ole Sauerberg argues convincingly that these tendencies have been enhanced within a British post-imperial context that has prepared the ground especially well for the emergence of a global perspective.⁵

If, as a host of theorists have suggested, the condition of globality has become the culturally dominant expression of the West's powerful imagination of space, it is through various cultural productions that it is at once expressed and understood, and literature remains a fertile medium for the articulation of such ideas. Since this thesis is primarily a work of literary criticism, its focus will remain almost exclusively on contemporary British fiction, and the main body of this study will be taken up with the analyses of several novels published since 1990 by three writers whose engagement with contemporary world relations articulates markedly different concerns from those highlighted by the authors who came to prominence during the 1980s. Though there have been a number of recent publications providing a broad overview of contemporary writing in Britain, these have tended to address globalisation tangentially, approaching it through critiques of the parameters of nationhood or postcolonial discussions of cultural transition and hybridity.⁶ In addition, the critical interventions offering detailed readings of 'contemporary' writers seem inclined to limit their analyses to the canonised names that came to prominence in the '70's and '80's, rather than introducing the voices of a younger generation. Indeed, my interest in this project was sparked by a sense of dissatisfaction with the continued dominance of these well-established authors – Amis, Barnes, Carter, McEwan, Rushdie, Swift, Winterson, the litany is familiar and

⁵ *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature: The Implosion of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 143.

⁶ For example, see Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996); Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel: 1878-2001*, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2001); John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003); Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004); Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Brian Finney, *English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

predictable – over the production of literary criticism at the new millennium. Criticism can open up new perspectives on literature, but it can also serve to limit and constrain the kinds of readings that are possible, particularly when it congeals into a ‘new’ canonical orthodoxy. Whatever the reasons for the comparatively diminished presence in mainstream criticism of writers born since 1960 – aside from the enthusiasm generated by Zadie Smith and her debut novel, *White Teeth*, which was published in 2000 and has already found a place on a number of university courses on contemporary or postcolonial fiction – it is arguably from this quarter that innovative new responses to an increasingly globalised world, as well as new stylistic directions for narrative fiction, are most likely to surface. Three particularly interesting writers amongst the emerging ‘new generation’ are Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell, whose work, despite its favourable reception in the media and on the literary prize circuit, has not yet received any kind of sustained critical contextualisation. Together, these authors have produced ten novels as well as short stories and various other writings, and all have featured on *Granta’s* prestigious ten-yearly list of Britain’s ‘best young novelists’, initiated by the Book Marketing Council in 1983.⁷ Whilst Mitchell, Norfolk and Kunzru experiment ambitiously with textual form and technique – their stories evoking the contemporary interconnectedness of disjunctive times and spaces – they also demonstrate a continued commitment to the representational possibilities of literary narrative. The selected authors have also achieved a measure of commercial acclaim, bringing into question once more the divide between literary and popular fiction: Lawrence Norfolk’s debut, *Lemprière’s Dictionary*, topped bestseller lists for six months in Germany, where he has become something of a literary celebrity, whilst David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* enjoyed similar success in Britain, with its sales propelled less by the novel making the Man Booker shortlist than its conferment as Richard & Judy’s ‘Best Read’ of 2005 as part of the hugely influential Book Club segment of their afternoon television show. Rather differently, Hari Kunzru’s profile was raised by the controversy that followed his refusal of the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize – awarded for his first novel, *The*

⁷ See ‘Best of Young British Novelists’ Volumes 1, 2 and 3: *Granta*, 7 (1983), ed. by Bill Buford; *Granta*, 43 (1993), ed. by Bill Buford; and *Granta*, 81 (2003), ed. by Ian Jack.

Impressionist, in 2002 – because of the award’s sponsorship by the *Mail on Sunday*. Kunzru declined the prize on the grounds of what he claimed was the newspaper’s pursuit of ‘an editorial policy of vilifying and demonising refugees and asylum-seekers’, announcing that ‘the atmosphere of prejudice it fosters translates into violence, and I have no wish to profit from it’.⁸

It is intended that in this thesis the work of these three authors will provide a case study of the narrative approaches explored in contemporary British fiction, with a particular emphasis on literary developments that may be attributed to the fluidity and multiplicity of millennial relations. Specifically, the thesis queries how subjects such as identity, history and geography are treated, and how these might be related to the notion of globalisation as a culturally dominant rhetorical response to a range of material developments. Close readings of Kunzru, Norfolk and Mitchell’s writing, seeking to draw out affiliations between the post-millennial cultural milieu and their various thematic concerns and modes of aesthetic representation, will form the backbone of the analysis. Like most selections, the choice of these particular authors is self-evidently partial and, in some respects, arbitrary; nevertheless, this study will go on to argue that their work articulates itself in illuminating ways with contemporary issues and concerns in ways that justify their grouping as well as suggesting new facets to fictional approaches that have been emerging in British fiction over the last fifteen years. Methodologically, I have tried to let myself be guided by the ‘invitations’ implicit or explicit in the material, though I have made use of various critical tools, ranging from postcolonial to information theory, when it has seemed appropriate to the text under discussion. At the same time, I recognise that my readings are tilted towards a consideration of what impacts a changing geopolitical situation characterised by the increased mobility of commodities, cultures and subjectivities has had on a selection of fiction produced in Britain. One can perhaps claim no more than to offer a freeze-frame of shifting sociocultural and literary currents, particularly when training one’s gaze on the contemporary, yet over the course of this thesis I hope to

⁸ A full transcript of Kunzru’s statement may be found on the author’s website, see ‘Society: Making Friends with the Mail (2003)’, <<http://www.harikunzru.com/hari/jlr.htm>> [accessed 25 January 2007].

demonstrate that a strand of contemporary British fiction is reforging identity in terms of global flows and networks that transcend traditional, regional boundaries. It is not my intention, however, to imply that the writers in question constitute any kind of coherent 'movement' or to homogenise their distinctive aesthetic approaches; and, as well as drawing out points of convergence and commonality between the selected novelists' texts, I have been conscious to signal the differences in their thematic foci and formal alignments.

Without wishing to pre-empt the main argument, what connects together the work of Mitchell, Kunzru and Norfolk, and also differentiates it from the writing of much of the previous generation, is a broadening of artistic perspective and imaginative mobility that are indicative of the new fluidity of networked global relations. This is to make the assertion that the narrative strategies introduced in the work of the selected authors reflect significant changes in our consciousness of time-space and scattered global geographies, as well as offering a medium to explore alternative modes of subjectivity. Though not entirely abandoning the framework of 'the nation', the selected novelists refashion it as a nodal point in a distributed network of connections, their narratives articulating the turbulent flows of people, images and texts whose disparate trajectories trace the emergence of new conceptual coordinates. In their introduction to the last twentieth-century issue of the British Council's *New Writing* series, editors Lawrence Norfolk and Tibor Fischer found a similar dynamic in evidence in the texts published in the anthology that year. Celebrating the productive fragmentation of contemporary British literature and its increasingly cosmopolitan orientation, Norfolk and Fischer suggested that the diversity of contemporary fiction refigures the nation as a 'cultural entrepôt, a place of flux and reflux, differently connected to both Europe and the US, historically and more problematically to the Indian subcontinent and to Africa'.⁹ These tendencies have, of course, been developing over a considerably longer period than the one-year snapshot provided by the anthology, but Norfolk and Fischer's comments indicate a tipping point both in terms of the subjects and themes articulated in contemporary British fiction, and in relation to a critical

⁹ Lawrence Norfolk and Tibor Fischer (eds), *New Writing 8* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. xiii.

perspective that has become more aware of transnational and transcultural dimensions.

Although their narratives range across a multitude of geographical settings, it is not merely that Kunzru, Norfolk and Mitchell find fertile ground for their fictions in countries and cultural contexts outside of Britain, but that in different ways their work expresses a new understanding of the world as a web of heterogeneous yet mutually interdependent histories and geographies. In this changed ontological context, new identities are emerging that are constituted both by the general mixture and miscegenation of individuals and populations and the cybernetic metamorphoses of bodies and societies under the influence of new technologies. The intricate and densely plotted novels of Lawrence Norfolk, for example, weave epic narratives from the submerged linkages between apparently unrelated historical events and geographical spaces, tracing hidden patterns and cross-currents extending over centuries to braid together the lives of distant individuals and social settings. As we shall see in Chapter Two, the scope and ambition of Norfolk's fictions are dizzying, drawing narrative connections between the formation of the East India Company, the massacre of French Huguenots at La Rochelle in 1627, and political events leading up to the French Revolution (*Lemprière's Dictionary*); the apocryphal tale of a sunken Baltic city, Spain and Portugal's scramble for papal favour in Renaissance Rome, and imperial conquest in West Africa (*The Pope's Rhinoceros*); and, in his latest novel, the mythical hunt for the Boar of Kalydon in Homeric Greece and its contemporary re-enactment by Greek partisans during the Second World War (*In the Shape of a Boar*). Whilst conscious of the distinctions between different temporalities and worldly locations, Norfolk's texts are animated by the unexpected convergences, counterpoints and reverberations that emerge from the juxtaposition of diverse histories. In Hari Kunzru's work, which will be explored in Chapter Three, empire in both its colonial and present-day forms is the exploitative regime that connects and segregates diverse peoples and territories. Kunzru's first novel *The Impressionist* (2002) follows the journey of its shapeshifting protagonist as he is pulled through the imperial machine, occupying and discarding the multiple subject-positions of the colonial world on his passage from the Indian subcontinent to Europe and finally to Africa.

Kunzru's next book *Transmission* (2004) works on the mass-mediated interfaces between characters in India, Britain and North America, presenting a contemporary world whose citizens are ruthlessly manipulated by the global economy, which controls their movements and uproots them from traditional connections with space and place. Chapter Four considers David Mitchell's formally inventive fictions, whose fragmented, interlocking narratives create a mosaic of textual modes and settings that is truly global in scope. Mitchell's first novel *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* (1999) and his third *Cloud Atlas* (2004) assemble a multitude of competing voices dispersed across vast tracts of time and space, from Ireland to Hong Kong to Mongolia, the nineteenth century to the twenty-second. Though resembling a series of discrete short stories – *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* have no overarching plot in a conventional sense – they are held together by the recurrence of various tropes, images and ideas, which imply a hidden architecture of congruity and connection. Mitchell's networked narratives create a composite portrait of humanity seen as an ocean of confluent, but gloriously various, histories and trajectories of becoming.

There is, of course, an apparent paradox in the retention of a national framework in which to situate my analysis; after all, globalisation involves not merely the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of extra-national influences contributing to the production and reception of literary texts, but a fundamental reconfiguration of this geographic frame. Yet what I hope will be borne out by my readings of Mitchell, Norfolk and Kunzru's work is precisely the extent to which the texts both situate themselves within and cut across broader cultural domains than the British or transatlantic contexts that have been predominant in postwar fiction. It should be recognised nonetheless that while the process of globalisation in its various forms has led to the emergence of different geographies and perceptions of belonging beyond those encoded in the nation-state, British literature since 1990 has in many respects bifurcated in terms of its fictional response to these changes. Alongside an articulation of the widened perspective of cultural interaction inherent in the concept of globality, contemporary British fiction has also seen a turn

towards regional and localised perspectives.¹⁰ The renaissance of specifically Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish literatures – whose cultural and linguistic differences were always rather problematically integrated into the ‘British’ novel – is one aspect of this movement, as are expressions of regional specificities beneath the level of the nation, for example in novels such as Tim Pears’s *In the Place of Fallen Leaves* (1994), which is set entirely in a small Devon village, and Jon McGregor’s *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003), which is a minute portrait of a day in the life of a single street in a northern city. These trends may seem contradictory, but in fact both responses demonstrate the Balkanisation of British literature and bespeak a loss of confidence in the capacity of national divisions to account for new conceptions of identity and difference. I have chosen to focus on a selection of novels that articulate the intercultural and transnational dimensions of contemporary experience largely because this seems to be a more progressive response to the new paths of migration and networks of communication and control than a retreat into particularism.

The substance of this opening chapter has two main objectives. In the following section, I will attempt to map out some of the key coordinates and lines of tension relating to the set of contemporary transformations brought together in the concept of ‘globalisation’, understood here as a complex array of social, economic, political, cultural and technological processes. As I will go on to demonstrate, the development of global capitalism and the spread of mass communications technologies have had a decisive impact on our experience of post-millennial reality, such that social relations are becoming increasingly unbound from geographical constraints. In a world where disembedded identities and cultures are routed through the networks of a global market that produces new hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion, new models of political agency and resistance are necessary which have the same global orientation as the forces they oppose. The analysis will necessarily be framed in general terms – by its very nature, ‘the global’ tends to invite rather abstract modes of contemplation – but, as far as possible, I hope to

¹⁰ This sense of the two-way movement of contemporary British writing towards global and local perspectives also informs Lars Ole Sauerberg’s study, *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature*.

avoid flattening globalisation into a single, all-embracing movement by acknowledging the multiplicity of its trajectories, as well as its fractures, ruptures and divides. In the process, I will touch upon a range of interlinked issues, including the economic advancement of the East; the rise of Islam in the Western imagination; the legacies of colonialism and continuing impact of imperialism; the extension of mass-communications networks and information technologies; the spread of multifarious physical and immaterial flows; and the emergence of theories of non-linear and 'complex' systems as a way of making sense of these changes. At the same time I remain conscious of the Western-oriented character of much of the discussion surrounding the emergence of a global consciousness. The notion of a new global epoch is certainly a persuasive one, but it also should be viewed with a healthy degree of suspicion, not least because, as David Lyon warns, the 'global age' position could easily slip into a totalising mode, as was the fate of a good deal of the discourse surrounding postmodernity, and there is little to be gained from proclaiming a clean break from the past.¹¹

The examination of these material and discursive transformations provides the grounding for the second strand of my introduction, which will consider these upheavals in the context of British culture since 1980. The intention of this section is to offer a necessarily brief and concise overview of literary terrain staked out by the generation of now-canonical writers who came to prominence during the late 1970s and early '80s, approaching their work through a review of the dominant literary and critical currents over this period, broadly characterised as the issues and debates surrounding postmodernism and postcolonialism. In particular, the discussion seeks to trace what I have termed the 'worlding' of the contemporary British novel over the last two decades, an age during which forms and *mores* were shaped more and more by pluricultural and global values, raising increasingly insistent questions about our relationship with history and the legitimacy of Western modernity. As Britain was opened up to the commercial and cultural flows of international capitalism, linear national traditions came to seem ever more anachronistic in the face of ethnic and cultural diversification, not to mention the

¹¹ *Postmodernity*, 2nd edn (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), p. 65.

new channels opened by the global media system. Whilst recognising the continuities that exist between the literature of this period and the work of the writers forming the basis of this study, I also hope to suggest the ways in which Norfolk, Mitchell and Kunzru deviate from the dominant literary concerns of an earlier generation that responded to a different material context.

To restate my position, the contention of this thesis is that there are some marked contrasts between the narrative forms and modes of identity articulated in the fictions of the selected authors and the awareness of cultural transition and multiplicity expressed by the Amis-Rushdie generation. Before we come to this debate, however, it is necessary to engage in a more thorough exploration of the perspectives and concepts raised by the phenomenon of globalisation.

A Global Age?

Empire is materialising before our very eyes. Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible globalisation of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule – in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.¹²

So begins the preface to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's highly influential and provocative thesis in *Empire*, which suggests that we have entered a new, global epoch structured not by modern imperialist geographies but by the deterritorialised flows released by the expansion of the world capitalist system. This emergent regime of 'Empire' represents something altogether different from the colonial relations that dominated world order at the beginning of the twentieth century. Colonial rule depended on the stable borders of the nation-state to regulate the production and circulation of subjectivities, commodities and capital, administering

¹² Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. xi.

over distant territories from fixed centres of power. In contrast, Empire materialises in the twilight of modern political regimes, superseding, though not dissolving, the waning authority of the nation-state with an apparatus of rule constituted by the growth of transnational corporations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media conglomerates and the increasing predominance of post-industrial forms of accumulation, labour and production. Unlike the striated or gridded spaces of modernity, which depended on a dialectical play between inside and outside, order and disorder, civilised 'progress' and atavistic barbarism, Empire is conceived as a smooth, networked space criss-crossed by complex faultlines of differentiation and homogenisation.¹³ The realisation of the world market means that exclusionary boundaries are perpetually reworked under the banner of universal inclusion and integration, for the new regime of Empire thrives on circuits of movement and mixture, functioning not through rigid structures of control but flexible and contingent modulations across an unbounded terrain. If for Hardt and Negri this apparatus of 'governance without government' generates a world order wielding enormous powers of oppression and destruction, its administrative logic penetrating almost every aspect of social life in a concrete realisation of Foucault's 'biopower', it also gives rise to emancipatory possibilities on a potentially global scale. The authors suggest that in the era of globalisation, the creative forces of the 'multitude' that sustains Empire – in effect a contemporary recasting of the Marxist proletariat – are also capable of constructing an oppositional 'counter-Empire', making use of the same planetary flows and exchanges to create a democratic alternative to global neoliberalism.¹⁴ The prosthetic and informatic technologies of the new media permit the extension of ever more invasive mechanisms of surveillance and control, but, according to the authors, they also open up opportunities for radically new forms of human cooperation and creativity. Under

¹³ For a comparison between the spatial tropes of the modern 'grid' and the contemporary 'network', see Mark C. Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 3-23.

¹⁴ The idea of the 'multitude' derives from the philosophical writings of Spinoza; see *Empire*, pp. 60-6. Whilst *Empire* is mainly concerned with mapping the new imperial order, tracing its continuities with European modernity, the 'multitude' remains a powerful but hazily delimited figure. Hardt and Negri's companion-piece, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004), focuses more explicitly on the constitution of the multitude as the vitalistic motor of history.

the processes of globalisation, alternatives to capitalism are not defeated so much as given the chance to operate on a worldly scale.

Whatever the questionable assertions of Hardt and Negri's argument – can a totally integrated social order exist without also demanding conformity and universally shared values? Could the multitude really *create* an alternative global society? How would this counter-Empire be structured and maintained? – it is a provocative intervention in contemporary debates surrounding globalisation that obliges us to think hard about the scale of political and social change. For this reason, Hardt and Negri's thesis acts as a touchstone for my own study, and references to it are threaded through the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, they are by no means the only commentators to have suggested that we have entered an era of unprecedented global relations. In many ways foreshadowing Hardt and Negri's argument, Martin Albrow's earlier theorisation of the 'Global Age' suggests that our conceptualisation of this new epoch is held back by recourse to the theoretical models and terminology of post/modernity, which are unable to adequately frame the new configuration of human activities and conditions of existence.¹⁵ For both Albrow and Hardt and Negri, the contemporary proliferation of post-theories, such as postmodernism or postcolonialism, can only gesture towards modernity's transformation in a vague and confused way, and their political strategies are only effective on this old terrain. Though offering useful ways of re-reading the received narrative of modernity, these discourses' deconstruction of the essentialist foundations of the universal humanist/imperial subject and their valorisation of specificity, multiplicity, hybridity are in fact easily assimilated into the logic of a new social order dependent on the fluidity and instability of every determinate ontological relationship. The affirmation of the free play of differences across boundaries, that recurrent trope in every 'post' discourse, is liberating only in a context where power works through fixed identities, binary divisions and stable oppositions, rather than by means of differential hierarchies and fragmented subjectivities. In many ways, this is merely to point towards the inevitable historicity of theory, which is never able to grasp fully the moment that it is trying to analyse,

¹⁵ *The Global Age: State and Society Beyond Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

relying on concepts and narratives that only relate incompletely to the full plethora of life-world circumstances. But whilst *Empire* attempts to retain some of the revolutionary and utopian elements of the modern tradition, Albrow argues that passage into 'globality' signals the final decay of the modern project, which can no longer integrate alternative, non-Western frames of reference into its narrative. Here, the materiality of the globe is a collective frame of reference, not merely for a cosmopolitan elite or metropolitan '*comprador* intelligentsia' but for ordinary people around the world.¹⁶ Far from homogenising cultural expression, the intensification of global interconnectedness spawns a diverse constellation of worlds that may be inhabited simultaneously.

These are stimulating ideas and, as Julian Murphet observes, it is possible to see the history of the twentieth century and beyond in terms of 'broadening horizons of global consciousness and the dissolution or dilation of known space'.¹⁷ In both academic and popular discourses, the concept of 'globalisation' has become almost ubiquitous, accruing the authority of a master-trope used to describe virtually every aspect of contemporary life. Thus it refers at once to the complex transformations of production, consumption and labour in the capitalist system, to the erosion of the nation-state as a coherent 'imagined community', to the struggle between the homogenising effects of a global (North American) culture and various local cultures and traditions, to the rise of new information and communication technologies such as satellite broadcasting and the internet. Although there is little agreement about globalisation's historical specificity, geographic reach, or even its dominant causes and effects, there is a degree of consensus regarding the general conception of the term. David Harvey's notion of the 'time-space compression' brought about by the increased mobility of capital is well established, and this is accompanied by Roland Robertson's awareness of an 'intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole', alongside Anthony Giddens's suggestion that the emergence of such a consciousness entails the structurally significant

¹⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 119-24 (p. 119).

¹⁷ 'Postmodernism and Space', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 116-35 (p. 127).

interlacing of local contextualities with distant social events and relations.¹⁸ In essence, this concerns the idea of the world as one 'place', where social, political and economic activities are becoming stretched across the globe, and where the expanding scale, growing magnitude, speeding up and deepening impact of interregional flows produces new patterns of social organisation and interaction. This shift is the consequence of many different factors, including the spread of consumer capitalism, Western imperialist expansion and the development of a global media system. But whilst the genealogy of globalisation is a predominantly Eurocentric one, product of a modernity that ripples outwards into more and more contexts and whose spread is accelerated by new technologies, it would be reductive to understand it merely as the unfolding of modern tendencies across passive planetary space. Indeed, globality also involves greater interchange between differing historical narratives and images of global order, and is thus a sharply contested terrain. This is not least because of the waning of occidental economic and political hegemony which, particularly from the viewpoint of those who live in Western societies, seems to signal the passage to a new stage of cultural fluidity and intermingling.¹⁹ Globalisation, then, is perhaps most helpfully seen as at once a problem, a conflict about in what or whose currency the world is being 'worlded', and a complex of multidimensional and reflexive processes that are extraordinarily difficult to encapsulate.

Of course, this reflexivity is intimately bound together with the explosion of academic interest in globalisation, which has emerged as the pre-eminent way of figuring disparate social trends. The images and ideas that circulate in critical discourse, as well as the popular media, do not merely reflect the changing social

¹⁸ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 240-2; Roland Robertson, *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 8; and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

¹⁹ Jonathan Friedman argues against seeing globalisation as part of a general evolutionary process, suggesting instead that it constitutes a temporary phase and should be understood in relation to hegemonic decline, as evidenced by increasing competition as capital shifts to East Asia and the growth of transnational corporations. Although Friedman does admit that the world is more globally connected than ever before, he rejects the idea that the mobility and mixing of cultures is a substantively new phenomenon, arguing that the consciousness of impermanence and the emergence of the discourse of hybridity are social products of a self-identified cosmopolitan elite. See 'The Hybridisation of Roots and the Abhorrence of the Bush', in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash (London: Sage, 1999), pp. 230-55.

world but actively help to shape it. This is not to deny the objective reality of global transformations; rather it is to keep in mind that our experience of them is inseparable from the often self-perpetuating carapace of explication and analysis, and the legacy of colonial history warns us against naturalising geographical and spatial constructs such as progressive accounts of globalisation.²⁰ But if the condition of globality currently represents a culturally dominant frame of reference for the Western imagination, a condition that is simultaneously shared and made, it is through various cultural productions that it is symbolised and understood. Although these geo-historical trajectories are unstable and complex, and precisely what globalisation is 'about' is a dramatic increase in the fluidity and complexity of human relations as people and technologies are entangled in multiple, mutating and mutually defining connections, I share Philip Tew's confidence in the capacity of literary writing to reveal while veiling, to construct fictional worlds that allow us to gain new perspectives on our material realities:

All thoughts, all theories, are about something. All perceptions are of something. All texts have referents. These exist independently of our perceptions, thoughts and theories. All texts involve such thinking about our thinking about reality. This is so, however diffuse or complex the process becomes in the narrative and its relationship with the life-world.²¹

The rapid changes to systems and structures that have long organised everyday life mean that we are currently living in a moment of extraordinary complexity, characterised by entrenched and enduring patterns of worldwide interconnectedness. Such profound changes challenge us to develop alternative ways of understanding the world and of interpreting our experience, and in this sense place new demands on narrative fiction, which has always been a medium for making sense of the world.

That we all now apparently live in one world has become a cliché mediated through a range of images. Photographs of the planet earth in space taken by the

²⁰ John Heggland, 'Modernism, Africa and the Myth of Continents', in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 43-53.

²¹ 'Reconsidering Literary Interpretation', in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, ed. by José López and Garry Potter (London and New York: Athlone, 2001), pp. 196-205 (p. 202).

Apollo astronauts returning from the moon are accompanied by fears of impending ecological disaster hastened by accelerated climate change, while global brands such as Nike and Coca-Cola recycle ecumenical sentiments once the preserve of religious movements, imagining a humanity united under totemic commercial banners of the capitalist good life. Such discourses heighten the sense of connectedness and interdependency condensed into Marshall McLuhan's communitarian vision of a 'global village' produced by the worldwide diffusion of communication technologies.²² The awareness of the finitude and territorial boundedness of the earth contributes to the erosion of the spatial distances separating and insulating people from the imperatives of contiguity and coevalness. A world of discrete, internally cohesive national or regional spaces, their consistency structured by the dialectical play between inside and outside, is in the course of being re-conceptualised as single plane shaped by the planetary circulations of various flows: of information, ideas, money, commodities, people and images. For theorists such as Arjun Appadurai, the juxtaposition of these flows creates a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities, which in turn demands a form of analysis reliant on figures of process, uncertainty and the volatility of relations rather than older images of order, stability and systemacity. His own framework traces five dimensions of global flow, which Appadurai terms 'scapes', consisting of ethnoscaples (the landscape of flows of people), mediascaples (the distribution of capabilities to disseminate information and narrative-based accounts of reality), ideoscaples (concatenations of political or ideological images), technoscaples (the global configuration of technology), and finanscaples (the fluid distribution of global capital).²³ The suffix '-scape' points towards the fluidity and irregularity of these diverse domains as well as indicating the formal commonalities that exist between them. These provide the building blocks for a multitude of disjunctive 'imagined worlds' constituted by their channelling into the historically situated contexts of persons and groups spread across the globe. In a way analogous to Benedict Anderson's discussion of the relationship between the novel

²² See *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge, 1962).

²³ *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996), pp. 27-47.

and the nation, the contemporary circulation of images and bodies, mediated by new technology, contributes to the emergence of a world-space as an imaginative locus for competing visions of modernity on a global scale, an acknowledgement of multivocal world histories.²⁴ Whether or not one agrees with Appadurai's precise delineation of this fractal landscape, his model does capture a sense of the complex negotiations between individual sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility. It does seem to be increasingly the case that people based in dispersed locales, and especially the cadre of global cosmopolitan elites, have come to share a common range of cultural referents, but if this amounts to a global culture in the process of becoming, it is one that is very different from the past emergence of national cultures that were largely able to synthesise local differences in relation to an exterior of other apparently coherent national narratives.²⁵

Unlike the economic and political integration carried out by the imperialist project, which essentially expanded the sovereignty of the European nations beyond state boundaries, one of the most significant aspects of the notion of a global space of relations is that it is no longer possible to imagine a transcendental 'outside' to this web of interdependencies. This is not to say that the various processes constituting globalisation are evenly distributed, or that they exert the same effects everywhere, merely that no place on the earth can opt out of these relations. After all, the conditions and the very concept of globality are at once manifestly contested and deeply divisive, involving a massive, worldwide restratification that excludes entire segments of the world's population from its benefits. Indeed, the very material transformations that promote the uniformity of the globe are at the same time causes of division, particularly for those who are unwilling to embrace fluidity, mobility and impermanence as fundamental conditions, or are simply not positioned to channel the circulation of global flows.²⁶ Despite its uneven distribution, the global may be understood as a field of mutual entanglements composed by a hybridised plurality of mobile and mutable cultures,

²⁴ See *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁵ For a discussion of the tension between local and global cultures, see Mike Featherstone, *Undoing Culture: Globalisation, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage, 1995), especially pp. 86-101.

²⁶ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 2.

cybernetic interpenetrations of the 'wetware' of corporeal bodies with informatic and prosthetic machines, and the reflexive binding together of natural and human systems. Difference, here, is maintained through connection rather than separation.

But how decisively new is this process; have populations not always existed in interconnection with others? Doreen Massey warns against making a false distinction between a past seen as marked by a unity of place – a pre-modern Elysium of authentic spatial consistency – and a contemporary space of flows where uniqueness emerges from a network of interrelations.²⁷ Nostalgic responses to globalisation mourning the loss of old spatial coherences may be longing for what never existed, part of the phantasmagoria of invented traditions and heritages that are not antithetical to the modern imagination but actually created by it.²⁸ If globalisation is to mean any more than the completed universalisation of Western modernity, retaining its tendency to loop spatial differentiation into a temporal sequence of historical 'development', with the West predictably at the head of the queue, then it is surely to bring into question the univocity of the occidental historical model. As Walter Mignolo suggests, the current form of technocapitalism is creating the conditions to think spatially and to relativise a modernity that from its very inception has denied the coevalness of various marginalised others both external and internal to its self-constitution.²⁹ That said, this is not to deny that the world is perhaps more riven by inequities than it has been at any point in human history. Instead, the linking together of globalisation with the postcolonial emphasis on coeval historical narratives brings to the foreground the fact that there are no people in the present world living in the past, in contradistinction to the Hegelian model of universal history, and that this present makes manifest 'a variety of chronological circles and temporal rhythms'.³⁰ The acknowledgement of one's own

²⁷ *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 62-9. Massey takes particular issue with Anthony Giddens's linear model of modernisation based on a contrast between traditional (pre-modern) culture and post-traditional (modern) culture, since this flattens space of its dynamic multiplicity by imagining it as a set of pre-constituted variations where differences are purely the result of internal characteristics.

²⁸ See Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives* (London: Profile Books, 1999), pp. 36-50.

²⁹ 'Globalisation, Civilisation and Languages', in *The Cultures of Globalisation*, ed. by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 32-53.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

contemporal becoming alongside others in time, of the mutual imbrication and enfolding of different time-scales, is a field of perception that has doubtlessly been opened up by the imperatives and technologies of global capitalism. However, in making this statement I am not proposing that the corrugation of the contemporary by disjunct temporalities is merely an expression of universal capitalist synchronisation. On the contrary, the light-speed of mediated representation and financial flow is only one strand of our saturated, volatile present, and these multiple temporalities do not merely clash but undergo continuous mutation as they filter into each other. One of the dangers of wholeheartedly embracing the 'global age' position as marking a clean break from modernity is that it could easily slip into a totalising mode, much like modernity once did, and this could serve to obscure globalisation's complex and contradictory tendencies.³¹ Certainly, the rhetoric of newness that initially sustained globalist discourse has been largely replaced by more diachronic narratives that consider the development of these forces in the *longue durée*. In this sense, it may be that rather than producing anything 'new' in the sphere of economics, politics and culture, globalisation has produced the conditions that might permit us to rethink culture in a larger historical frame. As Iain Chambers puts it:

In the mutual complexities of the westernising of the world and the worlding of the west, each and every history bears witness to its particular worldly location, and the manner in which that has come to be represented and . . . repressed. So, in speaking from somewhere the voice that testifies to a particular past and present increasingly resonates in the channels of global amplification.³²

One of the reasons why it became necessary, even urgent, to talk about the world as a whole is related to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc as an opposing force to the West in 1989. The ending of the Cold war, which had underpinned international relations for over forty years, necessitated a rethinking of the entire

³¹ Consequently, David Lyon's desire to retain elements from the concept of postmodernity as a material social, as well as cultural, formation is one that I share. See *Postmodernity*, 2nd edn, pp. 46-68.

³² *Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 15. Ellipsis in original.

system of global politics and the development of new discourses to explain the nature of the 'new world order'. As well as removing the final significant barrier to the world-wide circulation of capitalism, the fall of the Berlin Wall marked a shift away from a global labour market stabilised by Cold War restrictions and orchestrated primarily by American interests. In this context, then, the concept of globalisation has served as both a screen for the spread of neoliberal capitalism and a justification for the emerging political and economic order, the 'natural' outcome of a history that ends, according to Francis Fukuyama's controversial thesis, with the 'victory' of Western democracy.³³ Of course, this perpetuates the tendency to read globalisation merely as a homogenising movement, one that eventually incorporates and integrates heterogeneous elements as it expands to reach the natural limits of the globe; and if it is comprehended solely in economic and political terms then this may appear to be the case, though the rise of Islam as an alternative global vision does seem to present this evolutionary model with some particularly insistent problems. In cultural terms, too, globalisation has been interpreted as an extension of the economic and political domination of the United States, which thrusts its hegemonic cultural productions to all parts of the world and effectively erases local forms of expression. Here, the West's rapacious cultural imperialism is only intensified by the proliferation of media networks permitting its images and ideals to be beamed directly into distant people's homes. This idea of the global as the final expansion of Western dominance to the natural limits of the world is cognate with the propensity to view globalisation as a consequence of modernity, tending to see capitalist developments as happening in a linear fashion and producing standardised results everywhere, as in the refrains of 'McDonaldisation' and 'Coca-Colonisation'. But if there are integrative processes at work, and the logic of commodity consumption and bureaucratic modes of organisation, for instance, define much of modern cultural life around the globe, globalisation is not a one-way trajectory whereby the global penetration of Western culture inexorably leads to the effacement or evisceration of cultural differences. As Hardt and Negri are conscious to stress, the materialisation of a world market as a global field or totality

³³ See *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

does not equate to the totalisation of scattered identities, as was the case with the modernist nightmare of the industrial machine; rather, it thrives on the production of difference and is able to incorporate diverse forms of life, even those that oppose the global itself. Indeed, contingency, mobility and flexibility are the source of its power, and thus heterogeneity is less negated or attenuated than affirmed and arranged in a modulating apparatus of command.

Another event in 1989 also served to mark the advent of a new context of global relations. The controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, which led to the Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration of a *fatwa* against the author in response to his alleged 'blasphemy' of the sanctity of the *Qur'an*, exposed the deep-seated ideological contradictions within and between different versions of a modernity whose traversal of other histories and competing epistemologies meant that it was no longer the exclusive property of Western societies. The schism between pluralised Western liberalism and monologic Islamic orthodoxy – a conflict that the novel itself draws out, yet cannot unravel – was habitually portrayed as a clash of civilisations, its rhetoric prefiguring that of the contemporary 'War on Terror'. Yet the fact that hostility to the text was also expressed by British Muslims – communities in Bolton and Bradford demonstrated by publicly burning copies of the book – complicated this picture somewhat, suggesting that the neat dichotomies underpinning Cold War political relations had become inadequate conceptual tools to map a world structured by the fluid mobility of people and ideas through networks that link and relate rather than divide. Fundamentalism is itself the product of the modern world, but though these diametrically opposed responses to globalisation appeared to be largely kept in check during the nineties – leading to hubristic pronouncements of a 'new world order' ushered in by the spread of liberal democracy – the terrorist bombing of New York's World Trade Centre in 2001 signalled the dramatic emergence of a new regime of political relations split along the faultlines exposed by the publication of Rushdie's novel, an event whose ramifications are explored in the concluding chapter of this thesis. While the so-called 'Rushdie Affair' was more than a mere media spectacle, it could not have taken place without the worldwide distribution of media and communications networks, which filtered the events and often served

to exaggerate the intransigence of the offending parties. Indeed, a number of similarities may be drawn with the mass-mediated outrage following the publication in 2005 of a series of inflammatory cartoons caricaturing the prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Whereas Rushdie's novel raised the debates between literature and religion on the one hand, and artistic freedom and censorship on the other, the cartoons seemed deliberately designed to provoke those who already felt economically and politically marginalised. In this case, the spread of censure and indignation was even more pervasive and rapid, perhaps a consequence of the availability of new distribution media, most obviously the Internet, although the questionable artistic and moral purpose of the cartoons was also an important factor. In contrast to the involvement of only eight countries and around twenty-five deaths connected with the Rushdie Affair, the protests that erupted in the wake of the Danish cartoons extended to about thirty different countries and led to the loss of 139 lives. This response perhaps exemplifies the changes over the intervening period, suggesting that the world's greater interconnectedness brings with it increasingly unstable political and cultural relations as a range of different, even incompatible, viewpoints are brought into close proximity.

The relative decline of the West, and America in particular, as the hegemonic centres of authority over the peripheral rest, makes the simplistic yoking together of globalisation and Westernisation difficult to sustain. In any case, the notion that these tendencies are analogous relies on a rather undynamic conception of cultural transmission. The dissemination of cultural artefacts is less a kind of blanket coverage muffling all indigenous modes of expression than a dialectical process of mutual exchange, where cross-cultural contact reveals the permeability of cultural boundaries and produces new hybrid forms that are commodified and capitalised. If economic and technological transformations are primarily what make it possible to visualise the world as a single space, it is not necessary to presume that other interrelated processes replicate the same patterns. The logic of integration and homogenisation is simultaneously accompanied by opposed tendencies operating across all the primary domains of social power. Diversity and heterogeneity, the proliferation of alternative identities and differing orientations towards the global

situation, are equally constitutive of the contemporary world. Indeed, what the discourses of globalisation make apparent is that notions of the universal and the particular are a dialectical nexus, and just as globalising trends modify experiences of the local, so too do specific local practices have a determinate impact on the global. Roland Robertson has coined the term 'glocalisation' to capture this sense of interdependency that produces new identifications articulated through the ambiguous interlocking of presence and absence.³⁴ Although for Robertson this global-local nexus is not an unprecedented phenomenon – he traces a number of discrete phases of globalisation stretching as far back as the early fifteenth century in Europe – the twentieth century's technological innovations have resulted in an unmatched compression of world geography, accentuating issues of universalisation and particularisation. This presents certain challenges to our historical consciousness of place. The rise of various reactionary nationalisms, fundamentalist discourses, introverted obsessions with 'heritage', struggles to recover 'authentic' ethnic identities, and increasingly fine-grained modes of identity presentation – to name just a few examples – may all be seen as responses to the speed and volatility of global change that for many appears to be sweeping away established psychic geographies. What these represent are not anti-modern resurgences of primordial identities and values, but powerful refusals of the contemporary historical passage in course. Just as on the one hand globalisation dissolves the constraints of territory, with the world opened up by the apparently weightless circulation of capital, information and human actors evoking a kind of intoxicating vertigo for those able to take advantage of this mobility, on the other it is both fuelled by 'archaic' sentiments of parochialism and insularity and generates intensified space-fixing processes, such as augmented surveillance and tighter border controls.³⁵ As I will argue in Chapter Three, this is a key dynamic in the

³⁴ *Globalisation: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992).

³⁵ Indeed, Zygmunt Bauman frames the duality of the global-local nexus in terms of an increased polarisation, where the impact of global mobility and speed has divergent effects in different social and geographical contexts. For the 'global elite' with access to travel and communication technologies, the freedom to move coupled with the new deterritorialisation of power serves only to consolidate their position further, becoming virtually immune from local interference. In contrast, those unable to wield these disembedded global flows are further disempowered and isolated, confined to ghettoised localities that are shaped from without by anonymous global forces. See *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), and Bauman's follow-up, *Liquid*

writing of Hari Kunzru, which explores the issues raised by the disembedded quality of contemporary identity and critiques the political divisions created and maintained by the intersections of imperialism, capitalism and modernity.

That the sense of place and a situated, organically embedded selfhood seems in some way under threat is an orthodoxy of 'our' postmodern and postcolonial condition, a pervasive form of ontological insecurity where, to paraphrase Yeats, the centre no longer holds. This is largely due to changing global circumstances that, as I have suggested, have given rise to a shift in the balance of power away from the West, such that it can no longer ignore other histories and ways of life it was previously able to marginalise. Indeed, perceptions of immersion and engulfment have much to do with the spatialisation and retrospective re-phrasing of the unitary Western narrative of modernity in the context of globalisation.³⁶ What the relative fluidity of post-millennial relations brings into question is the modern assumption that cultures, societies and nations had an integral relation to bounded spaces that were internally coherent and differentiated from each other by separation, a geographical imagination that underpinned the imperial project to organise global space. Indeed, the very idea of 'place' entails the problematical necessity of a boundary that situates difference on the outside and constructs its uniqueness by turning inwards to recover or invent an evolutionary historical narrative, a process that must simultaneously flatten or assimilate a range of internal contradictions. Consequently, the discursive construction of Britishness as a coherent national identity depended both on its differentiation from distant colonial others and on the concurrent incorporation and effacement of the specificities of class and gender.

These arbitrary borderlines, then, have never been hermetic, but wide-scale migration and the spread of communications networks that unshackle cultural codes from their location within a national narrative have intensified the sense of

Modernity (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), which further refines this position. Though Bauman perhaps overstates the dichotomy between the worlds at the top and bottom of this emergent hierarchy of mobility, and sees little hope of a rapprochement between them, his analysis is valuable in drawing attention to the uneven effects of globalising processes.

³⁶ See Stuart Hall, 'When Was the "Post-Colonial"? Thinking at the Limit', in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. by Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 242-60.

their brittleness. As form gives way to flux and social relations become increasingly stretched out over space, mediation makes notions of separation difficult to sustain. Rather than zones of segregation, boundaries are reconceived as sites of transmission and interface: places are less static 'containers' of particular spatial identities than *processes* of interaction, articulated moments in networks of understandings that link with the wider world, and are thus profoundly political and ideological.³⁷ The benefit of understanding places in terms of the particularity of their connections to other places beyond – criss-crossed, even constituted, by paths of movement with varying speeds and trajectories – is that it becomes possible to think the local and the global together without setting one against the other.³⁸ Far from conjuring the image of completed simultaneity in which all interconnections have already been established, a vision of integrated totality implicit in the concept of a 'world system', here global space is seen as a theatre for multiple durations and becomings where the interconnectivity of relations is fundamentally open-ended.³⁹ The topographical cartography that was one of modernisation's, and, of course, imperialism's, fundamental technologies has, at the beginning of the new millennium, been displaced by a topological logic of relation and contiguity that figures space as a morhic ensemble of movements, stretchings, crumplings, fluctuations, involutions and distortions. In this milieu of continuities and connections, the confluence of physical and virtual planes where information is imbued with the material inertia of forms and forces, there can be no point of departure or termination, merely structured relations of enclosure and flow. Of course, there are dissonances, ruptures and attenuations here, too, which are just as much a part of globalised spatial relations as liberal imaginings of a smooth world of unbounded connectivity and glorious, complex mixity. Yet the movement from

³⁷ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

³⁸ See Doreen Massey, 'Power-Geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place', in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), ed. by Jon Bird and others, pp. 59-69.

³⁹ The philosophical reassertion of space as both a material product of social relations and as a site of changing cultural meanings can be traced back in particular to the spatial phenomenology of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). More recently, the work of Michel Serres, Bruno Latour and Manuel DeLanda has continued the critique of a static and stabilised space, advocating instead the notion of place as a latticework of movements and foldings.

static representation towards more open and shifting patterns of intermingling permits an imaginative revisioning of cultural history no longer framed by an autonomously unfolding modernity. If this has become necessary both because of widespread migration, often taking the form of an outside-in recursion from the former peripheries to the post-imperial metropolis, as well as the unparalleled fluidity of cultural artefacts voraciously incorporated and recycled by global capitalism, it places significant strains on definitions of citizenship and belonging, and not solely in Western countries.

The notion of 'home', then, is a crucial site of contestation in a world that appears to have changed state from 'solid' into 'liquid', shaped by unpredictable ripples of turbulence and consumerist manipulations of transience and impermanence.⁴⁰ As a staging ground for identity construction, the stability of place is being undermined by the spread of technology, rationalisation and processes of economic transformation; even those who physically stay in place may become disembedded by the inroads of modern means of communication.⁴¹ Whether it is done explicitly or implicitly, it has become *de rigueur* when talking about contemporary identity to set a rooted, essentialist and reactionary version against a performative, itinerant and hybridised alternative, where 'authentic' grounding is an intransigent and potentially pernicious fantasy. In this context, the concept of 'diaspora' has emerged as a particularly suggestive semantic vehicle that brings together these conflictual imperatives, albeit without resolving their tension.⁴² Paul Gilroy's notion of the 'black Atlantic', for example, proposes an analysis of modernity that is fluid and dynamic, and an understanding of situatedness looking beyond the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnic particularity.⁴³ By centring his study of the long history of African-diasporic culture

⁴⁰ In *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman suggests that the West has shifted from a 'solid' hardware-based modernity, characterised by heavy industry, Fordist mass-production, imperial expansion and monopoly capitalism, towards a 'light' or 'liquid' software-based modernity which poses fresh challenges for the cognitive frameworks used to narrate individual experience and joint identities.

⁴¹ David Harvey, 'From Space to Place and Back Again: Reflections on the Condition of Postmodernity', in *Mapping the Futures*, pp. 3-29 (p. 11).

⁴² Indeed, Susheila Nasta observes that the etymology of 'diaspora' connotes both dispersal and settlement; see *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 7.

⁴³ See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

on the triangular relationship between North America, Africa and Europe, Gilroy's intention is to take the Atlantic as a single, complex element of analysis and thus to open up a mobile space for the articulation of black tradition that is not fixed in a pre-modern past or imaginary homeland but constituted by nomadic lines of passage at once within and outside of modernity. As Peter Brooker observes, this concept of diasporic dwelling 'involves a stereoscopic notion of place and non-synchronous view of time', and therefore has a number of affinities with a modernity that has become increasingly reflexive and contested.⁴⁴ Indeed, such metaphors of marginality, travel and transgressive border-crossing are paradoxically foundational to the anti-foundational rhetoric of the various 'post' discourses which, their distinct concerns and political intentions notwithstanding, advocate a politics of difference to contest the essentialist binaries and hierarchies of the modern field of power that is overwhelmingly white, male and European. The general critique of fixed subjectivities and categories promotes a notion of habitation that wanders and migrates instead of having a fixed base or home; indeed, it raises fundamental questions about what it means to possess a homeland in a world of complex discontinuities and fragmented experiences. As Caren Kaplan indicates in her discussion of the political implications of such 'travelling theory', the figure of the nomad in contemporary postmodern and postcolonial discourse has come to represent 'a subject position that offers an idealised model of movement based on perpetual displacement'.⁴⁵ Although Gilroy is conscious that his depiction of this confluence of narratives does not slide into the fetishisation of displacement and itinerant cosmopolitanism that is a habitual gesture in metropolitan theory, he does try to delineate a new form of 'unhomely' community through the affirmation of hybrid multiplicity.

The conceptual apparatus of the 'black Atlantic' permits the histories of those marginalised by Western modernity to be reframed as a diasporic gathering. In this new context, the sundering and splitting performed by colonialist exploitation sows the seeds of an alternative form of collective identity that, with its emphasis on the

⁴⁴ *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film and Urban Formations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 20-1.

⁴⁵ *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 66.

play of difference across boundaries, operates as a powerful mode of resistance to such oppressive structures. This is the liberation of differences under the sign of collective homelessness, the projection of a world in which the given principles of differentiation have become outmoded, envisaging a new kind of shared future beyond parochial nationalisms and entrenched identity politics, one that in Gilroy's more recent work traces the outlines of an incipient 'planetary humanism'.⁴⁶ But this new form of humanism is only imaginable as a consequence of the renegotiations of subjectivity in the wake of the postcolonial; and rather than seeking to rekindle a dubious liberal universalism that imposes a hegemonic ideal of the human, Gilroy argues for a cosmopolitan solidarity amongst people around the world, a form of creative cohabitation embracing the everyday negotiation of difference as constitutive of humanity. Like Hardt and Negri's notion of the multitude, this involves strategies of cooperation appropriate for an increasingly divided and differentiated, but also increasingly convergent, planet, in lieu of narrowly identity-based social movements. As we shall see in Chapter Four, of the three authors whose work is analysed in this thesis, the novels of David Mitchell perhaps come closest to expressing a (post)humanist vision that is truly global in orientation.

A world population whose disparate experiences, practices and economic and environmental fates seem ever more closely linked together thus necessitates alternative modes of conceptualisation based on an awareness of what John Tomlinson terms 'complex connectivity'.⁴⁷ Though the rapid development of cybernetic, information and telematic technologies since the Second World War has undoubtedly produced new stratifications alongside pernicious and invasive forms of surveillance, it has simultaneously opened up novel possibilities for collective action, albeit in radically different terms than the civil society that took shape in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this global milieu, the medium and metaphor of the network has come to define our ways of understanding the world and acting in it, a form expressed through social movements, military/terrorist

⁴⁶ *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 2.

⁴⁷ *Globalisation and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p. 2.

organisations, business formations, communication systems, migration patterns and personal relationships. For Manuel Castells, the diffusion of network logic is not merely a technological phenomenon but in itself constitutes a new social morphology operating largely outside of national regulation, one which is also dependent on cultural, political and economic factors.⁴⁸ Common to all of these formulations is the emphasis on an intensified reflexivity whereby the density and global extension of new information and communication technologies create a historically unparalleled interdependence of social relations. In a networked space of flows, boundaries become thresholds and sites of exchange fluctuating between opposition and synthesis, a situation that has been evocatively described as an ‘age of universal contagion’.⁴⁹ This is to suggest that behind the utopian spectacle of unfettered connectivity – a world of diversity, mobility and apparently limitless opportunity – the consciousness of increased contact also generates profound feelings of anxiety, and not merely restricted to the spectres of biological pandemics such as AIDS, SARS and, most recently, avian ‘flu, or the proliferation of electronic viruses. Indeed, awareness of risk, as well as systematic attempts to manage it, are integral elements of a modernity that has grown progressively more reflexive as social and institutional practices become susceptible to chronic revision in the light of future information.⁵⁰ Feelings of ontological insecurity and ambivalence are, at least in part, consequence of an epistemology that has been rendered provisional and contingent, and it is one of the ironies of the ‘information society’ that the intensified commodification and circulation of various forms of information has served to induce and introduce greater degrees of uncertainty.

But if the informational saturation of the contemporary frequently seems indistinguishable from background chatter, and it is particularly interesting that Hari Kunzru’s novel *Transmission* is structured around this communicational opposition between ‘signal’ and ‘noise’, one does not necessarily have to submit to the idea of being cast adrift in a universe of dislocated signs and images. In attempting to

⁴⁸ *The Rise of the Network Society*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

⁴⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 136.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of risk society and its relationship with reflexive modernisation, see Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, (London: Sage, 1992) and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*.

provide, in Jameson's terminology, a 'cognitive map' of the global totality, a number of theorists have found inspiration in the highly interdisciplinary science of dynamic systems, specifically ideas drawn from complexity theory and its various sobriquets, of which chaos theory is perhaps best known.⁵¹ Indeed, it has been suggested that it is the increased awareness of the 'global' that contributed to the turn towards complexity within the social and cultural sciences, with the explosion of academic and popular discourses about globalisation over the last twenty-five years authorising a return to concepts of 'system' that had fallen out of fashion.⁵² In a world of intricate and mutually defining connections, traditional models focusing on the interaction between discrete and relatively stable entities, such as between individuals or national societies, have come to seem overly unified, static and reductive. Contrastingly, theories of complex systems offer a less mechanical and comparative approach, one that sees relations in terms of ongoing processes and trajectories of becoming that are fundamentally open-ended, and where local and global phenomena are linked in complicated and often non-linear ways. One familiar illustration of such non-linear processes is the planet's weather system, where small changes to atmospheric pressure in one part can produce massive effects elsewhere, with the system's sensitivity to initial conditions making it difficult to predict weather changes more than a few days in advance. This has given rise to the concept of the 'butterfly effect', a term first coined by the meteorologist Edward Lorenz but one that has since entered popular discourse, which proposes that the microscopic disturbances at one location may be amplified exponentially and could set off a chain of events ultimately leading to the formation of large-scale phenomena far away in time and/or space from the original site of disruption. Here the classical mechanics of the Newtonian universe based on principles of

⁵¹ Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers's *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue With Nature* (London: Flamingo, 1984) was perhaps the breakthrough text in the popularisation of complexity theory. Their ideas have been placed in the context of literary and cultural theory by N. Katherine Hayles in *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) and in William R. Paulson's *The Noise of Culture: Literary Texts in a World of Information* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988). More recently, the journal *Theory, Culture and Society* devoted a special issue to discussions of complex systems, see *TCS*, 22 (5) 2005, and both Mark C. Taylor's *The Moment of Complexity* and John Urry's *Global Complexity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) have explored the implications of complexity for emerging global networks.

⁵² John Urry, 'The Complexity Turn', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 22 (5) 2005, 1-14.

equilibrium and the reversibility of cause and effect are replaced by theoretical models of unpredictability, fluctuation, fields of probability, feedback loops and patterns of emergence and decay. In a similar vein, as we shall see in the next chapter, Lawrence Norfolk's historical fiction overturns teleological models of history in favour of an imaginative understanding infused with ideas drawn from the field of complex systems, depicting the symbolic patterns and volatile fields of force that coil through time to shape the present.

Complexity, then, does not simply mean complicated, but describes the many emergent and dynamic systems whose collective properties are irreducible to the working of individual components, and which have the capacity to adapt and co-evolve as they organise themselves through time. Though not all networks are complex by definition, the new media and information technologies underpinning concepts of the 'network society' are the kinds of flexible and adaptive forms that display emergent characteristics. As John Urry observes, such structures involve

a sense of contingent openness and multiple futures, of the unpredictability of outcomes in time-space, of a charity towards objects and nature, of diverse and non-linear changes in relationships, households and persons across huge distances in time and space, of the systemic nature of processes, and of the growing hyper-complexity of organisations, products, technologies and socialities.⁵³

Put briefly, the notion of emergence posits that complex, non-linear systems are able to develop collective properties or patterns that emerge from, yet are not simply reducible to, the micro-dynamic relationships between individual components or actors. Consequently, the spatial metaphor of the network should be understood not as an instantaneity of interconnections or an already constituted holism but as a mobile *process* of ongoing interconnection and disconnection, a conceptual shift from gridded hierarchies to regimes of distribution. As opposed to systems structured by the imperatives of efficiency and centralised modes of control, the physics of non-linear processes understands instability and change as constitutive elements of adaptive systems rather than aberrant disruptions of the

⁵³ 'The Complexity Turn', 3.

'natural' state of harmonious balance. These systemic structures emerge from the dynamic interplay between order and chaos, and as such reject the dichotomy between an arbitrary world of chance and one that is mechanically deterministic. Indeed, whether or not the complexity turn signifies, or even enhances, a new 'structure of feeling' for the disorderly flux of global capitalism, it does reinstate the openness of spatial relations that repudiates the notion of a fully integrated world.

Complexity thus represents a shift in the way that nature itself is conceived, proposing that, even without the influence of human activities, 'natural' ecological systems do not normally tend towards stable equilibrium, but are extremely sensitive to small fluctuations in their environment. Furthermore, the enormous interdependencies, overlaps and convergences between supposedly distinct natural and human systems place under erasure the very notion of a stable division between physical and social domains. The dissolution of the nature/culture duality is at the nub of Donna Haraway's post-humanist ontology, which imagines the emergence of cybernetic forms of life on the plastic and fluid terrain of new communicative, biological and mechanical technologies.⁵⁴ This is to suggest that at the nexus of commercial and technological revolutions a particular form of hybrid subjectivity is being produced that problematises the distinction between 'natural' organisms and 'artificial' machines. Although Haraway's declaration that we are cyborgs may sound like the stuff of science fiction, our collective entanglements with technology and the imperatives of the world market are now so intimate as to produce new determinations of the human. On the one hand, the extensity and intensity of technological automation, alongside the sovereignty of abstract market forces, threatens to expropriate, perhaps fatally, our ability to both understand and exert control over the world in which we live. In place of individual autonomy or collective action, we are compelled to adopt flexible strategies of continual adaptation to cope with the dispersed and highly mobile operation of power, 'stretching [ourselves] ever more tautly over time and space simply to survive'.⁵⁵ However, the sheer density of networks that incorporate and pass through us may

⁵⁴ See Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), especially pp. 149-81.

⁵⁵ Robert Hassan, *Media, Politics and the Network Society* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004), p. 98.

themselves open up hitherto unimaginable spaces of political agency, to rehearse Hardt and Negri's position.⁵⁶ Far from evacuating the possibility of autonomy from the social field, complexity's emphasis on emergence and non-linear relations implies that even small-scale actions at a local level can have massive global effects, with the proviso that outcomes are generally unpredictable and difficult to control. Small fluctuations may grow and change the overall systemic structure, yet with this hope that an understanding of complex systems could restore the potential for individual agency flattened by modern mechanistic structures comes a threat, since the security of stable and permanent rules appears to have vanished forever. In different ways, the fictions of David Mitchell, Hari Kunzru and Lawrence Norfolk each articulate the networked quality of contemporary relations, their novels tracing complex narrative connections that proliferate across time and space with ambivalent consequences for the political agency of their characters. Informed by experiences of hybridisation and corporeal transformation introduced by new technologies – making use of concepts such as cybernetic machines, virtual space and artificial intelligence once the niche preserve of the cyberpunk genre – the fluidity of the boundary between humans and machines in these texts is less a source of shock or celebration than a quotidian reality that opens up new forms of exploitation and liberation.

The notion of order-making on a universal scale that drove classic modern thinking, from the architectural grids of Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe to the structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, has been replaced, then, by models that attempt to chart global effects, acknowledging unevenness, asymmetry and unpredictability as structurally inescapable. And yet, the neoliberal proselytising of the 'information society' and the pleasures of cyberspace still retains traces of the modern desire to overcome the complexities of material space through its abstraction. An idealised universe of absolute transparency and unlimited traversability underpins much of the rhetoric of contemporary technocapitalism, specifically the utopian potential of a wired world to overcome the 'friction' or

⁵⁶ This optimism may be tempered by the startling statistic that between a third and a half of the world's population live more than two hours away from the nearest telephone. See Nick Bingham, 'Unthinkable Complexity? Cyberspace Otherwise', in *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, ed. by Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 244-60 (p. 255).

'noise' of spatial distance/difference that acts as a barrier to mutual dialogue. Indeed, Kevin Robins and Frank Webster draw attention to the 'strange affinity between virtual futurism and communitarian nostalgia', proposing that the cybernetic ideals of virtual culture actively suppress the complexities and material density of real geographies.⁵⁷ This detachment from experiential engagement constitutes a retreat into a purified and pacified space of relations, a wholly transparent and ethereal, not to say illusory, medium of exchange, where any trace of the world's materiality is thoroughly effaced. According to this logic, virtual technologies may also be seen as a kind of 'unworlding' of the world, for the ideal horizon of the networked space of flows is, paradoxically, the transcendence of the fraught passage of mediation: a world of spatial uniformity and immaterial, telepresent intimacy deprived of any sense of nearness and remoteness. Of course, technoscapes cannot exist without the material apparatus of copper cables, fibre-optic wires, transmitters and receivers – the fluidity of cyberspace through which the human body diffuses or amplifies itself beyond its limits remains at some level dependent on spatial fixity – and with this comes the potential for interference, breakdown and distortion, various forms of 'noise' that continue to disrupt the medial space of communications. As I will suggest in Chapter Three, Hari Kunzru's writing, particularly his second novel, *Transmission*, is fascinated by the porousness and speed of the contemporary world, where identity is uprooted from its connection with geography and scattered through the circuits of global capital.

One of the dangers of globalisation theory is that it can often seem ungrounded from any specific context, presenting an expansive panorama where details and particularities are lost to the wider view. The intention of the preceding discussion has been to offer a broad outline of how globalisation has been conceptualised by theorists – largely based in Western institutions – from across a range of disciplinary fields. The perspectives and concepts introduced here provide the foundations for the readings of Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell's fictions that take place in the following chapters. Yet conspicuously absent from the foregoing discussion has been an exploration of how these large-

⁵⁷ *Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 243.

scale transformations have made themselves felt in British literary fiction over the last couple of decades. With this in mind, the focus of the analysis will now turn towards the British literary context and will proceed through an analysis of the dominant currents in fiction and criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, and a review of the critical commentary concerned with prominent British novelists during this period. By surveying the fictional terrain mapped by a generation preceding the new wave of writers whose work is the subject of this thesis, I hope to stake out a point of departure for the issues and debates raised in the main body of this study.

The Worlding of the Contemporary British Novel

In the specific context of British society, the constellation of cultural, economic, political and technological processes outlined above under the sign of 'globalisation' made themselves felt in the acceleration and intensification of tendencies that had been in course at least since the end of the Second World War. In the postwar period the nation divested itself of many of its colonial possessions and shed most of its pretensions to imperial power, a self-perception that was becoming increasingly unsustainable even before the symbolic humiliation of the Suez Crisis in 1956. Britain's diminished status on the world stage was further demonstrated by its vulnerability to the pressures exerted by a global economic system that was rapidly changing shape: in 1973, the Oil Crisis revealed the country's dependence on other nations for its financial survival, forcing it to enter into partnerships with the United States and the Common Market in Europe to promote its own national interests. Through both its policies and changing attitudes, Britain acknowledged that it was now part of an emerging global economy, subject to the turbulent flows of labour and capital across its borders and ceding ever more authority to transnational corporations. Parallel to this movement, the influx of newly decolonised peoples to the metropolitan centre in increasing numbers – starting with the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* from the West Indies in 1948 – were transforming Britain, and the hegemonic notion of Britishness, from within. As well

as immigration from former imperial dominions in the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa, the arrival of a diverse range of cultural and ethnic groups originating from other regions than ex-British colonies prompted urgent reappraisals of national selfhood as ruptures opened up in the fragile division between 'native' and 'foreigner', 'inside' and 'outside'.

Though it is possible to see these aspects of postwar British society as symptoms of a long process of globalisation, the notion of the late 1970s or early 1980s as the fulcrum point of a decisive historical shift has become well established. The election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 inaugurated a dramatic redefinition of the political landscape, turning away from centralist planning and a consensus-based society and towards a new mood of individualist consumerism, corporate enterprise and free market globalism. If Thatcher and her Conservative government were most directly responsible for much of the transformation that overtook Britain during the '80s, the rise of the 'new right' should be understood as an index of wider trends towards the deregulation of markets, decentralisation, and the new flexibility of labour processes and patterns of consumption. As Stuart Hall, one of the most penetrating analysts of the Tory government during this period, astutely observed, Thatcherism was bound together with much more intensive and extensive global restructurings, the manifestation of a congeries of 'social, economic, political and cultural changes of a deeper kind taking place in Western capitalist societies'.⁵⁸ The labels given to this new social and discursive formation, such as post-industrialism, post-Fordism, or postmodernism, signalled an epochal shift into an unprecedented phase of modernity, though all of these formulations struggled to comprehend the totality of these changes. As the preceding discussion attempted to demonstrate, the emergence of globalisation as a culturally dominant rhetorical response does not so much overturn these concepts as situate them in a wider historical and geographical frame, and there remain innumerable points of continuity. Indeed, if the various 'post' discourses that have proliferated since 1980 have lost a degree of critical lustre, this may be because they now appear rather suspect as periodising

⁵⁸ 'The Meaning of New Times', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 223-37 (p. 223).

terms. Rather than a supersession of or movement 'beyond' the project of modernity, globalisation emphasises both the plural forms of modernity as it is translated into different cultural contexts and its reflexivity as it continuously remakes itself under the conditions of capitalism.⁵⁹

These momentous transformations gave rise to a new situation of British fiction that was very different from an earlier literary scene of the Movement, the Angry Young Men and the first generation of second-wave feminist novelists. Dividing the two moments was a kind of sea change in the terms of cultural temporality and cultural value, such that, as James F. English observes,

it was as though the fiction of postwar Britain had never actually *been* contemporary until now; it had finally, in the 1980s, managed to assert its contemporaneity, which seemed also to mean its worldliness, its recognition of and within a global literary geography.⁶⁰

The reappraisal of the 'contemporary' in the cultural context is visible in the tendency of recent surveys of British fiction to treat the post-1970s as a discrete literary phase. Even until relatively recently, it was common practice for studies of 'contemporary' writing to explore fiction produced over the entire of the postwar period.⁶¹ Current interventions in the field, however, have been inclined to restrict their focus to the last thirty years, and to the new generation of novelists who came to attention in the late '70s and whose literary concerns diverged markedly from those of their immediate predecessors.⁶² Contradicting earlier pronouncements on

⁵⁹ For a discussion of the reflexive qualities of modernity in the spheres of economics, society and culture, see Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

⁶⁰ 'Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 1-15 (p. 2).

⁶¹ Perhaps the most prominent examples are Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996); John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present: Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); and Dominic Head, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶² See Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003); Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004); Peter Childs, *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Brian Finney, *English Fiction Since 1984: Narrating a Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Philip Tew and Rod Mengham (eds), *British Fiction Today* (London: Continuum, 2006); and Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

the impending 'death of the novel' and references to a 'literature of exhaustion' provoked by a sense of the obsolescence of conventional narrative modes, this new wave of writers presided over a renaissance in British fiction, particularly in the novel form. Thatcherism's dramatic redefinition of the political landscape and the divisive policies of the Conservative government provided a fertile stimulus for many of these authors, many of whom have now become established names in the literary canon. Hanif Kureishi's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which looked back to the permissiveness and sexual license of metropolitan society in the 1970s, concluded on election night in 1979, now seen from the standpoint of the present as a signal moment in the transition towards a very different social ethos. Elsewhere, Pat Barker's novel *Union Street* (1982) offered an unflinching portrait of early life under Thatcherism from the impoverished end of an increasingly polarised society; whilst in *Money* (1984) Martin Amis captured the acquisitive spirit of the times, a climate where the obsessional pursuit of personal wealth was actively promoted under the banner of entrepreneurship. This new generation of authors also articulated complex and thoughtful fictional responses to Britain's changing relationship with the rest of the world. During the 1980s and '90s, the British novel consciously turned away from the perceived provincialism and insularity of postwar writing, which was felt to reflect exclusively the experiences of a white, middle-class readership, and broadened its frame of reference to give narrative form to the transformations in everything from international power relations and the spread of global capitalism to Britain's sense of national identity and alternative conceptions of modern subjectivity. If this has led to the waning of influence of the 'domestic' English novel that has long been the dominant term lurking within the category of 'British' literature, from another perspective it has brought about the pluralisation of the mainstream, which has splintered and proliferated into a variety of commercially and symbolically important subcategories, including the regional literatures of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and 'Black British' writing.

A useful gauge of the new 'worldliness' of literary fiction over this period is provided by the book prizes and awards that are themselves a constitutive element of the current literary scene and the marketing and promotional industries now surrounding it. Over the last twenty-five years not even one-third of the Booker

Prize winners have been native English, whilst between its founding in 1969 up until 1980 fully two-thirds were. This pattern of increasing recognition for non-English and even non-British authors on the domestic awards circuit has been accompanied by the launch of a new 'international' Booker Prize for which foreign-language novelists in English translation are eligible. In addition, several of the literary prizes that sprang up during the 1990s have assumed a more global orientation from their inception; the Orange Prize for Women, for example, is also open to US and Canadian authors. What these shifts indicate is that far from withdrawing into isolation, British fiction today exists in a dynamic relation with an increasingly global field of fiction in English, making possible new articulations and productive antagonisms between Britain's literary culture and the wider world.⁶³

The group of novelists who rose to prominence in the 1980s – figures such as Peter Ackroyd, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Angela Carter, Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Jeanette Winterson – helped to register and reconfigure the ways in which identity was formed and represented within the recent history of modernity. This took the form of a resurgence of experimentalism with narrative form and technique that in many respects echoed the postmodernist subversions of fictional realism during the 1960s, a period that saw British novelists including John Fowles, Christine Brooke-Rose, B.S. Johnson and Muriel Spark produce a number of works that toyed with generic conventions and literary theory, complicating both traditional character-representations and familiar narrative organisations of space and time. But unlike this earlier, consciously avant-garde group whose stylistic innovations often left them marginalised by readers, the following generation's search for alternative forms, strategies, tones and styles found a more mainstream audience, perhaps because they more accessibly blended linguistic and metafictional play with the social perspective of the liberal realist novel. Martin Amis's text *London Fields* (1989), for example, renders its characters as little more than puppets ruthlessly manipulated by various material and discursive 'fields', whilst his later novel *Time's Arrow* (1993) employed the technique of chronological

⁶³ For a discussion of this remapping of 'world literary space', see Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as a World', *New Left Review*, 31 (2005), 71-90.

inversion in order to narrate the 'unspeakable' event of the holocaust, thus turning the scenes of Auschwitz into a tale of resurrection and survival. Elsewhere, Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983) and Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) mingled biography and fiction to approach questions of verisimilitude and to explore the boundaries between art, life and history. Other writers created fantastical fictional worlds where alternative constructions of subjectivity could be imagined beyond the hierarchies and restrictions of the social hegemony. Angela Carter's erotic and symbolically elaborate prose in works such as *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1981) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) sought to deconstruct patriarchal myths of female passivity and exposed gender relations to the disruptive energies of the carnivalesque, stripping away pernicious stereotypes to evoke polymorphous forms of identity. Carter's experimentation with myth and fantasy was paralleled by Jeanette Winterson's allegorical refashioning of history in *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), which exposed the contingency and constructedness of ideas and beliefs about reality, and likewise employed characters with blurred or disguised genders to unsettle the binary positions that place limits on human relationships. The new hegemonic formation of the late twentieth century has led to the expansion of roles and identities available to ordinary people, and the individual subject has at once become more significant and more problematic as it multiplies across a diverse range of social worlds.

These disparate fictional responses express a desire to create innovative forms and narrative strategies that correspond aesthetically to the paradoxical nature of contemporary life and to the heterogeneous modes of being brought together by late modernity. In different ways, these novelists both register the profound upheavals occurring within British society over the last two decades and gesture towards transformations in world order more generally, broadly understood as the emergence of a new phase of capitalist accumulation and commodification where economic and cultural relations came to seem ever more fluid, hybrid, and deterritorialised. Whether this situation is seen as bewildering or liberating, it has become a platitude of critical engagements with British fiction of this period to draw attention to its mixing of genres and styles, its liberal borrowings from a range of cultural reference points, and its consciousness of the

instability of the traditional demarcations of subjectivity. Explicitly rejecting the social realism of postwar novelists like John Braine and John Wain, the Amis-Rushdie generation often looked overseas, particularly to America, for inspiration, situating their writing within an international context that drew upon a broad range of influences and literary traditions. In some respects, then, the work of this group of authors may be regarded as marking a significant moment in what I have described as the 'worlding' of the contemporary British novel, with its amplified frame of reference taking account of the miscegenation of diverse histories and geographies and announcing the awareness of its location within a wider literary-cultural field. Indeed, for Brian Finney,

what this new generation of English writers have in common has less to do with a similar aesthetic than with a shared response to the changing world of the closing years of the millennium. They offer a bewildering variety of narrative modes, voices and tones. But all of them place their narratives within a context, not of one class on a small island, but of a world which is threatened by the very success of the project of modernity, a world which is so thoroughly interconnected that it is no longer possible to treat any part of it as unaffected by everything else in it.⁶⁴

Yet it has now been over twenty years since the Amis-Rushdie generation first burst onto the scene, and though they are still producing fresh work – with the obvious and unfortunate exception of Angela Carter – Finney's notion that in 2006 they still constitute a 'new' generation seems at best rather misguided, and at worst to ignore an emerging new wave of British writers. Writing in the *Guardian*, Stephen Moss offers a contrasting view of the 'gilded quartet' of Amis, Barnes, McEwan and Rushdie as the literary 'old guard' whose continued dominance coupled with their high profile in the media has become a stifling influence on British fiction.⁶⁵ This is particularly the case in relation to what James F. English and John Frow term the 'literary-value industry' – glossed by the authors as 'the whole set of individuals and groups and institutions involved in [. . .] producing the reputations and status

⁶⁴ *English Fiction Since 1984*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ 'The Old Guard', *Guardian*, 6 August 2001, section G2, np. Available online at <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,532579,00.html>> [accessed 17 January 2007].

positions of contemporary works and authors' – whose growth and diversification has far outpaced the proportional expansion of the fiction industry it surrounds.⁶⁶ It is through this complex apparatus of academic journals and literary magazines; prizes and awards; the increasingly ubiquitous top-10 and top-100 'best' novel lists; as well as the dramatically expanded literary festival circuit, that determinations of literary value are produced and reinforced. Whilst it is beyond the remit of this thesis to enter into a detailed discussion of the possible reasons for the old guard's enduring cultural capital – never simply reducible to notions of aesthetic merit, though this plays a part – it is clear that it is bound up with an intensified focus on the form and figure of the celebrity in cultural life more generally. It goes almost without saying that in today's mass market the accumulation of literary capital is inextricably tied into the phenomenon and promotional apparatus of celebrity. The media outlets that have proliferated on the back of the digital revolution in print and communications technologies – newspapers, magazines, supplements, TV channels, radio stations and weblogs – may express a continued appetite for fiction, but they are as much concerned with the gossip that now surrounds the industry.⁶⁷ Certainly, the now-canonical authors who established themselves in the 1980s did not merely benefit from the rise of literary celebrity, but many, such as Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie, actively courted it in order to raise their public profile beyond a narrowly literary coterie. If the convergence between literary authorship and celebrity culture is not in itself a new phenomenon, it has certainly intensified over the last thirty years, and over that period the personas of Rushdie *et al* have become both saleable brand names and media personalities known as much for their lives as their work. In the self-perpetuating economy of celebrity, fame breeds further fame; thus it is hardly surprising that the wake left by the writers who were widely credited with leading the resurgence in British fiction during the 1980s may be only just beginning to ebb away.

⁶⁶ 'Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 39-57 (p. 45). For an earlier take on the increased embeddedness of the institutional apparatuses of literary evaluation, particularly in the context of the Booker Prize, see Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

⁶⁷ See Peter Childs, *Contemporary British Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 17-19.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, it is the contention of this thesis that the work of an emerging new wave of British novelists signals a contemporary bifurcation of the literary landscape that is broadly consonant with developments occurring since 1990 and the rise of discourses about globalisation. This is not to suggest that the fictions of the earlier generation were not sensitive to the historical changes in course or that they do not continue to offer interesting perspectives on the contemporary world; rather that their responses seem to have a different emphasis than those of the three authors analysed in this study. In particular, Brian Finney's assertion that novelists like Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan situate questions of identity within a wider context than that of British society and history – their texts writing 'to the world about the world in general' – is only partly convincing.⁶⁸ Whilst their texts certainly reach towards a more cosmopolitan orientation than the becalmed provincialism of the immediate postwar generation of writers, their conceptual coordinates remain broadly anchored on metropolitan concerns, albeit often portrayed as a microcosm of wider transformations. To take the example of Martin Amis, despite the fact that he is often considered one of British fiction's foremost chroniclers of the contemporary, his narrative concerns famously display a WASP insularity that seems out of step with the cultural dynamics of a globalising world. Perhaps this is why in *The Information* (1995), Amis connects the informational saturation of the late twentieth century with the extinction of the self rather than its proliferation and multiplication. Although the fictions of this generation of novelists provide a view on changing modes of subjectivity and citizenship – anticipating the new global order that Hardt and Negri have labelled 'Empire' – perhaps with the exception of Salman Rushdie they can only incoherently frame the interconnectedness and interdependence of scattered global geographies and the networked form of contemporary identity. A concise, if rather sketchy, overview of the shape of British fiction since 1980 should help to substantiate this argument.

One of the most influential currents in fiction and criticism during the last two decades of the twentieth century was the so-called 'historical turn', which both

⁶⁸ *English Fiction Since 1984*, p. 3.

signalled a resurgence of the narrative desire to recuperate, represent and rework the past and articulated a waning of confidence in the capacity of history to offer meaning and self-definition for the subject in the present. That history has become a source of anxiety in the late twentieth century – becoming a matter of ambiguities, awkward gaps and incongruities as opposed to providing continuity and coherence – underpins much of the perceived ‘crisis’ of postmodernity. In material terms, the redefinition of attitudes towards history had much to do with the traumatic changes in postwar Britain already outlined: the splintering of empire; the erosion of Britain’s influence in the world in political, economic and military terms; the multiplication of alternative forms of belonging and self-definition; and the general decentring of the Western model of modernity in the face of the alternative histories, both internal and external, that could no longer be suppressed beneath its univocal, global narrative. Whilst the subgenre of the historical novel has been a continuous presence in British fiction since the eighteenth century, the kind of writing that came to prominence during the 1980s was characterised by an acute consciousness of the difficulties and dangers of attempting to recover the past in narrative form. Striking examples of this ‘new’ historical fiction may be found in the work of various writers, including: Julian Barnes (*Flaubert’s Parrot*, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*), Peter Ackroyd (*Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton*), A. S. Byatt (*Possession*, *The Biographer’s Tale*), Alasdair Gray (*Lanark*), Kazuo Ishiguro (*The Remains of the Day*, *When We Were Orphans*), Angela Carter (*Nights at the Circus*, *Wise Children*), Salman Rushdie (*Midnight’s Children*, *Shame*), Graham Swift (*Waterland*, *Out of This World*), Adam Thorpe (*Ulverton*, *Pieces of Light*), Ian McEwan (*Atonement*) and Sarah Waters (*Fingersmith*, *The Night Watch*).

Steven Connor gives this strand of historical writing the appliqué ‘historicised fiction’, which is distinguished from the more traditional form of historical fiction by ‘the degree of historical self-consciousness’ it implies.⁶⁹ These novels question the capacity of the present to adequately encompass the past, foregrounding the ironic incompatibility between past and present viewpoints; they express the contingency and partiality of historical representation, ever aware of the possibility for

⁶⁹ *The English Novel in History: 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 142.

manipulation and distortion and the potential for other, conflicting histories that are perhaps no less legitimate. Here, literature and history are conceived as parallel modes of signification, neither of which is capable of claiming a privileged explanatory authority over past events. Concurrent with this novelistic interest in the overlaps between historical and fictional narrative were changes in the way that historians themselves understood the nature of historical writing. Drawing on poststructuralist theory, historians such as Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra and Keith Jenkins drew attention to the (con)textual construction of history and the ideological and political biases latent in the logical-empirical methodology of historiography.⁷⁰ This involved a recognition of the extent to which the discipline actively mediates its subject: historical accounts were revealed to be the product of narrative strategies, arranging events into hierarchies of significance and teleological patterns that also encoded specific kinds of rhetorical structures. Far from collapsing history into textuality as is sometimes claimed, the focus on history as a form of narrative did not deny the reality of the past, but rather understood historical coherence and meaning as the residue of a *poietic* process bound up with a complex of cultural codes and power relations impressing their own accents and inflections on the source material. Instead of marking the evacuation of the historical imagination, the past became a source of emotional fecundity and renewal as it was opened up to heterogeneous modes of narrative engagement.

Linda Hutcheon's influential notion of 'historiographic metafiction' as the dominant strand of postmodernist writing during this period seems particularly appropriate to the British context, describing narrative fictions that demonstrated a 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'.⁷¹ Certainly, many of the novels mentioned above incorporated metafictional discussions of their own fictional enterprise as they sought to give narrative shape to historical personages and events. For example, in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Julian Barnes's narrator, Geoffrey Braithwaite, an amateur scholar of Gustave Flaubert, embarks on

⁷⁰ For example, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁷¹ *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

an impossible quest to find the 'true' parrot that sat on the writer's desk as he wrote *Un Coeur Simple*. As we follow Braithwaite's literary obsessions, which lead him through various French museums and even to Egypt, the accumulation of various textual traces breeds only greater ignorance and doubt; contradictory versions of Flaubert's biographical history brush against each other and the titular parrot multiplies into numerous variants and copies. In the same way that Barnes's narrator finds his literary detective-work is unable to recuperate the original wholeness of Flaubert's life, Peter Ackroyd's novel *Chatterton* (1987) offers a complex meditation on the relationship between art, history and truth. Flitting between three historical eras, the interleaved strands of Ackroyd's text take in the life and death of the seventeen-year-old Thomas Chatterton, poet and famous creator of the spurious 'Rowley' poems; the story of the painting by Henry Wallis purportedly depicting Chatterton on his deathbed; and a contemporary narrative involving a young poet and an elderly novelist who are attempting to decode clues about the mystery of Chatterton's demise. Like Barnes's novel, *Chatterton* circulates around ideas of authenticity and forgery; rather than unravelling the layers of mystification, the three narrative frames operate like a series of prisms that inevitably distort what they represent, suggesting the extent to which his modern characters construct themselves against a delusive past that is itself already a simulacrum. Ackroyd's text thus raises some profound and complex questions about reference and representation, the intertextuality of history, and the nature of contemporary subjectivity.

The disturbed relation between the present and the past gave rise to a number of discourses during the 1980s and early '90s that expressed apocalyptic concerns about the 'end of history'. These emerged from a range of contexts. The publication of Jean-François Lyotard's provocative treatise on 'postmodern' forms of knowledge marked the advent of a new climate of suspicion towards the West's grand narratives, which of course included such idealisations as notions of historical 'progress'.⁷² For Lyotard, late twentieth-century social developments had led to the erosion of the epistemological authority of the fundamental tenets on which

⁷² See *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Western modernity grounded itself, suggesting that these beliefs could no longer legitimate themselves by recourse to supposedly transcendent truths – such as the emancipation of the rational subject – since legitimation itself was understood to be immanent in the production of such narratives. Elsewhere, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard aligned the weakening of historicity, in relation to both public and private forms of memory, with new patterns of consumption and the spread of media technologies that created the conditions for a huge expansion of both history and history-making. Rather than disappearing, Baudrillard and Jameson argued that history had been flattened into a circulation of depthless spectacles; the past was transformed into a commodity repackaged as nostalgia or retro-style, unreachable except through our own pop images and simulacra. What was under threat, or had already been destroyed, was the sense of history as a site of alterity, its distance/difference absorbed into the machinery of late capitalism.

In a different way, the aftermath of the Second World War evoked a historically unprecedented set of fears and anxieties with regard to history. With the beginning of the Cold War and the development by both sides of huge arsenals of nuclear weapons – many times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – the threat of humanity's wholesale annihilation became visible for the first time in its history. As the possibility of absolute ending moved from the realm of eschatology into the compass of the actual, the British novel registered and reflected on a dramatically altered historical situation where apocalypse seemed at once imminent and immanent. Following a story collection called *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) – nearly all of whose narratives explored post-nuclear crisis and were headed by a polemical anti-nuclear essay entitled 'Unthinkability' – Martin Amis published the novel *London Fields* (1989), which applied these apocalyptic concerns to pre-millennial London. Suffused with the iconography of death and war, saturated by constant rain and images of global disaster both atomic and ecological, the text elicits the deadened feeling of living in the ghostly hinterland beyond history. Under the shadow of destruction, Amis's London is a kind of necropolis populated by the future-dead, his novel a mournful elegy for a prelapsarian time of innocence. Similarly, the narrator of Graham Swift's earlier novel *Waterland* (1983), a history teacher named Tom Crick, offers the

endless human struggle to find meaning and purpose in the murky depths of history – figured as a process of dredging or land reclamation – as a vital corrective to the dystopian dead-time of the novel's present, where the ruins of Crick's personal life mirror a society gripped by nightmares of nuclear annihilation. Though not as bleak as *London Fields* – the text sets an entropic model of history against a cyclical version that embodies 'neither progress nor decay', thus refusing the very notion of an absolute ending – Swift's novel is burdened by the undercurrent of suspicion that the turn towards history and memory may also constitute a retreat from a traumatic, or perhaps post-traumatic, present.⁷³

Despite their global concerns about the demise of history – whether framed as an epistemological and ideological problem, a symptom of late capitalist development, or a consequence of a post-nuclear world – it is telling that many of the novels mentioned above confine themselves to provincial settings, turning their gaze inwards to meditate on the 'universal' condition of contemporary Western identity. Even Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989), whose disparate parts articulate the belief that historiography is inevitably a fragmentary, partial and selective undertaking, could easily be said to be overwhelmingly Eurocentric in its perspective. That this sense of ontological dislocation, displacement and insecurity may be an index of the West's increasingly extensive and intensive historical, economic, political and cultural imbrication with the rest of the world was rarely considered directly by the mainstream of British fiction, albeit with a few notable exceptions that will be discussed presently. From the standpoint of the present, however, apocalyptic pronouncements of the 'end of history' – combining feelings of melancholia and self-indulgent nihilism – now appear rather dated, even though many of the surrounding concerns remain undiminished, particularly the threat posed by the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Indeed, much of postmodern discourse more generally can be re-framed as a culturally dominant response within the West to the waning of its authority and the decentring of Western modernity within the larger narrative of a global history, with which it can no longer be considered self-identical.

⁷³ Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, 1983), p. 9.

Postmodernist theory also had its roots in the specific geopolitical climate of the Cold War and the ideological opposition between free-market capitalism and the communist system. The suspicion of grand narratives was, of course, a reaction against the modern forms of sovereignty and subjectivity that stemmed from the Enlightenment, but it was also bound up with the distrust of the 'authoritarian' or 'totalising' discourse of the Soviet bloc and the perceived rigidities of its social order. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the rapid collapse of communism, an entire phase of modern history appeared to have come to a close, an event prompting the political analyst Francis Fukuyama to offer a rather different spin on the 'end of history' debate. Though greatly criticised, Fukuyama's thesis actually has much in common with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's more recent notion that we have entered a new global age of economic and cultural exchange. As discussed earlier, Hardt and Negri propose that a new paradigm has emerged to replace the modern political order that structured the world according to binary oppositions and divisions; similarly, Fukuyama suggests that history has come to an end only insofar as it has been understood as a dialectical struggle between modernity and the 'outside' marking its boundaries. For both Fukuyama and Hardt and Negri, there is no longer a coherent Other against which capitalism may define itself; the logic of the world market has expanded to envelop the entire globe and the modern dialectic of inside and outside has been subsumed into a play of degrees and intensities, of hybridity and artificiality. In place of the structured divides of a modern world that administered rule and managed subjectivities through the fixed boundaries and channels of the nation-state system, the contemporary milieu is perceived as a smooth, networked space. From the vantage-point of globality, then, the synchronic depthlessness afflicting certain versions of postmodernism – which sees in the dispersal of modernity's unitary and progressive narrative only dissolution of history as such – is manifested as a symptomatic failure to acknowledge a multiplicity of cultural movements and historical trajectories. Indeed, the machine of capitalism thrives by integrating ever more territories and histories within its domain, though these are by no means equally positioned in the global economic system. Thus, the 'end of history' might be just as equally be conceptualised as a new age of historical inclusion, albeit one that is criss-crossed

by flexible and contingent hierarchies operating along the axes of difference, hybridity and mobility. No longer a teleological narrative of progress, history is now perhaps better understood as a temporal ocean striated by innumerable cross-currents. As suggested earlier, this changed perception is particularly evident in the novels of Lawrence Norfolk, which imagine history as an ever-shifting field of cultural and narratorial connections whose ebbs and flows, ripples and eddies, continually disturb the surface of the present.

How did these epochal transformations make themselves felt in the British fiction and literary criticism of the period? Perhaps the dominant current during the 'New World Order' of the 1990s was the arrival of postcolonial theory on the British literary scene and the disciplinary surfacing of postcolonial studies, both of which sought to construct a new genre of writing under the postcolonial rubric and to provide a framework for its reception. Whilst recognising that the genealogy of postcolonial fiction and criticism is bound up with earlier anti-colonial struggles as well as with the preceding category of 'Commonwealth Literature', Nico Israel situates the emergence of postcolonial studies as a coherent discipline around 1988-9, coinciding both with the publication of Salman Rushdie's infamous novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) and the sudden collapse of the Soviet Bloc that ended the Cold War.⁷⁴ It seems of no little significance that the date which a number of theorists of globalisation locate as the birth of the global age – notwithstanding the fact that, as has already been suggested, its gestation period has lasted hundreds of years – is synchronous with postcolonialism's rise to prominence. This is not to argue that postcolonial theory is merely a subset of globalisation, but rather that the two positions are intertwined in complex ways, constituting different but related responses to the same material contexts. With this in mind, it may be that the clearest understanding of the historical passage in course is to be found in the various texts grouped together under the ambivalent sign of 'Postcolonial Literature', many of which influenced and were influenced by postcolonial theoretical writing. Certainly, with its terminology of migrancy and diaspora, postcolonial fiction and theory offers a conceptual focus that is particularly

⁷⁴ 'Tropicalising London: British Fiction and the Discipline of Postcolonialism', in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by James F. English (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 83-100.

responsive to the hybridity and rootlessness of contemporary cultures and subjectivities. At the same time, though, it is worth recognising that the critical orientation of postcolonial studies has largely been preoccupied with the effects of European cultural hegemony on the rest of the world, tending to rest on an ideological basis of opposition allowing only insufficiently and schematically for the complexity of post-millennial relations and the literature that reflects on this widened perspective of cultural interaction.

Recognising the changes that mass migration and ethnic and cultural diversification were bringing to a nation-state system that seemed increasingly unable to offer the coherence of an 'imagined community', Homi Bhabha argued in his seminal essay 'DissemiNation' that 'we need another *time* of writing that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic "modern" experience of the Western nation'.⁷⁵ This new fictional mode – ambivalently located simultaneously within and outside the discursive time/space of the nation-state, expressing voices, accents and ethnicities with multiple affiliations – was articulated most forcefully in the work of post-migrant writers. For Bhabha, texts like *The Satanic Verses* were redefining national boundaries, articulating alternative modes of subjectivity that were diasporic, nomadic, and hybrid, capable of linking different territories and perceptions of belonging. Rushdie's earlier writings, such as *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983), reviewed the history of postcolonial societies from a perspective that, though critical of colonial domination and its continuing legacies, was sympathetic to the potentialities of political and cultural newness opened up by imperialism's conjoining and entangling of histories. In *The Satanic Verses*, his focus turned towards the contemporary im/migrant experience in Britain, exploring the traumas of displacement while also celebrating the new London that was being shaped by the incursions from the 'margins' to the 'centre'. An international writer in the largest sense of the word, Rushdie's celebration of rootless levity and suspended syncretism as progressive responses to the cultural dislocations of mass migration has been particularly influential in re-situating notions of 'home' and 'belonging' in

⁷⁵ See 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 139-70 (p. 141). Italics in original.

the time/space of diaspora. A different take was offered by Hanif Kureishi, who in novels such as *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *The Black Album* (1995) evoked a vision of ethnic and cultural hybridity that, in contrast to Rushdie's grandiose, magic realist allegories, was more grounded in the mundanities of everyday metropolitan experience. In many ways, Kureishi's writing anticipated the shift towards new black-British urban perspectives in contemporary fiction – recent examples would be Diran Adebayo's *Some Kind of Black* (1996), Courttia Newland's *The Scholar: A West Side Story* (1997) or Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006) – which now seem more dominant than narratives expressing the migrant's experience of Britain. Broadly autobiographical in outline, *The Buddha of Suburbia* depicts the travails of a young bisexual man of mixed Indian and English parentage, Karim, growing up in a London suburb. From Karim's opening words – 'I am an Englishman born and bred, almost' – the subject of hybridity and questions of relocation and belonging are brought to the foreground.⁷⁶ Throughout, the novel emphasises the performativity of cultural, national and sexual identity, looking towards a 'new way of being British' attuned to the cultural flows between and within nations that Kureishi insisted was vital to escape a future marked by 'insularity, schism, bitterness and catastrophe'.⁷⁷ Hari Kunzru's writing is similarly concerned with the instability of identity and the absurdity of a world structured by racial classifications, but as this thesis will go on to demonstrate in Chapter Three, it is more wide-ranging in its targeting of the institutions of empire, both those in the past and the new forms governing the contemporary globalised world.

In their different ways, the novels of Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi articulated the postcolonial mutations and proliferation of subjectivities within a sphere of Britishness that continues to change shape. Certainly since 1990 a multitude of diverse writers with connections to former Commonwealth countries have emerged from the shadows cast by these more established names. Those with roots in the Indian subcontinent include Amitav Ghosh (*The Shadow Lines*), Bapsi Sidhwa (*The Ice-Candy Man*), Sunetra Gupta (*The Glassblower's Breath*), Vikram

⁷⁶ Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 3.

⁷⁷ 'The Rainbow Sign' in *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 55.

Seth (*A Suitable Boy*), Amit Chaudhuri (*Afternoon Raag*), Vikram Chandra (*Red Earth and Pouring Rain*), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*) and Monica Ali (*Brick Lane*). In parallel with the emergence of these authors, many of whom have lived or continue to live in Britain, there is a similar fecundity of writers with generational ties to the Caribbean or Africa, including Caryl Phillips (*The Nature of Blood*), Fred D'Aguiar (*Feeding the Ghosts*), Ben Okri (*The Famished Road*), Bernadine Evaristo (*Soul Tourists*), David Dabydeen (*Harlot's Progress*), Andrea Levy (*Small Island*), Diran Adebayo (*My Once Upon a Time*) and Abdulrazak Gurnah (*Paradise*). Though many of these novels continued to draw on the legacies of decolonisation and diaspora, it has been suggested that there is a trend amongst the new generation of writers towards the acceptance of cultural syncretism as quotidian ordinariness rather than a spectacle of Britain's continued reinvention.⁷⁸ Part of this is the recognition that cultural hybridity is no longer, and perhaps never was, an exception to a concept of identity based upon an illusory unity, or even a multiculturalist notion of unity in diversity.

That a single homogenising mode of Britishness – in many respects synonymous with Englishness – is splintering into a diversity of forms, and will continue to do so under the spread of multifarious physical and technological flows, seems unquestionable. As Lars Ole Sauerberg observes, if this process has led to the emergence of various local regionalisms, aligned with the increased critical interest in specifically Scottish, Welsh and Irish writing, it is also shaping a literature that transcends traditional, regional boundaries.⁷⁹ It would not be an overstatement to suggest that the cultural milieu in which the British novel now situates itself has expanded outwards to encircle the globe. Whereas the world of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century novel could conceivably be mapped in terms of the parochial preoccupations of middle-class metropolitan society, the fiction of the new millennium is conscious of itself as part of a wider literary-cultural field. Indeed, under the conditions of a globalised world that forbids any kind of retreat into cultural or national specificity or self-sufficiency, the question of to what the

⁷⁸ Laura Moss, 'The Politics of Everyday Hybridity: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*', *Wasafiri*, 39 (2003), 11-17.

⁷⁹ *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature: The Implosion of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 2.

adjective 'British' in the context of the British novel actually refers is increasingly in doubt. It is not merely that this always slippery discursive construct has come under pressure by the pluralisation of ethnicities and historical affiliations of British writers, but also that for many novelists writing since 1990 Britain has been conceived, in the words of Lawrence Norfolk and Tibor Fischer, more as 'a launch pad than a terrain in its own right'.⁸⁰ This is to say that one of the literary reactions to a changing global situation where the nation-state is perceived as a restrictive rather than enabling framework has been the tendency for British writers to set their work elsewhere, or at least to situate their portrait of Britain and its history in an international context. Recent examples of this transposition and expansion of settings and themes may be found in Tibor Fischer's depiction of postwar Hungary in his Booker-shortlisted *Under the Frog* (1992), Giles Foden's study of Uganda under Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), and John Lanchester's *Fragrant Harbour* (2002), which charts the development of Hong Kong over the course of the twentieth century. Indeed, an article published in the *Independent* in 1993 opined that not writing about contemporary Britain appeared to be a growth industry during the '90s. Rather than a celebration of this new imaginative mobility, however, the piece was an elegy for a dying literary landscape overshadowed by the superabundance of American society:

Each time a good English novelist crafts a story not about England today, what does that do to England? Surely it must change the literary landscape ever so slightly, so that when you walk around England these days, it appears less . . . interesting. Less . . . mythic. Less like a place where important things are happening. And you wonder – if England seems a more diluted, washed-out kind of country these days, maybe that's because it is. Or perhaps people simply think it is – which might amount, in the end, to the same thing.⁸¹

In contrast to this notion of Britain, or at least England, as a kind of imaginative dead zone – a view that is suffused with post-imperial nostalgia for a past time of grandeur and significance – it is just as plausible to see the diversification of subjects and settings in contemporary fiction both as a sign of literary self-

⁸⁰ Lawrence Norfolk and Tibor Fischer (eds), *New Writing 8* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. xiii.

⁸¹ William Leith, 'Where Nothing Really Happens', *Independent on Sunday*, Review section, 2 May 1993, p. 14.

assurance and as evidence of the shift from an insular to a global culture. On one level, as Peter Childs recognises, “British” fiction is simply a matter of passports and residency, just as it is one of language’.⁸² To take the example of an author such as W.G. Sebald: despite neither writing in English nor being born in Britain, his long-term residency in East Anglia meant that he could be claimed as a British writer. Similarly, David Mitchell, one of the novelists discussed in this present study, has lived in Japan for most of his adult life and has primarily written about countries other than Britain. If both authors are British in a problematical sense, their work also articulates forms of identity less dependent on the limitations of individual selfhood and the nation as supporting frameworks.

As the hybridity of nations and cultures becomes ever more complex and more explicitly recognised, new myths of what Britain and British fiction are, or could be, are taking shape. Whilst ‘domestic’ postcolonial novels such as Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003) – both of which depict modern, multicultural London – continue to attract critical attention for reasons that may come to seem increasingly anachronistic, the widening of cultural reference points and the mingling of ethnicities and heritages over the last two decades of the twentieth century have also given rise to narrative strategies that are more globally oriented. The work of Salman Rushdie has already been touched upon, but it will be returned to here because the ambit of his writing since *The Satanic Verses* has progressively expanded beyond the national or regional perspectives of his earlier novels, and in this respect his fictions may be seen as most closely related to those of the writers explored in this thesis. The narrative of his most recent novel, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), shuttles between Kashmir, the United States, France and Britain, covering a period from the 1930s to the present. Centred on the violent and opposing political interests surrounding the disputed territory of Kashmir, Rushdie’s text situates the conflict within a much larger geopolitical context than that of the post-Independence India and Pakistan depicted in *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*. In particular, the novel ties together political developments in South Asia with the globalisation of the power of the United States

⁸² *Contemporary Novelists*, p. 20.

after the conclusion of the Cold War, as well as with the evolution of militant religious ideologies of the kind embodied in the terrorist attacks on New York in September 2001. As one of the characters in *Shalimar the Clown* reflects, 'everywhere was now part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete'.⁸³

What is being disrupted here by the multiple affiliations of postcolonialism and the new order of global relations is an earlier perception of national history. If novelists of the 1980s were primarily concerned with the narration of the nation – the fragmenting body of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, for example, is metaphorically entwined with the destiny of post-imperial India – this is not the focus of Norfolk, Kunzru and Mitchell, whose fictions, as I will show in the chapters that follow, open up alternative frames of reference for contemporary identity and citizenship that draw upon the deterritorialised morphology of flows, routes and networks. The rapidity and the intensity of the changes that have taken place over the last twenty-five years has meant that literary narratives have often been tinged with a sense of apocalypticism, with texts meditating upon the atomisation of self and society, the collapse of past and future in the dead-time of the present, the commodification of culture, and, most recently, the 'global' split between Islam and the West. Yet these cultural responses may be interpreted as symptoms of the movement towards a less domineering relation to modernity, demonstrating a new awareness of plurality and multiplicity and unconsciously gesturing towards an emerging logic and structure of rule no longer reliant on fixed boundaries and barriers. As the constitution of Western societies shifts under the influence of migratory movements and the globalisation of media technologies – generating new patterns of human interaction and interdependence both above and below the level of the nation-state – modes of storytelling are becoming apparent that at once encode and seek to comprehend the new fluidity of networked global relations. Aside from the three writers discussed in the main body of this thesis, one could make reference to Simon Ings's recent novel *The Weight of Numbers* (2005), whose

⁸³ Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 37.

tangled plot weaves a shimmering web of contiguity and chance spanning the past six decades, bringing together characters from different continents, periods and experiences in a way not dissimilar to David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Like Mitchell's text, the presiding philosophy of Ings's novel is the interconnectedness of lives and narratives: one of the plot strands involves the evolution of early theories about cyberspace, and the prophetic image of a virtual net thrown over the world operates as a guiding metaphor permitting imaginative links to be made between such diverse subjects as the development of electroconvulsive therapy, internecine conflict in Mozambique, human trafficking, and the legacies of the Second World War. The use of decentred, interleaved narratives, however, is not merely confined to literary fiction; recent films such as *Crash* (2004), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Syriana* (2006) and *Babel* (2006) have employed similar techniques, and it could be argued that Robert Altman was exploring these methods even earlier, though perhaps for different aesthetic reasons. Certainly *Babel* explicitly confronts the issues raised by the phenomenon of global communications, highlighting the difficulties of connecting with others even as our lives are inextricably intertwined.

The opening chapter of this thesis offers the view that the complex array of economic, social, political, cultural and technological processes contributing to the notion of 'globalisation' has transformed our understanding of the contemporary world, giving rise to new conceptions of identity and difference. In addition, I suggest that while the dominant literary responses of British novelists during the 1980s and early '90s were sensitive to these material changes, their fictions generally framed these as crises of Western modernity rather than prefigurations of a new cartography of global flows and exchanges, hence the tendency to fall back on the discourse of apocalypse. Over the following chapters, I hope to demonstrate how the narrative strategies and new subjectivities articulated in the work of three significant contemporary writers yet to enter the mainstream of critical discussion – Lawrence Norfolk, Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell – signal new directions for fictional approaches that have been emerging in the British novel over the last fifteen years, which are broadly consonant with the surfacing of discussions about globalisation. In the next chapter of this thesis, in order to traverse the space between the 1980s generation and writers such as Kunzru and Mitchell, I will look

at the transitional work of Lawrence Norfolk whose historiographical global fictions intertwine history and myth, past and present, fact and fable in ways that fit the templates of neither postmodernism nor postcolonialism but instead point towards a different way of conceiving international identities and relations than that of Western imperialism, if not quite still that of 'Empire'.

2

Lawrence Norfolk: Global Myths

The past does not come to us smoothly across the passage of time. It erupts and resonates in our time as a disconcerting and discrete event: as the voice and body of the other that challenges our own bodies and time.¹

Lawrence Norfolk announced himself on the British literary scene with his precocious and wildly inventive debut novel *Lemprière's Dictionary* (1991), whose expansive scope, complexity and ferocious erudition bespoke a powerful and original new voice.² Still only twenty-seven, Norfolk's stylistic virtuosity, along with the vertiginous intricacy of the novel's plot and its dense layering of rich historical detail, garnered high praise, though its digressive sprawl and verbal excess also exasperated some critics. Norfolk's text makes formidable demands on its readers, and not only because of its massive length: its interwoven plotlines range disjointedly between jumbled chronologies and scattered locales, whilst the fluid narrative viewpoint often relates events from the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives of different characters. If this suggests the desire for a kind of dizzying synoptic overview of the world that the author has called into being, then for Norfolk such 'messy, flawed, excessive' narratives reflect a modern reality that always 'exceeds, and outstrips, and exasperates', and that may only be framed imperfectly by the exorbitant proliferation of stories.³ His defence of the importance of length to the modern novel in conveying the complexity appropriate to contemporary life is made especially forceful considering that the US version of *Lemprière's Dictionary*, which was released soon after the British edition, had around a fifth of the text excised at the behest of the publishers, who were

¹ Iain Chambers, *Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.92.

² (London: Minerva, 1991). Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

³ 'The Honesty of Pagemonsters', *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 September 1994, p. 6

concerned that the more fantastical elements would make the book difficult to market to an American audience with particular expectations of the literary-historical genre. Although the ensuing discussion will refer to the longer British edition, the peculiar history of the novel's publication does draw attention to the difficulty of situating Norfolk's work, which commingles aspects of the historical romance, detective fiction, classical myth, sci-fi and the *Bildungsroman* without conforming to any generic distinctions. The amalgam of history, mythology and tales of more doubtful provenance perhaps has more in common with the fabulist traditions of Calvino, Eco or Pynchon, but Norfolk has also consistently restated the importance of historical authenticity in his narratives.

The plot of *Lemprière's Dictionary* defies easy summary, but a brief overview should serve to orient the analysis that follows. In broad terms, the text presents a fantastical account of the circumstances under which John Lemprière composed his celebrated dictionary of classical mythology, which was published on the cusp of the French Revolution. The chief protagonist is a poetic re-vision of the real historical figure who subjected the corpus of ancient myth to the classificatory gaze of modern Reason, and although there are some tenuous connections between biography and fiction, the novel makes radical departures from all but the most skeletal details of Lemprière's life.⁴ The novel makes overtures to this backdrop of eighteenth-century classicism, but historical anchorage is provided by a number of other disparate events: in particular, the foundation of the East India Company in 1600, the siege of the French port city of La Rochelle in 1627, and the advent of the French Revolution in 1789. What impels the narrative is the gradual revelation of the secret connections braiding together these apparently disconnected moments, weaving documented histories into an audacious fable of imperialism and ancestral vengeance. Following the death of his father, Charles, on the isle of Jersey in bizarre and disturbing circumstances, John Lemprière journeys to London to attend the reading of his father's will and to secure the inheritance of his father's personal effects. Amongst the reams of paper, John discovers a peculiar covenant signed by

⁴ For a more extended discussion of the connections between the real John Lemprière and his fictional alter-ego, see Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 145-7.

his French ancestor, François Lemprière, and Thomas de Vere, one of the nine British investors whose wealth founded the East India Company. This contract attests to François' ownership of a ninth of the Company's stock: it emerges that he was amongst a party of French Huguenots and venture-capitalists – a group known variously as the Cabbala and the Nine – who bailed out the original investors after the failure of the East India Company's first trading venture, and who had control of the business signed over to them. For political reasons, however, it was necessary that this agreement remained secret, and John Lemprière's stumbling inquiries uncover a conspiracy whereby de Vere, along with the other eight British investors, were offered a relatively small cut of the Company's future profits in return for them maintaining the pretence of their continued ownership, and thus remaining the legitimate faces of the more shadowy organisation that continues to run the East India Company as their own private trading empire.

After John's curiosity is aroused, the morass of documents comprising Charles's legacy is reinterpreted in the light of this buried scheme, and his haphazard and bewildered pursuit of various lines of inquiry ultimately unearths a more startling form of covenant that encompasses his own life. The discovery that the contract is made in perpetuity, making John the rightful owner of one-ninth of a company that has, by 1788 – the 'present' of this chronologically dislocated text – grown into an empire vastly more powerful any nation in the world is, however, only one aspect of John's relationship with the Nine, which is more than that of a simple cash-nexus. Prompted and guided by the figure of Septimus, a friend with an enigmatic relationship to the Cabbala, Lemprière pieces together the disparate papers left behind by his father and begins to trace the dim outlines of a more mysterious structure of ancestral indebtedness and historical responsibility. An inveterate reader of texts, John's trawl through this archive reveals that his father, along with a succession of ill-fated Lemprières before him, had spent his life investigating the clandestine activities of the East India Company and its secret masters, and his father's gruesome murder at their hands is the final movement in a recurrent pattern binding the family's history to the Cabbala's sinister plots. Each generation of Lemprière becomes ensnared by this ominous legacy, and the death of John's father is simply the most recent interruption in a larger quest threading

through the family line, repeatedly and unknowingly embarked upon for almost two-hundred years. Against the wishes of Charles's letter, which anticipates his son's confusion about his death and begs him not to pursue his doubts and unanswered questions, even urging him to burn his papers rather than read them, John follows in his ancestors' footsteps and is drawn into the labyrinthine convolutions of a design woven centuries before.

For much of the novel John misunderstands the nature of the enmity between the Lemprières and the Company, yet his clumsy investigations eventually bring to light a web of revenge plots spiralling from the catastrophic events at La Rochelle in 1627, an almost forgotten fragment of history that continues to haunt the present. The siege of the city was the endgame of a religious war between the French royal forces of Louis XIII and the rebellious Huguenots in the south of the country who, with support from the Protestant English, had been gaining influence. Fearing a potential coup, Richelieu's forces converged on the seat of Huguenot power and cut off all lines of supply to La Rochelle, repulsing the English ships that had come to the aid of the city and constructing a large fortification to prevent seaward access. Historically, the besieged Rochelais were forced to surrender after the final withdrawal of the English fleet, the population decimated by famine and disease. Norfolk's version of the event, though, is even more catastrophic: fires are started in the city and Rochelle becomes the scene of a massacre as the trapped citizens are consumed in the blazing citadel. The Rochelais are subject to a double betrayal; as well as the plight of the city being ignored by the rest of Europe, the reader later learns that the populace were sacrificed by the nine investors who had access to a subterranean passageway used to move the unlaundered yield of their illegitimate East India trade. To preserve the anonymity of their operation and to cover the tracks of their escape to England, the Nine abandoned their families and compatriots to their fate, with the lives of thousands of innocents becoming the necessary price to maintain their vast profit-making machine. It is this betrayal that splits the Lemprières from the Cabbala and underpins their ancestral opposition to the all-powerful Company; and the unexpended resonance of the Nine's callous act spreads out across nations and generations, warping the fabric of the present as it resounds through history. The deaths of the Rochelais is the debt upon which the

Cabbala's burgeoning economic empire rests – the founding injustice of monopoly capitalism perhaps – and this is also the source of the Lemprières' hatred for the organisation with which they have been complicit. The trajectory of the narrative is towards the settlement of this historical guilt, and John's quest is one of transhistorical revenge that is at once public and personal, since he is attempting to avenge the deaths of ancestors who, like him, have also opposed the Nine and their proxy Company.

The circulation of the narrative around particularly vivid, and generally violent, moments latent within personal and public memory is a recurrent motif throughout Norfolk's *oeuvre*, foreshadowing the sacking of the Tuscan city of Prato in *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (1996), and the connections made between the Holocaust and ancient Greek mythology in *In the Shape of a Boar* (2000). What animates all three texts in differing ways is vengeance for various atrocities, the profound need for a reckoning or settlement of historical debts that continue to bear upon the present: the novels respond to the waves and echoes of human tragedy that ripple outwards through time and space as a form of collective trauma. This symbolic desire for retribution is made flesh in *Lemprière's Dictionary* in the mysterious figure of Septimus – John's friend and guide on his quest – who, the reader comes to understand, represents the contemporary incarnation of the mythical 'Flying Man' of La Rochelle. The provenance of this legendary figure is revealed in an apocryphal account of the siege that tells of the escape of one of the Rochelais from the conflagration: in the last moments of the crisis, it is claimed that a burning child thrown from the ramparts was saved by supernatural intervention. Instead of falling to his death, the infant is said to have taken flight, skimming across the waves and out to sea. This magical sprite is presented as a kind of conduit for the souls of the dead and a focus for their unconsummated desire for justice that resonates through history, an infant vessel for the monumental psychic wound of their betrayal that can find 'no outlet for its overspilling force' (610). Perhaps a dark echo of Walter Benjamin's angel of history who is forced to look back on the ever-accreting catastrophes of the past, the winged spirit is a vengeful embodiment of the memory of this event, compelled to return again and again to the trauma of the Rochelais'

betrayal by the Nine.⁵ Though John is never made aware of his companion's true identity, who has survived for over one hundred and fifty years in various forms, he is covertly aided in his endeavours in the same way as the generations of Lemprières who have preceded him.

Although John's inquiries have the appearance of self-directed agency, he is manipulated throughout the novel by the intentions of ambiguous or sinister others, drip-fed tantalising pieces of evidence and snippets of information both by Septimus and, with more baleful purposes, the Cabbala, who spin out a trail in order to draw Lemprière ever further into their web. Far from wishing him dead, the Nine – who have survived into the present by means of the mechanical augmentation of their bodies, and now desire the youthful invigoration of their enterprise – in fact want to recruit John Lemprière to their ranks, attempting to blackmail the young man into taking up his place amongst them by implicating him in a tableau of elaborately staged murders. Indeed, Lemprière's overwrought imagination and his bookish obsession with classical history make him especially vulnerable to manipulation by the Nine, whose locus of control extends even into the interior terrain of John's psyche. After bearing witness to a series of disturbing events whose iconography recalls scenes from the pages of mythology – including the death of John's father who, like Actaeon in Greek legend, is fatally mauled by a pack of dogs after stumbling upon the bathing figure of a young woman; the apparent transfiguration of a desiccated Covent Garden madame into the sorceress Circe in the apt setting of the 'Pork Club'; and the ritualistic killings mentioned above – Lemprière becomes convinced that his readings of mythological texts have the power to bend reality into their own image, and that his febrile imagination is thus playing a violently productive role in murder. Although John is prescribed the task of composing his dictionary as a form of writing therapy designed to exorcise the unruly demons of his readerly imagination, it gradually comes to light that this is yet another ruse concocted by the Cabbala to ensure his complicity with their plot. The suspicious correspondences between the entries in John's dictionary and the gruesome deaths befalling a number of the city's prostitutes – one of whom is killed

⁵ See Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. and intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 257-8.

by a cascade of molten gold poured into her open mouth in an apparent allusion to Zeus's violation of Danae – turns his manuscript into a signed and dated series of bizarre premeditations, setting him up to look like an unusually erudite serial killer.

In many respects, the technology of the dictionary may be seen as an exemplary form of the eighteenth century's scientific and rational impulses, a system of cataloguing and classification arranged according to the logical, linear structure of the alphabet. As a device for the organisation of knowledge, the dictionary keys into one of the principal emblems of the Enlightenment era, the machine. Technological innovations such as the automata constructed for the French Court by Jacques de Vaucanson – who in Norfolk's text is one of the Nine specialising, like his historical counterpart, in the construction of mechanical marvels – were seen at once as expressions of modern ingenuity and as models for a new kind of civil society founded on the orderly laws of the natural sciences and philosophy. This search for unities between disparate spheres of activity precipitated the reduction of social relations to the imperatives of instrumental rationality, and not insignificantly gave birth to the notion of liberal capitalism as an autonomous and self-regulating system. In addition, philosophical doctrines such as La Mettrie's materialist manifesto *L'Homme Machine* espoused the understanding of the human body as an organic, systematically configured, and logically functioning device animated by physical forces rather than metaphysical notions of the soul. Notwithstanding the emancipatory elements of Enlightenment thought, particularly the centrality of freedom, democracy and reason to its political idealism, the centre of gravity in Norfolk's novel is rooted in twentieth-century suspicions exposing the other side of this dialectic, the tendency towards the subsumption of everyday life by mechanistic principles and regimes, which Michel de Certeau describes as the functionalist 'programmed time' of modernity.⁶ This stereoscopic vision explains the novel's strange mixture of technologies, from the vogue for relatively unsophisticated clockwork toys, such as the writing robot exhibited at the de Veres' mansion, to complex cybernetic systems more advanced even than present-day technologies. Indeed, the cybernetic interpenetration of the

⁶ *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 202.

human and the machine that is one of the novel's most insistent tropes literalises the production of subjectivities under the aegis of a burgeoning technocapitalism and its machinery of state and empire. Amongst the mass of minor characters depicted in mechanical terms, some appearing to be little more than empty mechanisms or puppet-like simulacra, the army of automata constructed to man the Company's East Indiamen represent a powerful symbolic refinement of this logic. These frames of 'copper, zinc, steel and glass' are walking analogues of a life reduced to 'the output functions of a machine', their blood-flows having been replaced by data-sequences and their actions determined by 'billions upon billions of soundless synaptic *clicks*' (355, italics in original). The binary oppositions that support these cyborgs' programmes mimic the logic underpinning capitalist and colonial systems, anthropomorphising a wider diminution of autonomous agency in the text.

The vision of individual sovereignty that formed the hard kernel of the Enlightenment project is thus continually undercut by the figuration of characters as automatons or marionettes, their lives entangled in and directed by inhuman and dehumanising structures they can neither understand nor control. From the economic rhythms of trade and imperial expansion to the transhistorical cycles of recurrence and revenge, the novel is dominated by the workings of large-scale mechanisms that threaten to entirely subsume individual subjectivity into their circuits. Even the cabal of investors who are putatively in control of the planetary flows of commodities and capital routed through the East India Company are revealed to be ultimately inessential to this system, which continues to function after their destruction at the climax of the novel. In part, Norfolk appears to be making a comment on modern processes of instrumental rationalisation, a proposition thrown into relief by the text's description of the Ottoman Empire's bureaucratic machinery, where, in the midst of the aimless circulation of organisational detritus, 'to miss the point is itself the point', with the distribution of messages and flows of information serving only to conceal the yawning emptiness at its centre (411). Beneath the innumerable instruments of government, the trappings of enlightened civilisation embodied in the administration of clerks and committees, Norfolk's empires lack any kind of moral compass or wider social

agenda, their sole desire that the structure perpetuates itself. Likewise, the union between colonialism and capital in the institutional body of the East India Company is depicted not so much as an expression of immoral greed than a mechanism producing particular modes of subjectivity and subjectification. Norfolk has stressed that rather than framing the world of the novel in the terms of humanity's moral codes, he was

much more interested in how the society and the commercial organisation and also the narrative organisation, work towards a particular end, seemingly of its own agenda; that this is in some ways a robotic structure and this economic cycle which took place between, say, Britain and India, or Britain and France in the 18th century, made its own agenda, and that human beings in this were basically pawns in the game [. . .].⁷

Yet, as we shall see, the robotic quality of people and structures in Norfolk's text also seems to be predicated on more modern couplings of organisms and machines, particularly Donna Haraway's conception of each as coded devices, cybernetic assemblages enmeshed in the matrix of contemporary communicative, biological and mechanical technologies.⁸ In fact, Norfolk's re-vision of eighteenth-century imperialism is intimately bound up with contemporary ideas about identity and power. The novel's depiction of the imperialist organisation of global production and exchange looks beyond the apparatus of the nation-state towards the flexible networks of contemporary bio-political regimes, a constitution that Hardt and Negri have termed 'Empire'.⁹ John Lemprière's nostalgia for the Edenic time of myth when 'the world could be plotted from its centre' is therefore set against the backdrop of the interactions between vast global systems whose unimaginably complex relations challenge the human desire for intelligible chains of cause and effect (32).

⁷ Manuel Almagro and Brian Crews, 'The Fiction of Lawrence Norfolk: What History Leaves Out. An Interview', *Atlantis*, 23.1 (2001) <www.atlantisjournal.org> [accessed 20 August 2006], 191-207 (p. 198).

⁸ See in particular Donna Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-81.

⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

The cybernetic amalgam of animate and inanimate alluded to throughout *Lemprière's Dictionary*, finding its most obvious expression in warped bodies of the Nine upon which the alliance of capital and technology inscribes itself, is supplemented by an emphasis on serpentine plots and recurrent patterns that serves to radicalise the Enlightenment model of the rational man-machine. In the evocations of the tangled city streets of London and Paris; of subterranean tunnels and passageways; of sinister conspiracies directing the passage of history; of the endless, indecipherable archives of the East India Company; of shifting nautical cross-currents and navigational patterns; even, as we shall see later, weather systems, Norfolk's text is a succession of interlocking labyrinths. Indeed, even the systemacity towards which John Lemprière's dictionary aspires is ultimately overtaken by complexity, incoherence and confusion, an interpretive opacity resistant to the taxonomic gaze of modern Reason. The scrupulously cross-referenced list of mythological personages, places and events gradually mutates into a 'serpentine thing' as textual connections proliferate uncontrollably to form narratorial networks that remain incomprehensible to the author (203). The most complex of all the mazes, however, is the novel's own convoluted plot, with its numerous dead-ends, backtrackings, odd mirrorings and repetitions from alternative viewpoints. Despite the recurrence of obscure signs and portentous symbols hinting at a key to the pattern – most obviously the 'rough-cut C' that appears in various contexts, which Lemprière ultimately comes to recognise as the shape of the harbour at La Rochelle – the narrative plays these momentary and local configurations of meaning against the possibility of still larger patterns that demand, and yet defy, comprehension.

As the narrative progresses, the conflict between order and flux, accident and design, coherence and chaos, is drawn out into larger and more complex structures. The individual revenge quests pursued by Lemprière, Septimus and the Indian assassin, Nazim – who is dispatched to the metropolis by the betrayed Nawab of the southern Carnatic – are revealed to be intricately, albeit ambiguously, connected with other discrete happenings across the landmass of Europe, including the war between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires, scattered political agitations on the ground, and even the puzzling rearrangement of the ornamental orange grove at

Versailles. This web-like proliferation of narrative strands does not so much clarify the nature of the interrelation between these spatially dislocated events as introduce ever more links in the chain of cause and effect, but we are given to understand that at some level these disparate phenomena are part of a pattern:

Peasant-mutterings over the *robot*-labour draft, a rebellion amongst the dwarves of the Magdeburg circus, Anabaptist ferment in Thuringia, these too wink in and out, on and off. And there are others. The configuration is still unclear in April, but as popular ferment grows, such outbreaks will become more frequent, the beacons more numerous until a long-destined shape emerges from lines implied between one point and another, as a message sent by heliograph confirms the network of stations [. . .]. (392)

Here the image of the systematically configured and orderly machine is displaced by a different logic, that of the decentralised, fluid and mobile network that Manuel Castells, amongst others, has characterised as the currently dominant social morphology and the pre-eminent form underpinning Western modes of thought at the beginning of the twenty-first century.¹⁰ In common with, as we shall see, the writings of Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell, Norfolk imagines the scale of global relations not in terms of a cluster of relatively stable, bounded and self-generating spaces, but as a rather more dynamic field of complexly interconnected systems comprising interactions from the microscopic to the global.

As the focus of the narrative gradually widens, moving from the restricted surroundings of the Lemprières' home on Jersey to incorporate the shipping-routes of East Indian trade, flows of commodities and capital, revolutionary uprisings across Europe and waves of historical tragedy, what is brought into view is the mutual interlacing of local contextualities with distant events and relations. The novel's dilatory movement gestures towards a globalised perspective, but of a different kind to the Enlightenment's modes of temporal and spatial framing, seeking to give narrative form to an integrated, though by no means static, stable or homogeneous, planetary space, a flexible totality that is the collective frame of

¹⁰ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). See also, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, and Robert Hassan, *Media, Politics and the Network Society* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004).

reference for what has been termed our contemporary 'global-human condition'.¹¹ John Lemprière's quest to unravel his own history becomes a journey to the centre of the imperial system, yet even as he penetrates the Cabbala's subterranean lair, the narrative simultaneously leads the reader away from it as it traces a diffuse web of interconnections and interdependencies operating distantly in time and space. Though passages like the one cited above offer the reader thrilling glimpses of immense, panoptical vistas far outstripping the visual and cognitive capacities of any embodied human observer, their effect, and the thrust of Norfolk's text more generally, is to question the very possibility of absolute viewpoints or simplified abstractions of the messy drama of human existence, a theme that is taken up in different ways by each of the novelists discussed in this study.

The novel's portrayal of what it terms the 'Europe-machine', this dense yet ethereal matrix of signals and transmissions, flows and exchanges of disparate orders of information, has less in common with eighteenth-century notions of the machine as a closed, internally-regulated system than with more recent theoretical models placing emphasis on the structural significance of unpredictability, fluctuation, fields of probability and non-linear patterns of emergence and decay.¹² As I have already suggested in the opening chapter of this thesis, theoretical concepts drawn from the New Physics, alongside recent interest in the field of complex systems, have overturned the classical mechanics of the Newtonian universe based on laws of reversibility and equilibrium, reconceiving physical space as a fluxing 'orderly disorder' where chaos and disorder are not aberrations of systems but irreducible aspects of their operation. In these terms, the 'Europe-machine' may be interpreted as a virtual-material plane of global interconnections and interdependencies, a deep and voluminous habitat comprising a multitude of ongoing processes and trajectories of becoming whose complexity stems from the dynamic interaction of vitalistic fluxes and flows rather than linear sequence and teleological progression. Unlike the mechanical or positivistic schemas favoured by

¹¹ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 25.

¹² For a discussion of *Lemprière's Dictionary* and three other novels looking back at the eighteenth century through the lens of contemporary theories of complex non-linear systems, see Lucie Hayes, 'Fictions of Enlightenment: Sontag, Süskind, Norfolk, Kurzweil', in *Questioning History: The Postmodern Turn to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Greg Clingham (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998), pp. 21-36.

Enlightenment epistemology, this connectedness without completion has more in common with the immanent, autopoietic growth of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome or the cybernetic entanglements of organisms and information in contemporary media networks.¹³ However, without fixed horizons and divisions, such as those provided by the structural apparatus of John Lemprière's dictionary, meaning becomes a vexed issue, subject to the fraught passage of translation and dissemination and threatening to become so dispersed as to be rendered practically unintelligible beyond local and provisional moments of coherence. From the impossible airborne perspective provided by Norfolk's text, the interconnected nodes of the Europe-machine appear to coalesce into the unity of form, yet whatever signal it may be transmitting remains all but incomprehensible: 'compared to the network which supports its brief and flickering life, the message itself seems of little import, just as the letter itself is nothing to the mighty Turn and Taxis postal system [. . .]' (393).

As the text goes on to observe, the problem here is one of scale, the difficulty of relating 'human unit to geopolitical mass, monoculture to Euro-system' that is one of the principle lines of tension running through the discourse of globalisation (393). The contemporary re-ordering of temporal and spatial relations means that life conditions are increasingly deterritorialised and subject to the influence of distant social forces, and this has particular implications for modern forms of autonomy. If in some of the more optimistic formulations, the medium of the network gives rise to new, more liberating forms of subjectivity and cooperative modes of habitation based on a recognition of coevalness, it is unclear what, if any, kind of personal or collective agency the novel puts forward. Even though it is, on one level, an aggregation of human (as well as non-human) actions, Norfolk's expansive network has a composite materiality and 'reality' that outstrips, and even obscures, the elements and processes that compose it, its innumerable, jumbled parts secondary to the larger system that is their means of emergence. The gathering weather system that is alluded to at various points in the second half of the novel, ominously prefiguring both the catastrophic recurrence of the siege of La

¹³ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, trans. and Intro. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987).

Rochelle and the storming of the Bastille that will occur in a year's time, is a case in point. For the earthbound spectator, the development of the powerful anticyclone across Europe that marks the opening of the 'Rochelle' section is full of portentous significance, its turbulence simultaneously meteorological, political and textual, but the specificity of the system as a whole remains stubbornly inscrutable:

Local prevailing winds – the mistral, sirocco, tramonta, various foehns – disrupted and contributed until the currents and cross-currents, interference patterns and pressure zones were jumbled together in a weather-system whose complexity outran its observers and left them adjusting windblown instruments. Whole orders of information wafted and gusted past in secret sweet abandon rippling through the billion blades of grass, grains of sand, motes of dust, and if there was an instrument to measure the effects of this system, from its merest nanospan to greatest gigascale it was a land mass nothing short of Europe. Its needles were already twitching, its ports wide open and circuits humming with a music so confused it could only be heard as monotone. But for the perfect observer, for the single invested overseer of this straining engine (498-9, ellipsis in original)

The precise 'message' being transmitted here seems of less significance than the means of transmission, with the narrative focusing on its mode of circulation and the processes through which it produces effects. The symbolism of this atmospheric phenomenon is refracted through the contemporary fetishisation of 'information' as a quasi-material entity, and like our data-saturated reality of networked communications and unbounded flows the ambient environment is noise. In opposition to the Enlightenment's epistemological essentialism, or the notion of history as imbued with a kind of secular providence, the very claims for universal reason that bolstered and even justified the West's colonial expansion, *Lemprière's Dictionary* offers a far less stable foundation where the search for transcendental meaning is converted into a gesture of self-erasure and dispersal. Whilst the spreading interconnections between the novel's numerous systems imply an increasingly integrated and holistic web of relations, stretching across and binding together the spheres of nature and culture, the consequence is only to further accentuate the distance between the locally-embodied individual and the uncontrollable logic of global forces that appear to emanate from everywhere and nowhere.

Nick Bingham's criticism of much of the discourse surrounding cyberspace and the new media technologies is perhaps apposite here. In particular, he observes the tendency to fall back on the idiom of the technological sublime to visualise global relations, which conceives of the world solely in terms of the 'unthinkably complex' with the result that 'individuals tend to be portrayed as drowning in a sea of information, unable to form a coherent identity in a world in which an excess of signs has swept away established measures of space and time.'¹⁴ In part, this is to suggest that the aspect of meaning creation underpinning the concept of 'information' has been fatally undermined. As Norfolk's weather system demonstrates, at its extreme limit, information and noise become all but indistinguishable from each other, not so much opposed entities as elements that remain ineluctably bound together. The vision of complexity as a kind of fluid transaction between signal and noise has much in common with Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (discussed in Chapter Three), a novel that is more explicitly focused on the massively mediated present and the paradoxes of increased connectivity, but which also sketches a world system that is at once self-perpetuating and volatile, subject to unpredictable risks and crises emerging from the dissonant interplay between stability and instability.

These issues notwithstanding, *Lemprière's Dictionary* holds in view the possibility of shaping flux into form and thereby anchoring an identity that threatens to be swept away by the 'complex connectivity' of global relations.¹⁵ The weather passages such as the one quoted above tantalise the reader with the prospect of an elusive 'perfect observer' able to interpret the message transmitted in the ripples of blades of grass – perhaps casting the ambiguous figure of Septimus as an angelic overseer – but to what extent there is a larger consciousness able to divine the significance of the meteorological pattern darting across the geographical machine is left deliberately obscure. For John and the Indian assassin, Nazim, the accumulation of information succeeds not in clarifying their situations but in swathing them in ever more opaque layers, since as mortal human observers they

¹⁴ Nick Bingham, 'Unthinkable Complexity? Cyberspace Otherwise', in *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, ed. by Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 244-60 (p. 251).

¹⁵ John Tomlinson, *Globalisation and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), p. 2.

are denied access to this panoptical space of contemplation where the messages become 'abundantly, blindingly clear' (502). The reader, however, is offered a brief glimpse of a sublime global complexity that seems less a vision of chaotic disorder than a brimming plenitude of multiplicity and unbounded proliferation. The vast sweep of spiralling connections and relations may exceed the perceptual capacities of the individual social atom, but as Steven Connor remarks, 'the sense of not being able to master the hugeness and complexity of things can become a consolation, a way of being at home within one's limits'.¹⁶ The novel's emphasis on 'plot' and 'pattern' provides a reassuring sense of the world's structural coherence, albeit one constantly threatening to reduce existence to the oppressive unfolding or execution of underlying codes. However, this rather deterministic framework is juxtaposed with a sense of the inexhaustible possibilities of worldly becoming, for which a potent image is provided by the text's meditation on the immensity of the ocean:

Could the sea ever become too-travelled, ever become worn? Huge zigzags ran across the ocean's surface as the voyages of possible ships scored their fading trails. Mats of phosphor and waterspouts were the true coordinates, shifting things. A school of whales was an island; invisible junctions of latitude and longitude marked every scrap of flotsam. The mysteries were not polar, but diffuse, dissolved in the corroding brine. (593)

The figuration of the sea as an inexhaustible field of possibility both restores the dynamism of time and space and finds liberation in the absence of subjective mastery. Similarly, the dizzying vertigo induced by the novel's multiplying plotlines opposes a synoptic view of reality where knowledge is fixed in place, as the mediated extension of the Western mind and body across the planet is met with evidence of its own material and perceptual limitations. But if, on the one hand, Norfolk's text finds hope in the dissonances, absences and ruptures that frustrate every attempt at systemic unity, on the other, it refuses to romanticise the real suffering of those for whom the world-system's inequalities are most pernicious. The elaborate representations of women's hunger, loneliness, sexual abuse, torture and murder throughout the novel makes the female body a symbolic ground of

¹⁶ 'Postmodernism and Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 62-81 (p. 74).

suffering, the focal point for capitalism's dehumanising effects.¹⁷ Perhaps the most enduring emblem of the conspirators' unchecked activities is the gold-glutted corpse of the violated prostitute – one of the aforementioned victims of the Cabbala's plot to ensnare John Lemprière – who is reduced to little more than a sacrificial object and potent figure of the commodified body.

What underpins the meteorological disruption and social ferment that overtake the 'Rochelle' section of the text is a powerful demand for justice to counterbalance the overwhelming weight of human suffering. This imperative for the redress and settlement of ethical and historical debts, which is intriguingly aligned with the economic logic of profit and loss that comprises the Nine's own value system, propels the narrative towards its cataclysmic dénouement. The weather system gathering above La Rochelle finds its distorted echo on the streets of London, where a revolutionary uprising, led by an insurgent named Farina, is sparked by the exposure of the hideously mutilated corpse of the first prostitute murdered by the Cabbala, a crime that had been concealed from public knowledge to preserve order. The city is the point of focus for the latticework of dissident lines of desire that are routed through the Europe-machine, the concentration of pent-up energies that have been building throughout the novel finally reaching their tipping-point as rioting erupts on the streets. At the same time, London becomes a site for the 'imperfect translation' of La Rochelle's traumatic legacy, subject to a form of mythic convergence that weaves together discrete times and spaces: 'The engine of Europe hums and spins, twitches in and out of its possible states as congruent details are fed out of the old city, away from the still centre of the anticyclone and into the new metropolitan template' (555). History promises to repeat itself as Farina's torch-wielding mob gathers outside the bourgeois symbol of the theatre, this tableau at once recalling the burning of La Rochelle's citadel and, more obliquely, presaging the impending revolution in France that is to occur on the very next night.

¹⁷ For this very reason, Suzanne Keen's reading of the novel is strongly critical of the ever-escalating scenes of violence involving women, suggesting that 'this sequence of horrors justifies Norfolk's final annihilation of the Cabbala, but it also titillates his readers' as a sadistic form of pornography. See *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 151.

Like the deep structures or ‘attractors’ of complexity theory, where apparently random events can be shown to conform to recurrent patterns and principles, the mob’s vengeance on the wealthy, cultured elite begins to retrace the contours of an older conflict. But as London threatens to be transposed into a resonant surface for replaying of the Rochelle massacre, the process of recurrence is disrupted by a chain of fortuitous events whose configuration becomes the medium of the Rochelais’ ancestral revenge on their murderers. Specifically, these events comprise the docking of three ships in London – the *Megaera*, the *Alecto* and the *Tisiphone* – each carrying its individual cargo of charcoal, saltpetre and sulphur and the accidental disturbance of a clay plug damming the riverbed above the network of tunnels where the Nine have made their lair. The subsequent vortex that is created in the Thames drags the ships down into the catacombs below. As the three vessels are pulled into the Nine’s subterranean domain, their spilt cargoes combine in the necessary proportions to create an immense repository of gunpowder in the uncannily dry tunnels. Only a spark is needed to detonate the material and it is Septimus who provides it, having sloughed off his earthly guise to reveal his true form as the dark avenging angel born from the fires of La Rochelle. The explosion of the vast powder-mine tears apart the honeycombed passages and erupts through the brittle skin of the city above, a spectacle that is laden with symbolism of the vengeful return of traumatic memories buried, but not erased, by the accretion of history. This explosive fissuring of modernity by what it has repressed also reaffirms the notion of history as a mechanism – or perhaps self-organising system – whose equilibrium is maintained by the impersonal workings of natural justice. The names of the three ships whose volatile cargo destroys the Cabbala – *Megaera*, *Alecto* and *Tisiphone* – originate from the pages of Greek mythology, denoting the figures of the *Erinyes*, or Furies, who exacted divine retribution on those who defied the natural order or escaped punishment for their crimes. Indeed, the elements themselves seem to conspire in the ecstasy of the Nine’s annihilation as they are ‘drowned in the rising flood, incinerated in the Furies’ fire, crushed beneath the earth’s dark tonnage’, with their fate presided over by a sprite of the air (624). This archetypal configuration may also be traced back through the narrative, which threads together Septimus’s astral plane, the

cavernous depths of the Nine's underground domain, the watery cross-currents of trade and piracy, and the inferno of La Rochelle that burns through history.

The concatenation of circumstances bringing about the Cabbala's demise is thus not directed by any single individual. John and Nazim follow their own personal quests, but they do so in ignorance and blindness, ever unable to divine the larger circulation of forces in which their stories are entrapped. Even the autonomy of Septimus, who is granted privileged insight and supernatural agency over the 'confused and human drama below', is revealed to be no less subject to the constraints that attend the other characters (563). On the contrary, he is barely a coherent subject at all, presented as little more than a channel through which the unquiet spirits of the Rochelais pursue the vengeance that will finally release them, a 'supercharged particle freighted with the souls of the dead' whose motions are only partly his own (610). Just as each generation of Lemprière is compelled to replay the same conflict with the Nine, Septimus remains trapped by the psychic gravity exerted by the legacy of La Rochelle, condemned to hover between air and earth – and life and death – until a settlement is made to appease the transhistorical demand for justice. Norfolk imagines history as a network of sensations, desires and memories, surges and undertows of untapped energy whose dispersal across time and space disrupts linear temporality and teleological concepts of progress. In opposition to traditional notions of historical agency, individual subjects are figured as nodal points through which fields of force resonate and discharge themselves as they rupture the faultlines of the present, unknowingly drawn into the ritualistic patterns that have become ingrained in the surface of history.

For Septimus, the confrontation with the grotesque and pathetic figure of François – whom he finally learns to be his father, a barely human shell of the man who sacrificed his wife and children to preserve his trading empire – is tinged with the sense that his punishment will be inadequate to heal a modernity that has been warped out of shape. Nevertheless, the novel does offer up Septimus as a *deus ex machina*, an angel of justice able to step outside of the temporal flow and discern the patterns beneath its superficial randomness, and who is empowered to intervene in the passage of history. It is more than a little troubling, though, that

the Indian victims of the Company's extortionate practices apparently have no supernatural protector, compounded by the fact that the fiery demise of the Huguenots at La Rochelle, as well as the lurid murders of white women in London, is considerably more spectacular than the remote suffering of Muslims and Hindus who fade into the novel's background. But perhaps their continued exploitation by the imperial system is one historical truth that Norfolk's text was unwilling to betray with fantasies of reconciliation. Even though the Cabbala is destroyed at the end of the novel, the East India Company is unaffected, its trading networks having spread far beyond the mastery of a secret cadre of investors. As history tells us, the Company will retain control of the subcontinent until 1857, when the British government takes over in the wake of the Indian Mutiny.

Norfolk's welding of fabulous elements to concrete historical detail may be chastised for departing from the world of facts, records and antiquities, and thus twisting history into a kind of theatre-piece, but this would be to misunderstand the relationship between myth and history in the novel. The modulation of history and the reworking of mythic structures in *Lemprière's Dictionary* seems impelled less by postmodernism's deconstructive ambitions or the self-conscious flaunting of artifice than by the desire to connect with different orders of truth beyond the empirical. In binding the factual and fantastic together almost inextricably, the narrative takes on an allegorical texture that is not simply a fabrication of the past, but a medium through which the past may speak in dialogue with the present. Elsewhere, Norfolk has disparaged the tendency for historical fiction to slip into a fetishistic relationship with the past, whereby events are 'wrapped up in a gauze of beautifully applied historical gestures' that, if it furnishes them with a patina of authenticity, also defuses their emotional force.¹⁸ Counter to this idiom of 'costume drama', the novel's experimentation with myth and fantasy invites more intuitive readings of history, combining the experiential, emotional and primordial elements that, alongside rational modes of understanding, are essential to what might be termed, following Heidegger, our ontological being-in-the-world. Indeed, whilst drawing attention to the dangers of aestheticising reality, Norfolk suggests that humanity

¹⁸ Manuel Almagro and Brian Crews, 'What History Leaves Out', p. 196.

cannot but live mythopoeically by means of various forms of story-telling that register and enframe our sense of the world, but always partially and imperfectly. His writing situates itself on the interface between the real and the imaginary, and in a similar way to dreams that bear on the waking mind with a logic and truth that is not immediately apparent, this mode of historical consciousness commingles a sense of presence and distance that acknowledges both the materiality of the past and its continued becoming in transaction with the present. As I will go on to suggest, Norfolk's work is infused with a sense of ethical responsibility towards the lives, objects and events that once existed yet have passed into obscurity; and the motif of vengeance reiterated in successive novels may be seen, in part, as a continued restatement of the necessity of doing justice to history.

Such a project is, in principle, unending, since it refuses the possibility of ever being at peace with the dead. In this sense, the restoration of harmonious balance in the final part of *Lemprière's Dictionary* is surprising: Septimus, freed from the encumbrance of his debt, ascends into heavenly lightness and tranquillity, Lemprière completes his dictionary and leaves London, and the insurgent Farina melts away as order is restored to the city. Though much escapes Lemprière and Nazim on their individual journeys into the centre of empire, leaving many of the labyrinthine intricacies of the plot unfathomed by its central players, both find a measure of fulfilment and reconciliation with their respective pasts at the end of their quests, albeit at the cost of Nazim's life. But by pointedly ending the narrative on the eve of the French Revolution – which in the novel has been carefully arranged by the Nine, who seek their own revenge on the Catholic monarchy – the conclusion of Norfolk's text is haunted by the premonition of a coming disorder that will tear up modernity's old foundations, suggesting that this point of stillness and equilibrium can only be momentary and will soon dissolve into the wider flux of history that ebbs between order and chaos, accident and design.

★ ★ ★

If *Lemprière's Dictionary* examines the age of Enlightenment through the prism of late twentieth-century concerns and disillusionments, Lawrence Norfolk's second novel could be said to rehearse the gesture, though here the focus turns towards the early sixteenth century and the Renaissance. Like his debut novel, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (1996) is a *big* book, even longer than its already considerably weighty predecessor and if anything even more panoramic in scope, its tangled narratives stretching between Europe, Asia and Africa and layered with rich historical detail.¹⁹ The book's tumbled multitudinousness and the excessive, baroque complexity of the plot is suited to the world that it inhabits, an era of rapid expansion that was just beginning to embrace a new global vastness ushered in by the discovery of the New World and the inauguration of the European seaborne empires. In many ways a companion piece to *Lemprière's Dictionary's* fantastic depiction of the vicious greed and rapacious imperialism of the East India Company, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* explores the power struggles between the growing empires of Spain and Portugal, who are competing for the favour of the corrupt and decadent Pope Leo X. This scramble for papal approbation is understandable: whilst the East India Company has been regarded as the world's first multinational corporation, it was preceded by the Roman Catholic Church which, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, was able to finance and regulate global trade and held considerably greater economic and political influence than any single nation-state. Ongoing territorial disputes between the Portuguese and the Spanish led to the publication of a papal bull that drew an imaginary line down the flat map of the world, demarcating where Spain's colonies ended and Portugal's began. After learning that Leo X is preparing a new bull proposing to extend 'the Pope's Line', with potentially enormous repercussions for East Indian trade, ambassadors from Spain and Portugal vie for the Pontiff's esteem in order to guarantee possession of their overseas conquests. A lover of exotic gifts from faraway places, the pope lets it be known that he desires another beast for his menagerie: the fabled adversary of the elephant which, according to Plinius, is the rhinoceros, although this mysterious animal is known in the text by a plethora of alternative names. The none-too-subtle subtext of this whimsical

¹⁹ Lawrence Norfolk, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* (London: Vintage, 1996). Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

request is that whichever nation procures the beast – thus enabling the Pope to stage a spectacular battle between his elephant, Hanno, and its symbolic nemesis – will be favoured by the papal bull bestowing sovereignty over other lands and people.

Despite its apocryphal appearance, the story of the competing Spanish and Portuguese argosies that set sail in search of this exotic, quasi-mythological creature is in fact rooted in historical record. As in the novel, history documents the sinking of a Portuguese ship off the coast of Italy in the winter of 1516: amongst the flotsam and jetsam that washed up onto the beach was the sea-bloated corpse of a rhinoceros, which had made the long journey from Gujarat only to drown with the rest of the crew tragically near to their destination.²⁰ There are also several other ‘real’ events on which the plot is anchored, including the massacre of over fifty thousand civilians in the Tuscan city of Prato by Spanish troops assembled by the Medici family; the tenth-century war between Christianising Germanic and native Wendish tribes on the Baltic isle of Usedom; and the destruction of the sacred and semi-mythical city of Vineta on the same island, which is said to have collapsed into the sea during a storm tide as divine punishment for the sinfulness of its inhabitants. If this last event is on the very borderlines of historical truth, the commingling of documentary history and fabulation throughout the course of the novel makes distinguishing between fact and fiction a formidable task. Like Norfolk’s previous novel, the various intertwining narratives are laden with empirical and sensual detail, evoking the decadence of Rome’s grand architecture and its less salubrious underside of alleys, flophouses and waterways; the hoary ruggedness of Usedom’s battered coastline and the similarly phlegmatic islanders; and the stifling humidity of the rainforests of Western Africa where the cultural traditions of the indigenous peoples mingle disastrously with those imported from Europe. It is the sheer physicality of description – alongside the portrayal of a host of real historical figures and the painstaking intricacy of the text’s authenticating detail – that lends the novel its patina of verisimilitude even as it braids this

²⁰ For a fuller contextualisation of this event and a description of Pope Leo X’s exotic menagerie, see Silvano A. Bedini, *The Pope’s Elephant* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), particularly Chapter Five, ‘The Ill-Fated Rhinoceros’.

together with allegorical motifs. Indeed, on this question of the overlap between truth and artifice, Norfolk has asserted that he tries ‘to drive a chisel between fact and fiction’, seeking ‘the look and feel of fact’ but without being imaginatively bound to it.²¹

Whereas the portrayal of British imperialism in *Lemprière’s Dictionary* has been criticised for playing down slavery, emphasising Indian riches and sympathising most with the Europeans callously exploited by the foreign masters of the East India Company, *The Pope’s Rhinoceros* brings to the foreground the institutionalised looting, abuse and human misery – both indigenous and distant – that lies beneath Spain and Portugal’s scramble for favour, the Pope’s childlike self-indulgence, and the gilded opulence of Rome’s churches.²² If India remains a largely peripheral setting in Norfolk’s first novel, his second journeys further afield, and as it does so gives voice to the remote victims of imperial expansion, without romanticising either the centre of European ‘civilisation’ or the indigenous culture of pre-colonial Africa. Much of the story takes place in three theatres of action: an obscure Baltic island off the coast of Pomerania, papal Rome under Leo X’s sovereignty, and the West African kingdom of Benin newly discovered by Portuguese traders; but what is particularly interesting about *The Pope’s Rhinoceros* are the links in the narrative chain that stretches between these spaces. Beyond the quest for the rhinoceros that drives the plot, the text takes shape from the echoes, reverberations and distorted translations of myths, stories and ideas between and across continents, with this intriguing interplay of contextualised – albeit grossly unequal – histories contributing to form described by one critic as a ‘network that is both implicated, global and disjunctural’.²³ Disparate places and events are connected together by the rhizomatic skein of the people and narratives passing between them, and the text’s fragile coherence seems permanently on the verge of dispersing entirely, mimicking the shifting convections of the seascapes that are the novel’s most persistent trope. As my reading of the text will contend, this mutual implication and intertwining of asymmetrical narratives as they flow across cultural

²¹ Quoted in Alice Thompson, ‘Horned Dilemma’, *The Scotsman*, 4 May 1996, p. 16.

²² See Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, p. 149.

²³ Brenda Cooper, *Weary Sons of Conrad: White Fiction Against the Grain of Africa’s Dark Heart, Travel Writing Across the Disciplines*, 3 (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 69-99 (p. 85).

and terrestrial borders at once unsettles and interrupts the imperialist arrogance that carves dividing lines across lands and oceans.

Much of the middle part of the novel centres on the teeming papal city that ‘jabbars in a hundred dialects, a thousand irritated conversations’ (155), taking in the vicious political and clerical manoeuvrings in and around the Vatican, illicit liaisons in its officials’ bedrooms, and the buried tale of the Pope’s involvement in the mass slaughter of innocents at Prato in 1512. Perspectives on the plotting and debauchery of Rome’s elite are also juxtaposed with views from ground level: those of the beggars who eke out a living on the filthy, verminous streets; of the *hoi polloi* populating the bustling markets and taverns; and even of the sewer rats whose internecine war mirrors the colonial conflicts in the world above. In a squalid, damp-ridden hostel situated in the dingiest quarter of the city, the novel’s protagonist, Salvestro, sets up temporary lodgings, having made the arduous journey from Usedom with a company of fractious monks, for whom he has been enlisted as guide along with his burly but simple friend, Bernardo. The motivation for this long pilgrimage is to beseech the Pope for money to rebuild the monks’ crumbling abbey that, like the drowned city of Vineta on whose former site it has been built, is being steadily reclaimed by the sea. Led by the saintly but unpopular Father Jörg, the monks of Usedom join the crowds of petitioners who gather every day outside the Vatican hoping for an audience with the Pontiff. But their diligence proves to be futile: His Holiness is more concerned with the secular pleasures of lavish feasts and entertainments than the spiritual and material deprivations of his flock, particularly those of obscure monasteries in outlying areas. As the months drag by – and the priests’ meagre reserves of coin gleaned from pawned relics are exhausted – support for the Prior gradually dwindles and the Chapter disperses, some finding work on the construction of the Basilica, others reduced to rag-clothed vagrancy on the streets. Only Jörg and the loyal HansJürgen retain dim traces of their faith – the former afflicted by blindness and becoming ever more emaciated as they persist in their mission – and pin their hopes of redemption on the benediction of a Pope who is ignorant of their very existence. Yet as we shall see, this quest, like the manifold others criss-crossing *The Pope’s Rhinoceros*, is

tinged with a modern sense of futility and disillusionment with 'heroic' journeys of discovery and triumph.

Sandwiching this monstrous city of 'waste, muddle and noise', are two other settings: Salvestro's birthplace at the very beginning of the novel, and the Africa to which he adventures near its end, before returning to Rome and ultimately back to Usedom (185). Though on the surface there would appear to be little to connect these places and their distinct histories, the text's juxtaposition of the pre-Christian Baltic island and pre-colonial Benin generates unexpected resonances. The text's opening section depicts Salvestro's return to Usedom – his native land and the site of childhood trauma and loss – and his attempt, with the assistance of Bernardo, to plumb the fathoms of the icy waters in a makeshift diving capsule in the hope of discovering the mythical lost city of Vineta. The legend of this prosperous port and citadel-temple of the Slavic deity, Svantovit, which was purportedly destroyed in the twelfth century, has been passed down for generations by Salvestro's ancestors, and his memories return repeatedly to his mother's spoken accounts of their history. She tells him of a war that lasted a hundred years as Christian invaders built their churches and violently suppressed the traditions of the indigenous pagan dwellers, destroying their temples and cursing their god. On the eve of a final battle, the conquering army of Henry the Lion witnessed a ferocious storm that engulfed Vineta, tearing it loose from the outcrop on which it rested and casting both to the bottom of the sea:

Somewhere below its surface was the city they had come to sack , the temples to raze, men and women to cut down, children's heads to dash against vanished walls, all disappeared, sunk out of reach, still to be done. The wound never bled. They were alone, every man foraging in his soul found an appetite only sharpened by the stark disappearance set before them. A promise had been made, but the victory was ill-defined and beyond them, in some inconclusive region of convections and sluggish movement. (26)

The soldiers' lust to 'dip their hands in godless blood' finds no fulfilment at the terminus of their long journey, with their holy mission to annihilate the heathen islanders ending in a victory of sorts, but one whose ambiguous form cannot satiate the desires that have driven their crusade. In contrast to the anticipated moment of

resolution and finality that will imbue their quest with meaning and narratorial coherence, the army's ultimate confrontation with the sea's 'limitless vista of nothing' offers little sense of an ending to lend their mission teleological significance, betraying the desire for plenitude that underpins all quest narratives. This sense of falling short, of an unbridgeable gap that exists between the actions available to us and the ideal form to which they can only fail to measure up, permeates Norfolk's writing both here and in the hunt motif structuring *In the Shape of a Boar*.

As demonstrated by the spectral presence of the La Rochelle massacre in *Lemprière's Dictionary*, powerful desires do not dissipate with the passing of time in Norfolk's work, but rather gather to form charged fields of force whose unexpended energies surge through the layers of history. Just as the trauma of the Rochelais clusters into recurrent symbolic patterns, the rage of Henry the Lion's battalions at Vineta's disappearance accumulates into jagged and tenuous lines of stress that course through this patch of land. The monastery that is built on the former site of the city, and, centuries later, is beginning to crumble, is at once a 'monument to [the Christians'] bafflement' and a repository of the impotent fury of the Lion's long-dead army (26). While listening to the monks' chanted plainsong, the incumbent Prior 'hears a different music dripping through the stones, a corrosive music of rage and voiceless purpose' (33). Acting as a conduit for these flows of psychic energy, the church's foundations are being steadily corroded and parts of the structure have already slipped into the sea, their subsidence threatening to re-enact the collapse of the city that occurred centuries before. History is re-imagined as a volatile, non-linear system where the perturbations left by past actions and events have the capacity to build in intensity as they are carried into the future, with the passing of time leaving some aspects of the past to fade into obscurity whilst others become seismic convulsions carving fissures across the present.

Though Vineta is lost to the turbid depths of the sea – Salvestro's endeavours to reach the city inside a modified water-barrel predictably come to naught, and almost claim his life – his forebears are described as 'a water people', and he is haunted by his mother's assertion that their ancestral home and its inhabitants are preserved intact beneath the surface of the water (12). Echoing the fabled city of

Vheissu in Thomas Pynchon's *V*, the Vineta of Norfolk's text functions throughout as a limit-point of desire, perhaps inviting comparisons with the Lacanian Imaginary and its always withheld promise of unitary presence and full subjectivity. For Salvestro, Vineta is the site of an irrevocable past and identity that remains tantalisingly, agonisingly, out of reach. The undersea city provides anchorage for Salvestro's sense of selfhood, but the influence that this mythical site holds over his imagination simultaneously threatens to displace his own lived history and constrain his future. Indeed, Vineta is implicitly linked with the absent maternal body from which Salvestro has been separated twice over, figured as an originary womb space to which he longs to return. The reader learns that the defining experience of Salvestro's life was witnessing the brutal murder of his mother by the bigoted and superstitious Christian islanders, who shunned the two of them yet were fearful of their pagan beliefs. The family were the last remnants of a community and culture on the verge of extinction and kept alive only through the stories told by Salvestro's mother, their obvious difference – the mother had 'the blackest hair on the island' and spoke words that even her son was unable to understand – viewed as marks of savagery (18). Salvestro's guilt stems from the unwitting part he played in his mother's death: he had recounted her secret tales of Vineta and Svantovit to his childhood friend, Ewald, which were subsequently passed on to Ewald's father, for whom Salvestro's mother scratched a living, gutting fish. Whilst his mother met a horrifying end, drowned upside-down in a water-butt by a posse of islanders, Salvestro managed to escape his own death by water and swam half a mile to the mainland to roam the woods as a feral child before being pressed into the service of a band of mercenaries. If Bernardo's interest in Vineta is largely the promise of recovering its sunken treasure, Salvestro's quest for the chimerical city thus may be read as an attempt to reunite himself with his lost parent and his now vanished people, and to suture his splintered subjectivity that is torn between the circumstances of his birth and upbringing and the effort to re-fashion himself in the present.

The reader learns that the name carried by Salvestro conceals another: as a boy he had been known as Niklot, this name being the only trace of his past life that has been almost entirely erased from history. The ambiguous figure of the 'Water-

man' that reappears throughout the novel, which is both the image of his reflection in the surface of the water and a second self suspended between corporeality and dissolution, signals the bifurcation of Salvestro/Niklot's identity (75). This aqueous creature represents 'the other path he might have taken' on the night of his mother's drowning, namely the downward plunge towards Vineta and the same watery oblivion claiming her and his ancestors (75). Just as the sea bears no trace of what has passed through it, the Water-man exists on the outside of history, a virtual self abandoned to give birth to the figure who was washed ashore and came to be known as Salvestro (a name that translates literally as 'found in the forest').

Salvestro's liquid twin, then, is the embodiment of Niklot, the alter-ego that did not survive and is 'of a piece with the drowned Vineta'; and like the simulacrum in Lacan's mirror, the Water-man holds out the possibility of a unified subjectivity that may only be felt as an absence or lack (75). Salvestro is driven onwards by a desire for ontological unity and belonging, yet the passage towards the wholeness of the Imaginary is a deathly one, for mergence with Niklot, his mother and Vineta would involve his own negation beneath the icy waters. In addition, the text implies that although Salvestro appears to live on as 'the last of his kind' (753), it is the ghostly, revenant figure of the Water-man that is Salvestro's 'true' form. Salvestro has been reborn, but in the process he has become unstitched from time, transformed into 'a denizen of outskirts' in both spatial and temporal senses, unable to properly fit back into the world he inhabits (75). Consequently, Salvestro's narrative is tinged with a sense of belatedness, as though his destiny is already written in the surface of the water: he is a living anachronism, an interruptive presence simultaneously within and outside the temporality of Western modernity that is being disseminated across the globe by trade and conquest.

How Bernardo and Salvestro come to find themselves bound for the west coast of Africa aboard the *Lucia*, a leaking, worm-riddled vessel manned by a drunken captain and a ragamuffin crew of ex-mercenaries, is the consequence of a complex web of duplicity woven by the Spanish and the Portuguese who, it emerges, are actually in league with each other on the capricious quest to procure the rhinoceros. The rivalry between the nations is superficial, merely the 'likeness of contention' staged for a fatuous pope who is amused by the spectacle of the

contest (520). The Spanish ship that sails from Rome is supposed to offer no more than the pretence of their intention – a rhinoceros has already been acquired from Goa by the Portuguese and is en route to Italy – and Salvestro and Bernardo are the credulous dupes recruited for the purpose, seduced by disingenuous assurances of fame and wealth. However, all does not go entirely to plan, and the *Lucia* is taken over by the renegade soldier, Diego, who was made the scapegoat for the massacre at Prato and seeks both to restore his tarnished reputation and to exact vengeance on the person truly responsible, Cardinal Giovanni di Medici, now known as Pope Leo X. Not party to the agreement between Spain and Portugal, and thus unaware that the *Lucia* was never intended to complete its voyage, Diego and his motley crew haul their mouldering vessel into the Bight of Benin, where they make landfall.

The expedition is guided around the continent's treacherous coastline by another stowaway, who has inveigled her way aboard as Diego's mistress: a former slave snatched from her homeland in West Africa and sold into the servitude of a wealthy Roman household. She is introduced initially as 'Eusebia', but like Salvestro, she too conceals another name and a history violently sundered by colonialism. Back in Africa, Eusebia bore the name 'Usse', and the ichi-marks inscribed on her face identify her as a princess, the eldest daughter of the tribe's priest king. The Nri tribe regard Usse with a mixture of fear and veneration, but she also commands the reverence of the numerous peoples who populate the area, for the Nri kingdom holds religious and ceremonial, but not political, influence over the groups who claim different ethnic origins. As Usse's narrative is sketched in more fully, however, it is revealed that her father and the tribe's spiritual ruler, known in the Igbo dialect as the 'Eze Nri', is dead, and until the burial rite is completed, a successor may not be crowned. Since she is the Eze Ada – the daughter of the king – it is Usse's role to wash her father's body before it is finally laid to rest, and to preside over the inauguration of a male heir. In spite of the clan's patrilineal traditions, the symbolic figure of the Eze Ada wields enormous power, confirmed by Usse's metamorphosis into a 'living ju-ju' as her miraculous return interrupts a meeting of counsellors, headmen, priests and assorted title-holders who have gathered from far and wide to debate the increasingly disruptive presence of white men in the region (611). As well as this sacred authority that lies 'coiled inside the painted body, strong and

untouchable like a python's muscle', the reader is led to believe that Usse has a direct channel to the spirits of her ancestors (611). The line was apparently severed during her three-year exile in Rome, where she waited in vain for her father's instruction, but it is re-established upon her homecoming, and Usse's narrative is repeatedly disrupted by italicised communications between her and the dead king.

The associations between Salvestro's position as the last of Usedom's pre-Christian Baltic community and the situation of Usse's people, whose gods and indigenous customs are under threat by the pervasive colonial incursions of the white men, are unmistakable. Further underscoring the connections between these far-flung territories and their specific histories, Salvestro finds that his nightly dreams are disturbed by barely audible susurrations akin to whispered voices. Similar to a radio tuned between stations, it seems that Salvestro is also able to pick up the interference of Usse internal communiqués with her father, hinting at the potential for exchange and dialogue that cuts across the boundaries of gender and race. Despite Usse's deep apprehension and resentment of Salvestro's 'spying eyes and thieving ears', the messages remain incomprehensible to him, swathed in impenetrable static (604). Norfolk's text offers no idealised dialogue between the white man and the black woman – each are located in cultural contexts that, though yoked together, are the product of different, and grossly unequal, historical trajectories – yet the insistent buzz in Salvestro's head perhaps makes a more significant point about the persistence of distinct, corporeal histories at once within and outside the homogenising grid-lines of globalised modernity and its 'universal' subject. Whilst Salvestro's involuntary reception of Usse's communications with her ancestors confers no divine knowledge, it does register the disconcerting presence of other voices and other bodies whose unassimilable differences challenge colonial binarisms and reveal alternative configurations of the present. Like the pre-Christian city of Vineta that, though submerged, continues to resonate within the new epoch, the disruption of Salvestro's dreams by the voice of the colonial Other punctures a modernity that has violently excluded it, and against which it stages the drama of 'progress'. The novel is acutely conscious of the material restrictions that figure certain truths whilst obscuring others, and Norfolk's perspective admits a less domineering form of subjectivity where, in the words of Iain Chambers, 'the other is

not positioned in order to be deciphered and explained as the object of my discourse and knowledge, but is received as the reverberation, the resonance, of what escapes the intentions of my representation'.²⁴ For Salvestro, interpretation becomes an unstable site of transit, transformation and translation, and in the process of coming up against the limits of his understanding, a threshold or interval is opened up in the linear surface of empire.

The interface between Rome and Benin is created by the European mission of discovery and plunder in which Salvestro is involved, and at the heart of the novel is the question of what happens when histories and traditions cross oceans. What new articulations are produced by the uneven mingling of distinct cultural narratives? The quasi-mythical figure of the rhinoceros is central to this intriguing interplay between West African and European stories brought about by colonial contact. For the disparate peoples of West Africa, the deepening incursions of white traders and settlers can no longer be ignored: the presence of the white men is seen as a 'sickness' threatening to pollute the land and to weaken the ties binding the communities together (605). Yet what these alien invaders portend, and what action should be taken, eludes the elders of the various tribes, who turn to the Nri for guidance. The men of the Nri arrange a palaver to gather together representatives from over three dozen tribes, turning the village of Onitsha into a transitory city, and the people await the guiding words of the Eze Nri. Instead, it is the powerful figure of Usse, momentarily transformed into the fearsome apparition of the Eze Ada, who commands the men, channelling her strength of purpose into a spectacle of irrefutable authority:

Her breath filled their lungs, pumping them so full that if she were to hiss and suck they would collapse, fall to the ground as sucked-out skins [. . .]. Her fingers corked their straining ears and she only had to pull them out for the words to flood their heads and come pouring out of their mouths. They were caged apart from one another and only bound together by the snaking arm which reached out of her and gripped them, each one held singly – she was pivoting, her limbs motionless as though her spine were a stake stabbing deep into the earth where Ala grasped and twirled it slowly between the strong white pads of her fingers. (611)

²⁴ *Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.

Usse's startling proposal is to purify the land through a blood ritual that involves the sacrifice of the herds of livestock on which the tribe's wealth and subsistence depend; a gift to the river that she believes will appease the anger of the spirits and fulfil the wishes of her father. To understand this act, one that Brenda Cooper compares with a similar event occurring in southern Africa in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to unpick the relationship between the advent of the Europeans and the founding stories of the Nri.²⁵

Through a number of scenes which portray an unidentified, and perhaps archetypal, master artisan known only as 'the old man' who is teaching his child apprentice the complex techniques of bronze casting, the richness of the society's oral culture and history is made manifest. Indeed, the telling of tales is inseparable from the process of enshrining the king's body in bronze – the craftsman's sacred role – which is painstakingly executed in stages and layers, incorporating the images of Eze Nri who have come before, just as cultural memory is maintained by the layering and interweaving of myths and stories. The clay stump forming the core of the bronze, however, turns out to be a carefully modelled penis, drawing attention to the phallocentrism of Nri society, where the pantheon of Law-givers and ancestors is exclusively male. Whilst Norfolk's text implicitly criticises the damaging effects that this hierarchy has on the society – Iguedo, the old man's wife, pours scorn on the male fetishisation of their ancestors' stories – the Nri are judged no more harshly than the similarly phallocentric Catholic Church that dominates Europe and beyond.

The boy's apprenticeship in bronze casting is thus simultaneously his initiation into the male world and into their secret stories. One of the tribe's most powerful myths concerns the first Eze Nri, Eri, who is said to have drained the water from the earth and created the three great rivers of West Africa, and whose son, Ifikuanim, cultivated and tamed the land. This tale is widely known, but the bronze-caster goes on to reveal the full, and much less familiar, story of Ifikuanim's nameless brother. After the death of Eri, his sons cut his land in two; whereas Ifikuanim clears the forest, plants crops and farms livestock, his sibling leaves the forest undisturbed and

²⁵ *Weary Sons of Conrad*, pp. 85-6.

hunts animals in the wild. Despite their differences, the brothers are not quite opposites; instead, their ways of life presented as supplementing each other. However, despite his skills as a huntsman, the nameless brother finds that he is unable to feed his people and is forced to encroach on Ifikuanim's land across the river to look for meat. The hunter's punishment is summary: enlisting the help of Enyi, the elephant, Ifikuanim captures his brother and covers his body in a thick layer of clay, with the weight of the sun-baked mud forcing him to walk on all fours like an animal. The humiliation is complete as the brother's hunting horn is stuck on the end of his nose, thus accomplishing the transformation of the forest-dwelling brother into Ezodu, the wild and monstrous rhinoceros. Ifikuanim annexes his brother's territory, planting it with crops, and claims the beasts that the brother hunted for himself.

Put simply, then, the narrative records 'an old mistake' committed by the Nri's founding father, an 'ancient stain' that pollutes their history and now appears to have bled into the present, a legacy that the tribe are unwilling to confront (636). The fable of Enyi and Ezodu lends itself to many different readings, yet what is significant is the way in which Usse, whose privileged position grants her knowledge of this secret usually reserved for men, interleaves it with the growing crisis in the region and another story which she overhears in Rome and has brought back with her to Benin. Crouching outside a door in the grand house where she serves, Usse eavesdrops on a clandestine meeting between the Spanish and Portuguese ambassadors who have been petitioning the Pope, and is struck by mention of her homeland and of the expedition to capture a rhinoceros. Whilst understanding only imperfectly, Usse interprets the Pope's desire to capture and enslave the rhinoceros as the harbinger of the curse on the land bequeathed by Enyi and Ifikuanim, which violated the balance between change and tradition and left to future generations the inheritance of impurity. Most intriguing, though, is the belief that the white men who both trade and take by force, looting and destroying villages, are manifestations of Ezodu, who has returned to reclaim the property that was stolen from him. Though for the Pope the rhinoceros stands as a symbol of the exotic colonial body – perhaps the 'untamed' counterpart to the domesticated and servile elephant – for the Nri, the meaning of the rhinoceros is bound together with that of

the invading White-men. There is an interesting reversal of traditional imperialist discourse here, whereby the Europeans assume the 'wild' and 'uncivilised' qualities attributed to their colonial subjects: 'the White-men were weak and few in number, but there was something fearsome in them' (606). Yet equally pronounced are the allusions to a suppressed filial bond between white and black. It is significant that Usse's interpretation of the European quest to Benin is framed not precisely in terms of conquest, but rather of the recovery of a forgotten connection:

The two men were talking inside. She understood that these people did not know where they were going or where they came from. They had no remembrance of the animal. The streets were like rivers in spate, blind and furious. The men and women were boiling surges and undertows. No wonder their Pope groped for his beast. They had travelled further than their memories. (458)

Further bolstering this notion of a severed kinship, the bronze-caster draws attention to the 'white flesh' of the nameless brother – who dwelt within the shade of the forest – in contrast to the darker skin of the farmer Ifikuanim who 'worked under the open sky, under the sun which burned him' (655, 640). Indeed, the process of forging an effigy of the Eze Nri is laden with the symbolism of the tribe's founding myth: the colourless wax is held within the clay mould in the same way that Ifikuanim's brother was trapped within the hide of Ezodu, but the introduction of the molten bronze displaces the wax inside, which is consumed as it drips into the fire. Hence, the bronze body of the Eze Nri can only be created through the purgation of its waxen, and white, mirror image, just as the integrity of the Nri's cultural lineage depends on the continued displacement of the 'ancient stain' on which it is founded. In this sense, the clan's attempt to purify the land and their cultural identity through ritual sacrifice invokes the same logic of essentialism that legitimated the ethnic cleansing of Salvestro's people, and which is to be deployed by the colonial powers whose incursions will tear apart their traditions and institutions.

The parallels between the history of the Baltic and of Africa are made manifest in one of Salvestro's dreams just before he and Bernardo are cast out of Benin. Fusing together the invasion of Usedom and the incipient colonisation of

Africa, Salvestro imagines himself as part of the army that reaches Vineta only to find it already destroyed. Staring into the sea, Salvestro glimpses the Water-man, his reflection and splintered self-image: 'he glanced down at him again, then stared. Now how had he failed to notice that before? The Water-man was black' (663). But if there is identification between Salvestro's past incarnation as Niklot and indigenous societies of West Africa on the edge of large-scale colonial occupation, the novel is careful not to flatten this landscape into a backdrop for the drama of the white male subject. Indeed, particularly striking about the novel's portrayal of pre-colonial Africa is its recognition of a rich and complex cultural history embedded in sophisticated social structures, contrasting starkly with the objectifying gaze of the European explorers who viewed this difference as a primitive and debased reflection of their own modes of being. The Nri's rituals and institutions are shown to be shot through with the Laws of the Father, yet the juxtaposition of the sovereignty of the tribe's dead king with the vain and corrupt rule of the Pope demonstrates that this society was no more patriarchal than Europe, and certainly no less civilised than a Renaissance Rome scarred by social and political inequity. The woodland through which Salvestro stumbles while fleeing from the Nri may resemble 'another forest, damper and colder' where the child Niklot lost himself, but the text is unambiguous in its rejection of the idea that this place may stand in for the other, as though frozen in the chronology of his past (620). Salvestro's quest to recover or reconstruct a shattered identity, to end his itinerant wandering and find ontological dwelling in a world where 'none of his costumes truly fitted', cannot be consummated in a Benin that refuses to offer itself as an idealised site of belonging (404).

The facts of Salvestro dislocation, self-invention and unrequited desire for 'home', not to mention the novel's allusions to imperialism and the forced migrations of the Middle Passage, would seem to invite postcolonial readings of the text that place questions of hybridity and diaspora centre-stage. Yet he remains a man of his time, with his various roles as Soldier, Guide, Gentleman and Explorer only serving to underscore his acute consciousness of his own inauthenticity. Salvestro's rootless journeying and his positioning as an outsider is framed in quite different terms than the rhetoric of regeneration and renewal that is often brought

to bear on the trauma of displacement. In common with the text's depiction of its various quest-narratives as inevitably compromised – their promise of fulfilment leading only to ambiguity and doubt – Salvestro is not re-cast as a hero in the old mould, but as an ordinary man who is persistently caught up in events over which he can have no influence. Surprisingly, considering he is the novel's protagonist, he is afforded barely any agency at all; rather, he is constantly acted upon by others, his journey less an affirmation of individual will than an endless flight from assorted pursuers who, by the end of the novel, blur into one: 'behind him, the torches muster for the chase and dot the night with their red glows. He might as well be outside the palace at Nri, or in Rome, or Prato, or on the shore of the mainland looking back at the island' (741). As in *Lemprière's Dictionary*, though perhaps more subtly, *The Pope's Rhinoceros* welds the life trajectories of historical actors to the flux of global forces, which circumscribe the horizon of possibilities that are open to them. Indeed, the opening pages of the novel place humanity on the very margins of planetary history, representing the millennia that shaped the landmass of northern Europe through the textual equivalent of time-lapse cinematography where 'an inch of silt marks a thousand years, an aeon means a single degree of arc' (3-4). Viewed in terms of this slow drift of geological time, individual human lives are shorn of their world-historical significance, and made to seem largely peripheral to the parallel subsistence of the sea-creatures populating the Baltic:

A million undisturbed existences floated, swam, spawned, and died before the first keel cut the waves above and the nets descended to haul the sea's fat harvest to the shore. Invasions, battles and slaughter were a vague clamour, dim thuds in the deathly air; the pale bodies sank quietly watched by lidless, curious eyes. Spars and planks drifted off the exploded coast. Dim shapes sank amidst the skerries. (6)

Throughout the course of the novel, the sea recurs as a figure of what history does not record and as the entropic state towards which it moves: motifs of sinking, decay, drift and dissolution imply the moral corruption surrounding the Catholic Church and imperial conquest, but also signal the impermanence of a past that is always on the edge of being forgotten. Norfolk's text – indeed his *oeuvre* as a whole – is concerned with reclaiming such 'soundless, unlit struggles' that go unrecorded

by the inevitably partial chronicles of history (519-20). Nevertheless, his work remains conscious of the instability of the events that it portrays, which is perhaps why it combines mythic textures with a more conventional, documentary mode. The Water-man is an obvious cipher for the spectrality of the past, a protean figure constantly dispersing and emerging, whose image is at once a reflection and a distortion of the surface world. He embodies the events, objects and lives that have slipped through the cracks of history and leave behind no trace of their passing, connecting the pre-Christian Niklot and his lost people with the Nri civilisation that will be obliterated by imperialism. The identity that Salvestro finds in the surface of the water mirrors his discontinuous being and internal exile, a constant reminder of the past that he lacks and longs to inhabit, and which, despite its fragility and elusiveness, seems more palpably 'real' than his present half-life that offers little hope of redemption. Certainly, Salvestro's adventures in far-flung places bring him no closer to the unity and cohesion he seeks so fervently; on the contrary, they come to seem little more than deferrals of the fate that Salvestro escaped on Usedom, and which claimed his watery double. As in all three of Norfolk's novels, however, there must be a reckoning between the past and the present, and it is this imperative that compels Salvestro to retrace his steps, travelling from Benin back to his birthplace, Usedom.

Before Salvestro completes his circular journey, though, he has an appointment to keep with the Pope who awaits the delivery of his rhinoceros from Africa. At exorbitant expense, Leo has arranged for a Naumachia – a theatrically re-enacted sea-battle – to take place in his palatial residence, the high point of which is intended to be the conflict between Hanno, his beloved pet elephant, and its adversarial other. As Brenda Cooper observes, this exotic tableau is suffused with a European discourse that placed its colonial subjects in hierarchies of difference: the praiseworthy traits of the elephant, whose servility and obedience were attributes of the properly domesticated colonial subject, are pitted against the rhinoceros's untamed rebelliousness.²⁶ The Pontiff reads the clash in more rarefied terms: his own readings of Plinius have inspired the conviction that this spectacle will resolve

²⁶ *Weary Sons of Conrad*, pp. 89-90.

into a vision of metaphysical purity, believing that ‘the battle will be a kind of negation, that between the two adversaries lies a third truth, a pristine creature preserved within their caked and coarsened skins’ (688). However, as one would expect in a novel whose multitudinous quests invariably lead to disillusionment, the revelation is not of the kind anticipated. The Portuguese ship carrying Salvestro, Bernardo and their bestial cargo is wrecked off the coast of Italy during a storm, with Salvestro the only one to emerge alive from the tumult. Despite the unfortunate drowning of the beast, not to mention the death of his companion, Salvestro continues to Rome with the animal’s corpse in tow, artfully disguised from the factions awaiting its arrival beneath a pile of manure. Historically, the battered hide of the rhinoceros was indeed recovered from the sea, and, after being stuffed with straw to preserve the body, was transported to the Vatican by the Portuguese. In Norfolk’s playful recreation of the event, Salvestro arrives at the palace perched on top of the animal, whose eviscerated cadaver has been crammed full of bread before being raggedly stitched back together. Notwithstanding the beast’s palpable lack of fighting spirit, the absurd spectacle of the Naumachia commences at the Pope’s behest, and elephant and rhinoceros confront each other in a battle that rapidly descends into carnivalesque farce. As the bread stuffed inside the gutted interior begins to ferment, the effigy of Plinius’s fabled monster balloons in size – ‘its head the size of a water-barrel, its body the hull of a ship’ – before finally, and spectacularly, exploding (735).

Aside from its obvious comic value, this explosive dénouement works at a number of other levels. The body of the rhinoceros is the site where the tangled threads of the novel’s quest-narratives converge, yet the beast that arrives in Rome is little more than a hollow shell, an empty signifier that fails to engender the crystalline image imagined by the Pope. Just as the novel’s ur-quest – the journey of Henry the Lion’s army to Vineta – ends not in the consummation but the dispersal of their purpose as they are confronted by ‘the sapping extent of the sea’ in which all resolutions drift, sink and unravel, the unity of the rhinoceros ultimately disintegrates (26). The hunt for the rhinoceros allegorises the era’s overwhelming passion to explore and comprehend the new global immensity encoded in the world atlases published by Ortelius and, later, Mercator: a passion that was inextricably

entwined with the desire to penetrate, possess and subjugate these fantastic geographies. But it is also a symbol of what escapes its hunger for knowledge, the misapprehensions and distorted understandings that accompanied the dissemination of myths and cultural narratives across continents and oceans. In the same way that the Nri's perception of what the white Europeans represented was routed through the fable of Enyi and Ezodu – with disastrous consequences for the tribe – the figure of the rhinoceros cannot be separated from the carapace of rumours and abstractions that surround it in Rome. The creature is chimerical, changing 'shape and size with bewildering rapidity' as its form is filtered through local gossip and recast by a spate of putative sightings (682); even its name becomes subject to discursive multiplication, known variously as 'The Beast', 'Ganda', 'Ezodu' and 'Rosserus' (though never 'Rhinoceros'):

Backtracking along any one of these reports to their source is slightly less feasible than stalking a shrew through the aftermath of a stampede of a herd of aurochs, for Rosserus is decentralised, operates by seepage, makes no sound and is unimaginable if by 'image' is meant something hard, sharp, and bright, such as a silver brooch in the shape of a unicorn. Its memes are everywhere and nowhere at once, a blackening swarm, multiplying their way through *Ro-ma*. . . . (690; italics and ellipsis in original)

The text's use of Albrecht Dürer's sixteenth-century woodcut of the rhinoceros, which adorns the front cover of Norfolk's novel as well as framing each of its chapters, also alludes to this process of dissemination as narratives are layered on top of each other and proliferate across time and space. Like the bread-stuffed beast that appears before the Pope, Dürer's rhinoceros contains a number of anatomical inaccuracies, most obviously the presence of a smaller second horn on the withers. In fact, Dürer's rendering was accomplished without either him or his contemporaries ever laying eyes on the animal; instead, it was based on another artist's sketch and brief written description. In spite of its errors, the woodcut became enormously popular in Europe and was regarded as a true likeness of the animal, even dominating scientific attempts to portray the species for nearly two centuries. The question of what the rhinoceros means poses itself insistently; yet instead of resolving into knowledge, the beast's symbolic potency fragments and

multiplies, filtered through the pages of Plinius's *Naturalis Historia*, West African folktales, imperialist discourse, papal whimsy, and local gossip. The rhinoceros is a splintered mirror wherein the novel's various characters read their own desires and needs, whilst the object itself remains not so much impenetrable as distributed through a network of other stories. Keying into the morphology of the contemporary 'Information Age' – where the world is figured as a densely connected web of lives and environments – meaning emerges from Norfolk's portrayal of the rhinoceros and the quests that surround it by virtue of the transmission and flow of cultural material across and between disparate spaces, a passage that is fraught with dissonances and ruptures.

But what is the fate of the rootless Salvestro, 'the last of his kind' (753)? Following the explosion of his gift, Salvestro's brief moment in the limelight as the elected champion of the gathered crowds gradually segues into anonymity and collective amnesia, with his form becoming ever more insubstantial as he begins to fade from the city's memory. Before leaving Rome for the final time, Salvestro is presented with the reward for bringing the Pope his rhinoceros: to hear the Pontiff's confession, a pantomime that is loaded with significance considering the Pope's crimes and transgressions. And yet, unlike the elemental punishment of the Cabbala in *Lemprière's Dictionary*, here there is no aestheticised reckoning. Called upon to stand in judgement against this false father who has been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for so much death and suffering, Salvestro finds himself unable to connect the 'plump and jolly Pope' with the drowning of Bernardo and the Portuguese seamen, the massacre of innocents at Prato, or the fate of the Nri thousands of miles away (741). Whilst the Pope is forced to confront the horrific images of slaughter carried out in his name at Prato – his memory haunted by 'the glowing braziers, the tools of black iron' and 'the reek of burning hair' – whether this is accompanied by contrition and penance is left unclear (744). For Salvestro – who at the end of the novel is remembered only in the chronicle of Brother HansJürgen, the last of the monks of Usedom – the only destination that remains is the placid sea off the coast of his birthplace, and the cold embrace of the Waterman in the passage to the drowned Vineta. With no place in the modern era that is

coming into being, Salvestro finally slips outside of history to merge with this mythic womb-space, a death that brings his exile to an end.



The ending of *The Pope's Rhinoceros* stands as an elegy for the passing of an age, heralding the loosening of religious authority in favour of secular forms of sovereignty and the birth of the modern individual who possessed shaping power over their own lives, at least those in certain sections of society. It is also tinged with a contemporary sense of disenchantment with the lure of quests and adventures to distant places, partly a corollary of the disappearance of unmapped and unexplored frontiers in today's globalised world, and partly due to a more pervasive waning of the idealism sustaining such narratives. Both *The Pope's Rhinoceros* and *Lemprière's Dictionary* contest the received orthodoxies of historical record, spinning baroque patterns from seemingly unrelated and frequently obscure events culled from the archive. Through its repeated return to the genealogy of modernity and its dissemination of global geometries of power, Norfolk's work simultaneously traces the cultural mythology of certain images and ideas as they proliferate across time and space.

The author's third novel, *In the Shape of a Boar* (2000), reaches at once further back into history than his previous writings and confronts events that are uncomfortably modern, setting up parallels between a three-thousand-year-old myth and atrocities committed in the last days of the Second World War.²⁷ Reverberating throughout the text, but never confronted head on, are the 'unspeakable' traumas of the Holocaust that have stained the lives even of the survivors who had no direct experience of internment in concentration camps. Although the legacy of trauma is a subject that also animates his previous novels, the difficulty of remembering and representing such moments is marginalised by the desire to make textual and historical connections between apparently discrete events. *In the Shape of a Boar* does find overlaps between temporally distant

²⁷ Lawrence Norfolk, *In the Shape of a Boar* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 148. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses following the quotation.

situations, as well as suggesting the potency of certain recurring symbols and patterns, but the spreading plotlines and rich tapestry of characters and incidents are much more condensed here than previously, and this allows for a more concentrated exploration of the nature of the dividing line between history and myth, and the problem of how these are both established and preserved. The novel's layering of ancient and modern texts is thus directed at metahistorical questions circulating around notions of intelligibility, authenticity and responsibility. The opacity of the past, whose inevitably partial records frame their object imperfectly and inadequately, is articulated by Norfolk in an essay on the poetry of Paul Celan:

Of all the events which have occurred, lives lived, acts committed, almost none survive. The past is made now. Its paths are laid down in the present, and as that present slides into the past, which it does with every passing second, so those paths extend. They lead back, but intransitively, into a vast hinterland of lost histories: events, objects and lives which have passed unrecorded, or unwitnessed, or have consumed such witnesses as there were.²⁸

Though the inquiries of historians must stop where the evidence gives out, artists are permitted to continue, and Norfolk's third novel is motivated by a sense of obligation towards these self-consuming histories whose reality has been lost down the trackless paths branching away from the narrow trails of history. Echoing Rilke, whose poetry is a touchstone for the protagonists of the text, what Norfolk's work explores is the fraught ethical imperative to 'speak and proclaim', to offer a testimony to the irreducible eventness of the event, whilst also paying heed to the spectral qualities of writing that will always frustrate the hunt for pure, unvarnished meaning (148).

The novel dovetails two stories which take place in the hinterland beyond evidential limits, imaginatively converging two points in history, the first unutterably distant, the second almost unbearably close. By overlaying these analogous texts, Norfolk is once again inviting the reader to draw out recurrent

²⁸ 'The Hunt for Paul Celan's Boar', in *Uncanny Similitudes: British Writers on German Literature*, ed. by Rüdiger Günter (Munich: Lucidum, 2002), pp. 9-20 (p. 17).

historical patterns and archetypal motifs, but this is accompanied by a desire – considerably more sustained than in his earlier fiction – to raise questions about the narrative shaping of historical events and the responsibilities of art, especially to those events whose actuality has grown tenebrous and obscure. Such dark and silent spaces in the interstices of history, sites of the unspoken and the unspeakable, mark a perceptual limit that cannot be easily crossed, even imaginatively; but in their very absence they make mute demands on our historical consciousness through a kind of negative affirmation. Of course, Norfolk’s playful re-visioning of history is always anchored by political and ethical inquiries, but in contrast to the stylistic exuberance and excess of his previous novels, *In the Shape of a Boar* is a more controlled and concentrated work, consistently teasing away at humanity’s debts and obligations to its history. For Norfolk, these fraught difficulties are at once necessary, honest and real:

Necessary because that which most exceeds comprehension is that which most requires it. Honest because in the absence of comprehension only the effort to comprehend may take its place. Real because, despite its resistance to our comprehension, that which happened, happened.²⁹

The hunt threading through the ancient and modern parts of the novel is, then, at once literal and metaphorical, both a quest to slay the ‘boar’ of the novel’s title in its mythic and contemporary forms, and a pursuit of meaning into the zones unmapped by historiography. Structurally, the novel is divided into two unequal sections, each of which represents a different kind of unknowable past. The opening part, entitled ‘The Hunt for the Boar of Kalydon’, depicts a Greece too ancient to have left us its records, and recounts the primordial myth of the titular boar-hunt, a fictional reconstruction of an event that is itself apocryphal. In response to a call from king Oeneus, a band of heroes gathers on the shores of the Gulf of Petras having journeyed from the far-flung places of the ancient world to track the fearsome beast that has been rampaging through the countryside and terrorising the local population. The unnaturally large and ferocious animal was released by the goddess Artemis, who had been slighted by the failure of the king – who is also

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the father of the expedition's golden-haired leader, Meleager – to include her in his offerings during the annual festival of first fruits. The narrative focuses in particular on the figures of Meleager and Atalanta, the solitary female hunter, who become companions and potential lovers, along with the 'night-hunter' Meilanion, the spurned rival for Atalanta's affections. As the heroes advance into the mountainous heartland – losing and then finding the trail, their number steadily diminished by skirmishes with their prey, murderous quarrels with each other, and the catastrophic flooding of a ravine – their progress is shadowed by the lone figure of Meilanion, who peels off from the throng to follow his own perilous path. The hunters gradually tighten the net on their quarry, and the boar is driven back to the place whence he issued, a cave whose entrance cuts through the side of a vast, rocky crater at the end of a narrow gorge. Somewhere within the lightless interior, the wounded animal awaits, and the three surviving heroes cross the threshold to disappear into the darkness. But here the story falters, with the narrator unable to follow Meleager, Atalanta and Meilanion into the cave since what happens within this place is not recorded in the surviving fragments of the myth; thus the end of the hunt and the fate of the hunters remain shrouded in obscurity. The cave marks the horizon-line of what can be known, a symbol for all that has been lost to history and memory without the possibility of reclamation, and it is around this structural aporia that the novel circulates in both its ancient and modern sections.

The second, and more substantial, part of Norfolk's novel is labelled simply 'Paris', and although the most contemporary thread of the narrative does indeed take place in a Paris of the late 1960s, it is interwoven with a series of other spatially and temporally dislocated strands. These are shuffled snapshots from the life of the Jewish poet, Solomon Memel, whose début masterwork, *Die Keilerjagd* (*The Boar-Hunt*), draws its imagery from the myth of the Kalydonian boar and makes symbolic linkages between the legend and the poet's own wartime experiences. Another layer of allusion is introduced by the title of Norfolk's text, which invites parallels to be made between Sol and the historical figure of Paul Celan whose famous poem, 'In Gestalt eines Ebers' (translating to 'In the Shape of a Boar'), became embroiled in a controversy – known as the 'Goll affair' – similar to that which ignites around Sol's canonised epic. The works of both men also confront

the legacies of the Holocaust, and are driven by a sense of poetic obligation to bear witness to the fates of the voiceless millions who lost their lives. To compound these analogies, there are in addition a number of overlaps between the trajectory of Sol's life and that of Celan's, with Sol's childhood in Czernowitz and the deportation of his parents, the doubtful territory of his war years, and his subsequent repatriation and settlement in a Paris apartment, closely following Celan's biography. The accusations of plagiarism at the nub of the 'Goll affair', not least the provenance of the symbol of the boar in 'In Gestalt eines Ebers', are mirrored by Norfolk's own 'plagiarism' in the act of appropriating Celan's life-history for the novel's portrayal of Sol. If it is unclear why Norfolk chose to draw so copiously on Celan's life for his fictional model whilst masking the derivation with an altered name, the questions posed about the overlap between art and life, and particularly the encounters and re-encounters with sites of reading, are ones that recur throughout the novel. Such issues are central to the relationship between Sol and his poem, and indeed, Lawrence Norfolk and his own text.

In the same way that the intention of the novel's first section is to efface the thousands of years separating the hunt from its contemporary telling, the second part, despite Sol's comparative temporal proximity, is also unable to reconcile these terms, and is permeated by a sense that his memories misrepresent the truth of what really happened. As in 'The Hunt for the Boar of Kalydon', the reader bears witness to a form of reconstruction, though here it is Sol's biography that is reconstituted from the fragments, with the narrative jump-cutting between significant moments in the poet's life to mimic the dislocated workings of memory. Opening with Sol's early adult experiences in Czernowitz, then part of Romania, on the cusp of the Second World War – where we witness the ghettoisation and deportation of Sol's parents along with the rest of the town's Jewish community by the German occupiers – the narrative criss-crosses between an account of Sol's escape from this fate, his gruelling trek into the mountainous Greek interior – where he becomes caught up with the partisan resistance – and his postwar experiences prior to and following the publication of his poem. The correspondence between survival and remembrance, the question of whether living on also demands the laying to rest of a troubled history, is at the heart of Sol's story and

the reception of *Die Keilerjagd*. Like Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge', Sol's composition is seen as an authoritative testament to the evil that overwhelmed humanity in the middle of the twentieth century, a powerful expression of modernity's collective trauma. The piece makes use of the allegorical image of the boar as a means of presenting what is unrepresentable, this trope gesturing towards historical and psychic gaps through an aesthetic re-encounter with an original violence. But the poem, which has brought its creator fame as well as acting as a legacy from which he struggles to emerge, also purports to be a truthful account of events that Sol witnessed as an inadvertent party to Greek resistance against the Nazis. In the fusion of his own adventures with this legendary tale, Sol's journey is made into a representative myth for the contemporary, a story of loss, survival, resistance and revenge. As the text skips between different moments in Sol's history, however, these memories become ever more conflicted and uncertain, and his claims about what he witnessed on the contemporary iteration of the boar hunt are undermined by a number of alternative versions of the episode. Indeed, the course of Sol's narrative repeats the first part's slide into opacity, moving towards its own version of the cave's gloom: the stillness of Sol's darkened apartment overlooking the Pont Mirabeau, where Paul Celan is thought to have committed suicide in 1970.

The thematic linkages, parallels and verbal echoes between the ancient and modern sections of the text create an intricate web of foreshadowing and counterpoint. The impossibility of retrieving certain historical experiences is a reality that both parts of the novel are forced to confront, but the imperative to fill in the gaps or to admit the possibility of other kinds of truth that elude the operations of historiography are what propels the recuperative struggle. Although they take very different forms, both segments are works of reconstruction painfully aware of the instability of the traces that the past has left behind, which are insufficient to restore its original presence. Thus, these attempts at reconstruction are beset by the anxiety that they may also be betrayals of the truth, their efforts little more than self-deluding feats of translation that succeed only in concealing their source beneath layers of mystification. To read the past is also to re-write something that, if it is recorded at all, is always already written, with the fact of history's textual mediation making it not a window into former times, but rather a

prism through which the contemporary also views its own fears and desires. Whether or not the legend of the boar of Kalydon or Sol's own story about what took place after his flight from Czernowitz and the fate that befell its Jewish community are literally true, they have symbolic and emotional resonances that are as meaningful as historiography's pursuit of facticity. The hunt for the boar, and Sol's poetic transposition of it into modern history, are, in common with Norfolk's previous novels, revenge quests that imagine a victory over the forces of violence that have been unleashed on the world and threaten to consume history itself. What is at stake here is the memory of the boar's victims who never re-emerge from the cave, those lives that are swallowed up as if they had never been, whose fate cannot be told because, as Sol proclaims bitterly, 'the boar only remembers his victors' (340).

In spite of the novel's qualified affirmation of the historical imagination, the ambiguities that cling to Norfolk's reconstruction of the myth of the Kalydonian boar are not easily overcome. The text is supplemented by an immense catalogue of nearly two hundred footnotes attesting to the traces of the myth scattered through the cultural productions of the ancient world, drawing upon a range of classical sources and scholarly commentators, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to Homer to the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus. If these are intended to confer an aura of authenticity, to move closer to the truth through the accretion of documentary sources, then they also demonstrate the spectrality of the past and the limitations of historiography. As the story unfolds, the references that accompany almost every footstep become increasingly quarrelsome and contradictory, offering irreconcilable versions of the heroes' fate and even citing ancient, perhaps apocryphal, texts that have now been lost. Indeed, far from bolstering the account, this critical apparatus raises the possibility of a multitude of alternative versions of the quest, generating a form of discursive interference whose noise is detectable in the interstices of Norfolk's narrative. It is on the threshold of the boar's cave that these fraying threads must finally snap, for this is a place that admits neither hoof-marks nor footprints, leaving behind no trace of what takes place within. As the three surviving heroes approach the entrance, the tale's compacted mass finally collapses in on itself:

The trails of 'Atalanta', 'Meilanion' and 'Meleager' run out. Their footprints churn the ground to an illegible palimpsest where all three are reduced to the evidence for their existences, collections of plausibilities, fleeting intersections between the different versions of their history, which meet as collusive armies to battle amongst themselves. (124)

The inverted commas that have come to enclose the protagonists' names signal the unshackling of the real historical figures from the heroic avatars inscribed in the corpus of mythology, the warriors 'cased in black inhuman armour' who stand in for those who 'walk into lightlessness and silence, leaving nothing (124, 123). As Norfolk's image of the 'illegible palimpsest' would suggest, the morass of texts that support the material existence of the heroes and their quest lead the reader no closer to their actuality. Interestingly, a similar process of narrative dispersion occurs at the end of Hari Kunzru's second novel, *Transmission*, which will be discussed in the next chapter, though here the source of interference is not the textual mediation of history but rather the chatter of the contemporary global communications networks.

If the novel's first section could be said to be animated by the problematic of reading and the spectrality of the past – the narrative collapsing into a black hole from which no light emerges – then the 'Paris' section introduces yet another layer of mediation, multiplying the sites of interpretation by translating the myth of the Boar of Kalydon into the context of modern history. The multiple hunts referred to above are replicated here, though in a different form – as are the protagonists. The archetypal figures of Atalanta, Meleager, Meilanion and the boar find their echoes in a contemporary drama, this time the vengeful hunt for a German Abwehr officer named Eberhardt by a group of Greek partisans whose legendary female leader bears the *nom de guerre*, Thyella. Sol, whose journey into Greece and consequent involvement with the *andartes* is shrouded in uncertainty, reprises the outsider role of the 'night-hunter' Meilanion. Just as in the first part of the novel, the reconstruction of this event is troubled by the tension between truth and the work of memory, which invariably transforms its object. The transposition of the mythic structure into the twentieth century seems intended less to imply that the atrocity

of the Holocaust may in some way be 'explained' through recourse to cyclical patterns inherent in the course of history, like Yeats's spiralling gyres, than to suggest that its reality is irreducible to, but also inseparable from, the intersections between history, myth and fiction. What the title of Norfolk's text asks us to consider is the *shape* of the boar, its mark or the furrow left by its passage, which is a legacy of savagery and waste that both defies and demands comprehension. It also opens up the possibility that the boar itself, a compacted figure of rage and violence, but also one of blame and potential retribution, may forever elude capture and the justice demanded by the survivors. Or perhaps that there can be no atonement that will measure up to this psychic and historical trauma: the boar has already gone, and there will be no vengeful or recuperative gestures sufficient to redeem the memories of those who were consumed by its passage, only the bitter fruit of guilt and shame.

The incitement to confront and give testimony is at the heart of Sol's poem, *Die Keilerjagd*, which draws explicitly on the myth of the boar-hunt and forges resonant lines of connection with his experiences amongst the Greek *andartes* and the complex feelings of guilt stemming from his status as a Holocaust survivor. In this context, Sol, like Celan, feels compelled to bear witness to events that he cannot have directly experienced and cannot be properly known except imaginatively: the trope of the boar's cave approximates to the darkness of Auschwitz, and thus the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of remembrance. Like the unrepresentable fates of Sol's family and friends, the poem itself operates as a kind of absent presence in Norfolk's text, only reproduced in occasional fragments yet alluded to throughout the second part of the novel; a structuring absence, perhaps, that places the reader in a similar state of hermeneutic uncertainty as those who debate the correspondence between *Die Keilerjagd* and the 'truth' of Sol's experiences. For this is the crux of the 'Memel affair': whether or not this widely-read, canonised work is based on real, verifiable experiences. Sol's poetry is not reducible to his status as survivor, victim or witness; nevertheless, the success of the poem depends as much on its apparent documentary authority as on its formal and artistic qualities, lodged in the public consciousness by virtue of the 'true' events behind its lines that have come to assume their own resonant

iconography. As well as probing the mythologising of the hunt for the boar, then, the novel explores the modern means by which Sol's story, his survival of the war and his achievements as a poet, is transformed into myth.

The literary controversy – which has a significance that is more than simply literary – that engulfs Sol and his poem is sparked by a scandalous critique of *Die Keilerjagd* penned by Jakob Feuerstein, one of Sol's childhood friends and fellow survivors from Czernowitz. At the heart of Jakob's painstaking analysis is the coded implication that Sol played no part in the events that inspired the poem: his history is a fabrication and his artistic prestige rests on a falsehood. In a similar way that the reconstruction of the Greek myth in the first part of the novel is subtly undermined by the apparatus of footnotes which accompany it, Jakob's annotation of *Die Keilerjagd* draws attention to the poem's inaccuracies, incoherencies and implausibilities, and in so doing reveals 'a country whose weather was impossible, whose plants could not grow, whose geography was unmarked on any map' (280). Jakob's reading seeks 'not the tale, but its teller', chipping away at the biographical elements that have propelled the poem to fame, and thereby challenging the authority of the poem as a historical document by putting in question the 'reality' behind the lines that has always been claimed by the author (279). Inventing one's life alongside one's art, or indeed running each into the other, would hardly seem to be the most damaging of accusations – after all, images of poetic genius often rely on this confluence of the aesthetic and the biographic – but here the stakes are particularly high. There is an ethical pressure surrounding the Holocaust that outstrips other historical events, and the commitment to truthful representation, or at least to strive for this ideal, is seen as imperative, a point exemplified by several recent controversies involving survivor testimonies.³⁰ Insisting that poetry must be 'an occasion of truth, the place where it becomes tellable', Jakob perceives Sol's poem as a retreat from the ethical obligation towards truth that he prizes so highly, a failure to face up to a historical reality unadorned by sentimentalism (278). For Jakob, who is perspicacious enough to recognise the horror awaiting Czernowitz's

³⁰ For example, the publication of Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments* in 1996 generated a storm of debate in Germany and Switzerland after the veracity of what purported to be a memoir of the author's childhood in a Nazi concentration camp was robustly challenged, with Wilkomirski being accused of fabricating his experiences.

Jewish community, the truth is 'cold and hard'; stories of hope and redemption are merely 'warm lies' that veil the intransigence of this fact (203). There can be no doubt or middle ground between what is known and what is not, no space for contesting alternatives. Despite this belief, neither Jakob nor Sol's assertions can ultimately claim greater authority; although Jakob's measured critique is safely written off as the ravings of a lunatic, the autobiographical veracity of Sol's epic and the integrity of his memories are issues that continue to shadow his work.

Sol's fervent supporter throughout the dispute is Walter Reichmann, a German publisher who was stationed in Paris during the war and harbours a deep sense of guilt about his own association with the Nazi genocide. As becomes clear during his interview with Sol and his prior commentaries on the poet's work, it is essential for Reichmann that the poem was 'lived before it was written' and assumes the full burden of real, lived experience (245). But in many ways, what Reichmann sees in the poet and his work is what he needs them to be: *Die Keilerjagd* becomes a cartography of personal and collective redemption, and Sol a visionary 'custodian of our uncertainty' (135) whose confused, stumbling journey through the mountains of Greece is transmuted into an epic allegory of survival:

A second Solomon Memel had been framed within its columns of text, as he saw when the magazine arrived some days later with his name prominent on the front cover. The protagonist of Reichmann's narrative had created himself in the harsh terrain of the mountains, turned on his enemy and defeated him. (227)

If Sol is disturbed by the translation of his life and art into a representative struggle – the poetic explorer-hero who wrote his way out of the darkness – then he does not, or is not able to, offer a more truthful version. Reichmann's narrative may, to draw on one of the historiographer Hayden White's terms, 'emplot' Sol's history in a particular way to produce his imaginative reconstruction, but the base elements remain the same.³¹ Sol's recollection of these events – his pursuit of the partisans, Thyella and Xanthos (the Atalanta and Meleager of myth), who are, in turn, tracking

³¹ See *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

the German officer, Eberhardt (an embodiment of the boar), a hunt reaching its climax in the same basin of rock as in the legend – is consistently thrown into question. Indeed, the name of this barren place, ‘Khaxani’ or ‘the Cauldron’, seems particularly significant in this respect, evoking the potent image of an alchemical crucible where elements are purified, but also fused together in new combinations. In the first instance, Sol’s assertion that it is Thyella who ultimately kills Eberhardt, castrating him in a bizarre repetition of Atalanta’s vengeance on the centaurs, Rhoecus and Hylaeus, who attempted to rape her, seems to displace his own part in the murder. But Sol’s apparent involvement is obliquely alluded to in a drunken telephone conversation with his childhood friend, and one-time lover, Ruth Lackner, at a tantalisingly early juncture in the ‘Paris’ section: ‘A long time ago, he had killed a man. The man had been dying. But he had killed him’ (133). This account would cohere more neatly with the mythical framework of the boar-hunt, with Sol fulfilling the role of Meilanion, who is said to have slain the animal after Atalanta and Meleager had failed. But whether or not this is historically ‘true’ remains undecidable in the text, since the event, in both sections of the novel, ‘happens’ in the mountain cave where histories are consumed. Just as Reichmann’s reading of Sol’s life and work is shaped by what he requires it to mean, so too does Sol’s memory call into being a heroic Thyella and an adversarial boar/Eberhardt to fashion his experiences, tinged by shame and guilt, into an allegory of resistance and revenge.

The most contemporary strand of Sol’s narrative sees *Die Keilerjagd* become the subject of yet another reinterpretation, this time a celluloid version directed by the aforementioned Ruth Lackner which has even more radical implications than Jakob’s textual critique. Transposing the darkness of the cave onto a gloomy top-floor apartment, Ruth’s art-house movie targets not the teller but the tale itself, putting forward a re-visionary version where those who journey into history’s hinterland disappear as if they had never been. In this scenario, there is no final reckoning with the boar, a figure apparently absent from Lackner’s film, and Meleager and Atalanta’s movement into the cave is portrayed as a journey into dissolution. In the closing scene of the film, all that remains of the actors is the disembodied voice of Paul Sandor, one of the leads, declaring that ‘there are no

truthful silences', before it too ceases (337). This hinges on a slight alteration of the original poem. Whilst the reader is told that in Sol's piece the mythical Meilanion grazed his shoulder on the wall of the cave – a symbol for 'evidence' – in Lackner's account no mark is left behind. Like the vibration of Sandor's voice through the air, Ruth's modern heroes leave no trace of their passing. The indictment concealed in the cinematic imagery of the apartment's bare, unblemished walls and the gaps between floorboards gradually dawns on Sol:

'There's no crack in the glass, Ruth.' He pointed. There's no mark on the wall either. I didn't understand before.'

'Because they've gone. The lovers and the tracks they left. They've disappeared, like your Greeks.'

'That's not what you say. You say they never existed. That none of it happened.' (338)

What is at stake for Ruth as much as Sol is the conceptual and ethical question that reverberates from the very real event of the holocaust: 'how does one write of a disappearance? What of those events which leave no trace and those beings who leave no footprints?' (224). The desire to bear witness to what cannot be seen or experienced – the death of the boar in the depths of the cave and the annihilation of six million Jews – is what animates Sol and Ruth's art as much as the reconstruction of the legend in the first part of the novel. But if one is condemned to follow a trackless path where even the trace of an absent presence has already been erased, then the necessity of an imaginative and intuitive engagement with this vacancy is what prevails. For Ruth, Sol's poetic reconstruction of his experiences constitutes a refusal to accept the entropic fact of history: that all memories and memorials will ultimately decay. Sol has survived but has failed to live on in a progressive way by facing up to a history without heroes; like Jakob, Ruth's contention is that he has invented his own history, overlaying the myth of Atalanta/Thyella's triumph over the boar/Eberhardt in order to infuse his memories with a redemptive symbolic resonance because he cannot accept that 'the boar didn't die at all. [. . .] The boar won' (341). Ruth suggests that the figure of 'Thyella' existed only in the dim outlines of a local folk-myth, whilst the barbarous Eberhardt was an insignificant desk officer: both fall short of the theatrical roles that Sol has

imagined for them. In other words, *Die Keilerjagd* is a work borne of the most profound sense of shame, with Sol's 'Thyella' and 'Eberhardt' existing only as symbolic projections of the desire for resistance and triumphant defeat that appears so lacking from their history. As Ruth observes:

I understood why you needed [Thyella], and what you needed her to be. You think we should have fought like her, [. . .] in our Bukovina, and your Agrapha, and everywhere between. Better to have left our mark like that. (341)

Whether Ruth is 'correct' or not remains unanswerable in Norfolk's text, though the concluding pages of the 'Paris' section do offer yet another version of events, in which Thyella has turned betrayer of her comrades and is executed without trial. If there are no heroes here, there are no obvious beasts either, and even the identity of the boarish Eberhardt is doubtful. But perhaps this not the weightiest question after all. If both Ruth and Sol are agreed, as they seem to be, that 'the truth is just silence', a cave-like aporia forever absent from signification and escaping all attempts at representative inscription, then it may be more interesting to consider where this problem leads (340).

Ruth's own mode of survival, essentially an exorcism of her history, bears traces of Jakob's pragmatic commitment to living on in the present moment by coming to terms with loss, laying the dead to rest rather than invoking their testimony. Here, those who have lived yet have gone unrecorded by the historical archive may as well, as Sol observes, 'never have existed' (340). This is the bleak logic of 'unliveable truth' where all doubts are stripped away and what is unknown cannot be spoken of. Sol's aesthetic response, then, is certainly understandable, but is it really, as Ruth and Jakob imply, a species of existential bad faith? On the contrary, Sol's poetry is less a wilful blindness than a testament to the ambiguities of temporal being and the unfathomable essence of memory. And one would imagine that Norfolk's own sympathies lie with this fraught effort to comprehend, with the confused stumble through the darkness. Rather than parcelling historical consciousness into bars of light and shade, Sol's (and Paul Celan's, and Norfolk's) art affirms the potential for an imaginative engagement with, and revivification of,

these resonant absences that Wilson Harris, in another context, terms 'fossils'.³² Thus a dialogue with the past opens that is radically different from conventional historicising that must always subsume the past into the present.

In sweeping spirals, the hunt is retraced again and again through the course of the novel: by Sol's journey and poetic re-encounter with it; by the pursuant annotations of Jakob and the narrator of the first part; by the tenacious journalist who follows in Jakob's footsteps, who himself followed Sol's; by Ruth's unfinished film; by the reader who tracks them all. The myth is like a magnetic field in which all are caught up, compelled to repeat an impossible journey; but this repetition, this eternal recurrence, cannot step behind the curtain of time to reveal the original truth. Nonetheless, to cite Norfolk again, 'despite its resistance to our comprehension, that which happened, happened', and the novel's haunting final movement is to cross the threshold of the cave, to represent what has been hitherto unrepresentable.³³ The slender concluding section of Norfolk's novel is intriguingly entitled 'Agrapha', which is both a real geographic location situated in the mountainous wilderness of northern Greece and the title for an anthology of works never recorded elsewhere that translates as 'Unwritten Things', a book now lost to antiquity. Despite the comparative brevity of this portion of the text, it is crucial to Norfolk's commitment to imaginatively reclaim the forgotten histories that are a necessary part of our reality. Indeed, the text's epigraph, inevitably taken from one of Celan's letters to his friend Walter Jens, expresses precisely this belief in the capacity of art to evoke marginal truths: 'I have often asked myself where I might have got my "boar". Boars, my dear Walter Jens, – such things do exist'.

In an apparently recuperative, but impossible, gesture, the final part of the novel bears witness to the confrontation with the boar, an event that takes place at the intersection between history, fiction and mythology. Depicted here is the faltering passage of an unnamed male – either Meilanion or Sol, or perhaps a fusion of these identities – through the cave's cramped interior, which becomes progressively narrower as if to signal the precariousness of this imagined space that

³² Wilson Harris, 'Fossil and Psyche', in *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles 1966-1981*, ed. by Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), pp. 68-82.

³³ 'The Hunt for Paul Celan's Boar', p. 20.

is on the very margins of reality. As befits the tunnel's cognitive darkness, the narrative works on touch, though the 'fissured patterns' and 'pitted honeycombs' of the walls are not easily assembled into comprehensible shape (349). Without the benefit of sight which lends itself more readily to abstractions, there is a powerful feeling of intimacy and sensory immediacy that seems to collapse distance altogether: the detached contemplation of an absent past becomes a physical encounter with it. This is a place where temporal flow has no dominion, with the figure of Sol/Meilanion transfigured into a conduit for 'the other's old breath' as both ancient and modern strands of the novel merge into each other (349). But such imagery of synthesis and the plenitudinous erosion of temporality contends with the weary exhaustion of the hunt for meaning through which there is 'no trail to follow now and nothing more to know' (350). The cave is at once barren and inhospitable, a 'dead lung', and a fertile matrix where the 'soured air' holds latent within it the trace of its 'fizzing rush through living blood' (349). Poised on the narrow line between life and death, witness and survival, this is a place where 'nothing could happen', and yet where something does (349).

Sol/Meilanion is led deeper, attracted by a warm, musty scent and the faint sound of an animal breathing. The boar lies dying, this figure of unquenchable rage and destructiveness now weak and vulnerable, submissively awaiting its preordained fate at the hands of the night-hunter. But the triumphal slaying that is anticipated does not come to pass; instead, the act of revenge and the duality of hunter and hunted pass into a tableau of tenderness and compassion – perhaps even reconciliation – as Sol/Meilanion rests his head on the animal's side, listening to the gradual shallowing of its breath and the slow ebb of its heartbeat:

He felt the boar's fading heat pulse through the hard armature of his fat. The lungs rose and fell, each inhalation jostling his head, each exhalation shallower than the last. In, and then out. He was in time. The boar's heart thudded, slower and slower. He waited for its silence.

Now. (350)

It is only in this paradoxical space of inscription on the limits of reading and writing – on the very edge of erasure – that the event can be excavated from silence and

darkness, its singularity neither traduced by textual records nor cloaked in an obscurity beyond articulation.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Norfolk's work is motivated by an ongoing sense of a debt to the past, not merely because it continues to shape lives in the present, but because its burden and legacy have their own significance that must be attested. This is bound up with a need to do justice to history, but with an awareness that the temporal gap between experience and memory cannot be easily circumvented. Whilst in *Lemprière's Dictionary* and *The Pope's Rhinoceros* these concerns were of secondary importance to the desire for narrative, the layering of stories in *In the Shape of a Boar* is directed at the problem of historical mediation itself. Even though reconstructions must inevitably be partial and imperfect – inflected by contemporary needs and concerns – the obligation to bear witness to the past and to reach towards lucid testimony would seem imperative to frame a reality that cannot be otherwise encompassed. In the words of W. G. Sebald, who in writings such as *The Emigrants* (1996) and *Austerlitz* (2002) returns again and again to the intolerable experiences of historical trauma, 'the ideal of truth in its entirely unpretentious objectivity [. . .] proves itself the only legitimate reason for continuing to produce literature in the face of total destruction'.³⁴ In striving for this ideal, the final part of *In the Shape of a Boar* suggests that it is within and through the category of the aesthetic that the lost may be redeemed and even re-vivified.

However paradoxically, 'Agrapha' gestures towards the imagined unveiling of absolute presence, where the parallel realities of the novel's ancient and modern sections become one and the limitations of causality, temporality, and thus also mortality, are overcome. The figuration of the cave as a site held in temporal and spatial suspension brings with it a vision of the historical consciousness's redemptive homecoming to a past unaltered by the vicissitudes of time, a moment preserved in its original purity. Nevertheless, this is a place that is uninhabitable, dug out of a space that has no dimensions and which can only fold back into itself, there being nowhere else to go. What we witness in this movement beyond

³⁴ *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. by Anthea Bell (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p. 53.

evidential and perceptual limits is the symbolic death of the boar that has consumed so many lives, the precise moment of its demise signalled by the novel's final word, 'now' (350). This is a strangely definite way to resolve a text that continually returns to the impossibility of resolution, but perhaps this 'now' is more ambiguous than it appears. Does 'now' signal the advent of the 'time for the Tellable' that has been withheld throughout the novel? Or does the word's dying echo as it is absorbed into the silence of the cave suggest the hollowness of this poetic desire? Is 'now' the moment where the distancing effect of the past tense gives way to an atemporal infinity? Or does this moment vanish at the very instant that it is announced, a now without duration that has always already slid into the past? These are questions that can gain no purchase on the walls of the cave, and their ceaseless reverberation stands in the place of any simple answer. But such tensions are proper to the place from which they issue, and to the effort to comprehend that which defies comprehension: the vital, but inglorious and unheroic, business of an ethical relationship with history.

In many respects, the urgency surrounding the representation of history situates Norfolk amongst the earlier generation of novelists such as Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd and A.S. Byatt, and in some ways Norfolk may be read as a transitional writer. His work brings to an end, or at least leads down a cul-de-sac, the historiographical metafiction of the 1980s and 1990s, whose limited concerns with geopolitics, history and identity circled around a set of preoccupations that lived experiences of global relations was passing by, positioning the West more forcefully as a point on the compass increasingly redefined by obstinate pressure on the political and aesthetic axes of representation. This is the territory traversed, mediated and unmasked in Hari Kunzru's first two novels, which I will explore at length in the next chapter.

3

Hari Kunzru: Lost In Translation

A spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration.¹

Like Lawrence Norfolk's fiction, the fraught legacies of colonialism and empire also motivate the writings of Hari Kunzru, whose novels to date explore the formation of identities and questions of individual agency in the context of imperial domination. The changing forms of imperialism – understood as an evolving global structure that produces and manages diverse subjectivities – provides the backdrop for the migrant lines of displacement scoring the narratives of Kunzru's debut novel, *The Impressionist* (2002), and his more recent *Transmission* (2004). *The Impressionist* portrays the absurdity of a world divided according to racial hierarchies and ethnic classifications, tracking the ontological metamorphoses of its Kashmiri protagonist as he is interpellated by the institutions of the British Empire and the dominant social forms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kunzru's second novel turns its focus away from the imperialism of European authority and capitalist expansion and towards contemporary modes of sovereignty: the global order of transnational corporations, non-governmental organisations and media conglomerates that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have suggested constitutes a new imperial paradigm. Latterly, the author has produced a book of short stories entitled *Noise* (2006), whose narratives tease away at the cybernetic intertwining of bodies and machines in today's networked and mass-mediated world, and thus enquire into the very nature of the human.² As well as his fictional writings, Kunzru has been an

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 213.

² Three of the five stories in this collection are also published online on the writer's website; see Hari Kunzru, 'Selected Short Fiction: 1995-2003' <<http://www.harikunzru.com/hari/fiction.htm>> [accessed 10 October 2006]. Whilst they have only recently been collected together in a single volume, these short pieces are actually amongst Kunzru's earliest published work, and *Noise* is

outspoken figure on the subject of economic and cultural globalisation that informs his work, publishing articles and making public statements on issues of social justice, immigration, technology and democracy. In addition, he is an active member of the English PEN association, an international community of writers and readers that campaigns for the freedom of expression as a fundamental human right.

For Kunzru, questions of literary value are inseparable from politics: his high-profile refusal of one of Britain's most established literary accolades – the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize – for *The Impressionist* was a reaction to the sponsorship of the award by the *Mail on Sunday*, which, according to Kunzru, was responsible for pursuing 'an editorial policy of vilifying and demonising refugees and asylum-seekers'.³ Though the furore created certainly helped to raise the author's profile, with Kunzru's refusal generating a good deal more media coverage than that afforded to the eventual winner, Mary Laven's novel *Virgins of Venice*, Kunzru felt that allowing *The Impressionist* to be connected with a publication that fostered xenophobic attitudes would be particularly hypocritical considering the novel's challenge to the legitimacy of racial divisions. In many respects, however, precisely what *The Impressionist* exposes is the difficulty of avoiding the effects of typification and transcending the layers of expectation and prejudice that have accreted over hundreds of years of colonial contact and cultural exchange. Indeed, despite the fact that Kunzru's novel journeys back to the early decades of the twentieth century, the narratorial viewpoint is inflected by the pressures of our contemporary hyper-mediated world, where the rapid circulation of signs, images and sensations means that representations take place in a penumbral field of mutually constitutive discourses and intertexts. This is to follow Peter Morey in suggesting that *The Impressionist*, like a number of other recent British-Indian novels, displays an acute awareness of postcolonial subjectivity's 'overdetermination by textuality', which

chiefly of interest for revealing the embryonic form of ideas that are more fully worked out in his novels. For this reason, I have chosen to concentrate on the author's more extended writings at the expense of a more in-depth engagement with his shorter fiction.

³ A full transcript of Kunzru's statement may be found on the author's website, see 'Society: Making Friends with the Mail' (2003) <<http://www.harikunzru.com/hari/jlr.htm>> [accessed 25 January 2007].

views identity as a performance that is inevitably shadowed by a multitude of other performances.⁴

In common with many recent novels that explore the shaping of identity by imperial literary and cultural hegemony, Kunzru's text articulates the hybridity of post/colonial relations in opposition to the notions of authenticity and purity ambivalently fostered by imperial discourse. The overcoded, 'already-read' quality of the British-Indian relationship – intensely conscious of its dialogic association with the discursive field of framing representations that precedes the encounter between self and other – made manifest in works such as V. S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), not to mention earlier novels by writers such as J.G. Farrell and Paul Scott, frequently becomes a site of ironic subversion, as the shortfall between stereotypes or imagined constructions of peoples and places is exposed. In exposing this ironic gap, however, these novels are at the same time continually drawn back to the spectre of a truer and more essential self that may be rehabilitated, and though Kureishi's text emphasises the performativity of ethnic and cultural identities, the problem of how to resist the objectifying gaze of white Britain remains central. What differentiates *The Impressionist* from these novels is that its layering of intertextual allusions and self-consciously derivative characters, incidents and narrative modes suggests both uneasiness with the interstitial, in-between position of the migrant subject and a deep scepticism towards the possibility of producing subjectivities independent of the assumptions and desires of others.

The novel opens with a richly symbolic scene of miscegenation and mixity, a tableau of alchemical intermingling that – by bringing together the superficially monolithic structures of opposed culture, race and nation – mimics the insinuation of histories that colonial contact at once performs and represses. Three years after the turn of the twentieth century, Ronald Forrester, who is, appropriately, a forester conducting ordinance work for the British government in southern India, is

⁴ 'He Do the Empire In Different Voices: Intertextuality in Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*', *New Hybridities: Societies and Cultures In Transition* (unpublished conference paper, University of Munich, July 2004).

caught in a monsoon with the daughter of a wealthy, high-caste Kashmiri Pandit and her train of bearers, who are travelling to Agra to consummate her arranged marriage. As she lies in her dripping-wet palanquin, Amrita's opium-soaked day-dream of an apocalyptic deluge that will drown the earth and save her from her narrowly circumscribed future takes on concrete form as the party are engulfed by a torrent that the rains force down the mountainside. Miraculously, both Forrester and Amrita survive and take shelter in a cave that is presented as a womblike space of creation, where the detritus of the old world has been swept away and, in a reversal of the sacred doctrine of the First Man, Amrita is transfigured into the 'mother of the new'.⁵ This scene is suffused with the exoticism of imperialist perceptions: to Forrester, the naked, mud-smearred body of Amrita resolves into the vision of a 'native mother goddess', whose 'wild tangle of hair' and 'black-tipped breasts' exude an untamed and intoxicating sexuality that seems so much more real than the 'milk-white and rosy-cheeked' girls who populate his fantasies (13). Of course, Amrita's earthy eroticism is no less filtered through colonial stereotypes than these 'picture-postcard' English roses, for the commingling of fertility and licentiousness in the spectacle of the native female pervades any number of metropolitan cultural productions. Indeed, Forrester 'wonders if he has created her, sculpted her with his sleepless nights and his meanderings through the desert', and thus whether what he sees is merely the projection of his own desire for a black sexuality lacking the inhibitions of the demure English (14). But rather than simply offering the exoticising perspective of the white male, the novel also replays the encounter from Amrita's point of view, through which the paleness of Forrester's skin likewise becomes an object of fascination and concupiscence. The frisson associated with the transgressive combination of blackness and whiteness is a motif that runs throughout the text, and as Amrita and Forrester succumb to their scandalous sexual union – each unaware even of the other's name – they are rendered down into potent icons of skin colouration. Even as racial and ethnic boundaries are reinforced, however, the text simultaneously undermines them: the mingling of sweat and dust turns their entwined bodies 'an identical red-brown

⁵ Hari Kunzru, *The Impressionist* (London: Penguin, 2003; first pub. 2002), p. 14. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

colour. The colour of the earth', revealing both the arbitrariness of colonial regimes of discrimination, and setting against its hierarchical modes of classification a primal moment of syncretism and mixity (15).

The novel is structured around the opposition between such tropes of transgressive interpenetration and the rationalism of Western modernity that produces fixed, intractable categories precisely in order to justify the existing hierarchies of power. For instance, the figure of the Scottish missionary, Reverend Macfarlane, is emblematic of the incestuous self-legitimation underpinning the knowledge production of imperialism's civilising mission. His research follows in the footsteps of early psychologists and anthropometrists such as Francis Galton by arranging spurious racial typologies into a quasi-divine ladder of Being. It is hardly surprising that at the top of this list is the white European, whose superiority and 'civilisation' now has 'scientific' credence. In many ways, then, the opening section of *The Impressionist* can be interpreted as a portrayal of the fear that threatens to deconstruct such rigid hierarchies – for the mingling of different races signifies the contamination of the West's dream of its own purity, effacing the very divisions that maintain its putatively ontological authority. If it is against this repressed fear – not the dread of absolute otherness but a lingering awareness of the kind of 'remote kinship' that Conrad's Marlow finds so unsettling – that the rhetoric of colonialism constructs itself, it is the undeniable presence of such syncretic border-crossings within post/colonial space that subverts the hegemony of a homogeneously defined subjectivity.⁶

The novel's central character and product of the brief encounter between Forrester and Amrita, Pran Nath, encapsulates these themes of hybridity and mongrelisation, with the revelation of his mixed biological background radically overturning his sense of identity.⁷ To be a 'blackie-white' in Kunzru's novel is to have one's humanity irredeemably tainted, a most visible source of shame that

⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1994; first pub. 1902), p. 51.

⁷ It is difficult to know precisely by what name to refer to the central character of the novel, since his transformations are not so much disguises as wholesale revolutions in identity. Rather than modifying the names to reflect his current incarnation, which would perhaps lead to confusion, or opting for an unwieldy compound – such as 'Pran-Rukhsana-Bobby-Jonathan' – I have elected to call the protagonist Pran throughout this chapter, though it is certainly not my intention to imply that this represents his true, essential identity.

attests to a biological inferiority circulating through contaminated blood (46). Whilst this marks a dangerous blurring of the boundaries between settler and native, undermining a binarism central to imperial power, the doubled identity of the Anglo-Indian is conceived as an atavistic pollution both by the Indians who construct themselves as indigenous and the English themselves. When it comes to light that the milky-white skin of Amrita's son is not, as it was assumed by his Kashmiri relatives, somatic evidence of the family's 'superior blood', but rather the legacy of Pran's secret English paternity, the boy is summarily cast out of his palatial home in Agra by the Brahmin Pandit who believed himself to be Pran's father (21). It is interesting to note the potency, but also the instability, of the transcendental signifier of whiteness here, which operates simultaneously as a guarantee of authenticity and the preservation of deep-rooted lineage, but also, paradoxically, as a shameful marker of foreignness. But whilst this incident neatly reverses the imperial gaze that aligns whiteness with an inherently superior English identity, it can only do so from within the same intransigent, essentialist paradigms of nationhood, which are unable to countenance Pran's more liminal position.

Unused to having to fend for himself, Pran becomes a shape-shifter in order to survive, inhabiting and jettisoning a string of different incarnations as a mode of self-preservation and attempting to blend, chameleon-like, into his surroundings. After being expelled from his home and barred from his 'Indian' subjectivity, Pran is forced to beg ignominiously, and unsuccessfully, on the streets outside its walls. Desperate for food, he finds work in a brothel run by hermaphrodites (or *hijras*), who force him to wear women's apparel and give him the name Rukhsana. The atrophy of Pran's selfhood leaves its 'residue dispersed in a sea of sensation, just a spark, an impulse waiting to be reassembled from a primal soup of emotions and memories', and this process of dissolution and coagulation is repeated throughout the novel (65). Pran is subsequently sold to a representative from the princely state of Fatehpur, becoming the pawn in a web of conspiracy and political blackmail that is intended to ensure the succession of the Raja's profligate younger brother. In particular, Pran's role is to employ his waiflike charms and newly acquired sexual skills to compromise the position of the British Resident, Major Privett-Clampe, who has the authority to decide who will be inaugurated as heir to the kingdom. Finally

making his escape during a carefully stage-managed hunting expedition that descends into farcical confusion – having been tutored in the English language and aspects of culture by the smitten Major – Pran becomes caught up in the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre in 1919, where an anti-colonial demonstration results in the massacre of hundreds as the British Army fires on the protestors. Pran's unusually pale skin allows him to 'pass' as an English child through the chaos; fearing for his life in a climate of elevated racial tension, he is able to slip aboard a train heading south to Bombay. Exhilarated by the association of his whiteness with Englishness, and attracted to what he sees as a superior way of life, Pran cultivates his English persona and disguises traces of his Indian origins, fascinated by the assurance and rigidity of a society 'built according to the blueprints of class and membership that are almost noble in their invariance', in preference to his own ungrounded and formless mode of existence (251). Taken in by a Christian missionary – the aforementioned enthusiast of anthropometry – Pran is re-christened Robert, though he also acquires other appellations: he is given the Hindu name Chandra by the Reverend's wife who, unlike her husband, is intoxicated by the exoticism of Indian spirituality, whilst to the habitués of the city's red-light district where the young man finds work on the side, he is known as Pretty Bobby (222). As Pran's masquerades as an Englishman become increasingly sophisticated, allowing him to gain entry to the most exclusive hotels and soirées, so too do his desires intensify to possess and inhabit the mythical abstraction of England. The opportunity to complete his transformation arrives when a young Englishman he is accompanying is killed during nationalistic rioting; Pran steals the man's steamer ticket and personal documents, all the necessary paperwork to legitimate his new identity as one 'Jonathan Bridgeman'. Upon reaching the promised land of England, Pran attends a minor public school, graduates to Oxford, and embarks on an ill-fated love affair with Star Chapel, the daughter of an anthropology don. Hoping to win her favour, Pran agrees to assist on the Professor's anthropological expedition to a remote part of Africa, and despite their relationship coming to an abrupt end, Pran embarks on his final journey: this time away from the metropolis and towards a confrontation with the blackness that he has repressed for so long.

As this brief précis of the novel makes clear, Pran's initial banishment from his home and expulsion from a 'pure' Indian ethnicity impelled by the discovery of his true father's 'blinding alien whiteness' signals the beginning of the text's destabilisation of any fixed notion of identity (64). Significantly, the astrologer employed by Pran's father to compile a chart for his new-born son foresees a future that is a latticework of random mutations and puzzling discontinuities:

The chart was strange and frightening. The stars had contorted themselves, wrung themselves into a frightening shape. Their pattern of influences had no equilibrium. It was skewed towards passion and change. To the astrologer this distribution looked impossible. Forces tugged in all directions, the malefic qualities of the moon and Saturn auguring transmutations of every kind. It was a shape-shifting chart. A chart full of lies. (26)

On one level, the novel launches a familiar postcolonial attack on Manichean identity structures and essentialist fetishisations of purity. Indeed, it is precisely the absolute authority, yet absolute meaninglessness, of the construction of race regulating colonial relations that allows Pran to exploit its contradictions: his almost flawless mimicry of the English indicates both the precariousness of a cultural identity that may be acquired and exchanged for another, and the equally fabulated quality of racial discriminations. Pran's disconcerting impersonations make manifest the hybridity of forms produced in the contact zone of imperialism – when he arrives at the mission in Bombay, Reverend MacFarlane is troubled by the boy's ambiguous appearance as 'white yet not white', immediately recalling Homi Bhabha's formulation of the radically split status of the colonial subject – yet these masquerades are not directed towards overturning existing structures and discourses (234).⁸ Quite the opposite, Pran's motivation is less a wish to mock the colonial master than borne out of his adulation for Lily Parry – a strikingly beautiful socialite whom he believes to be English – whose radiant skin appears 'indecent in its whiteness' and holds out the promise of entry into the venerated centre of empire (258). Pran's clumsy wooing campaign is founded on the pretence of his Englishness, but when he finally comes face to face with the object of his affection,

⁸ See Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92.

Lily is entirely unconvinced by the façade and vigorously rebuffs his overtures. It emerges that, like Pran, Lily is concealing the secret of her own status as a ‘half-and-half’, and the momentary slippage of her clipped English accent to reveal unmistakably Indian tones demonstrates that her prominent social standing is upheld by a performance even more highly polished than Pran’s, but no less superficial (265).

Thus, both Lily and Pran appropriate and participate in the racialised discourse of empire, where appearance is a resonant, yet perversely empty, signifier of difference that constantly segues into the tyranny of essence and purity. Although their strategy is a subversive one, this is far from its intention; Lily and Pran’s struggle towards the white Englishness at the apex of the evolutionary ladder only has meaning so long as existing colonial structures are retained and the mutability of identity concealed. There is an obvious paradox here that goes to the heart of the colonial project itself: whilst the Europeans legitimated their civilising mission through recourse to a constructed ethnic hierarchy, the process of civilisation itself implied that cultural identity could be exchanged and acquired, and therefore the very notion of authenticity became deeply problematic. Certainly, Pran’s assumption of the biography of the murdered Jonathan Bridgeman attests to the instability of the codes of race, culture and nation.

The novel thus works on the overlap between ‘passing’ and ‘parsing’: Pran’s attempts to become the perfect Englishman are themselves based on textually transmitted, circumscribed and practised versions of Englishness. Pran learns poetry by rote and improves his accent and grammar with Privett-Clampe, gains a working knowledge of English history from MacFarlane, and, upon arriving in England, keeps a notebook in which he records his observations and compares them with the social and cultural texts he has learned about second-hand. By modifying his behaviour and continually refining aspects of his infinitely malleable self, Pran becomes a consummate imitator of Englishness, albeit of the kind that allows him to blend in with the England of Public School and Oxbridge. Though in London he briefly glimpses another version of Englishness that is entirely new to him – a form that, ‘washed out and poor’, is not exported to rule the colonies – Pran also finds ‘the originals of copies he has grown up with’, and thus a recognisable context into

which he is able to insert himself (299). Indeed, he merges with the fabric of middle-England so convincingly that his love affair with Professor Chapel's daughter, Star, unravels precisely because she sees him as being 'exactly like everybody else', rejecting him for being simply too conventionally English to satisfy her eclectic, cosmopolitan tastes (415). Pran's success at once confirms the inevitably performative nature of identity, and is predicated on the fact that others also think in terms of, and recognise, the stereotypes he embodies.

On the level of form and content, *The Impressionist* reflects both the polyphonic multiplicity of its protagonist and his interpellation by the textual codes of imperialism. Empire is portrayed as a vast machine within which subjectivities are produced, fixed in place and re-circulated, and Kunzru's novel suggests the difficulty, perhaps even the impossibility, of extricating colonial representations from the networks of texts and images inevitably mediating our understanding of the imperial system. The author has made reference to the deliberate 'fakeness' of many of the novel's characters and scenes, which play on and pastiche a discursive field dominated by the 'heritage films' of Merchant and Ivory and the wider trend of post-imperial nostalgia that has been termed 'Raj Revivalism'.⁹ Stereotypical figures such as the alcoholic colonial administrator, Privett-Clampe, the repressed missionary, MacFarlane, Professor Chapel, the eccentric academic, not to mention his bohemian daughter, are strategically employed both to foreground the genre's intertextual overdetermination and to point towards the centrality of appearance and spectacle in the economy of colonial identity. Whilst Pran is well aware that his refinements of the self are entirely directed towards external consumption – though he chooses not to examine his own motives too closely – the novel suggests that the imperial system locks all involved into particular roles that determine their behaviour. The importance of being seen to behave in a certain manner is demonstrated by the absurd posturing of the colonial servants in Fatehpur – who in fact wield very little authority – as much as it underpins official visit of the British Resident to the kingdom, who wonders whether the Nawab's attirement in the 'wrong' kind of shoes is intended to be a subtle gesture of disrespect. Here,

⁹ Nick Ryan, 'Global Village Rebel', *Scotsman*, 29 May 2004, Critique section, p. 8.

appearance is everything, and any deviation from the codes of conduct is read with confusion and suspicion. The novel reproduces the hollowness and absurdity of the rituals on which colonial power depends, yet for the individuals who are enmeshed in this structure – flattened into symbols or ciphers – it seems that identity may only be affirmed through the endless reproduction of such performances. Indeed, as Pran's carefully constructed persona begins to dissolve in the African desert at the end of the novel, he dreams that 'cables and wires are strung between every object and person in the darkness around him, forming a single interconnected mechanism', in which he is also implicated and whose complexity outstrips his attempts to understand it (469). However, whether it is possible to escape from the cat's cradle of the imperial system is, as we shall see, a point about which Kunzru's text remains equivocal.

As well as self-consciously drawing on the generic aspects of imperial fiction more generally, *The Impressionist* is punctuated with specific allusions to the classic literary narratives of empire produced by writers such as Kipling, Forster and Waugh, amongst others. *Kim* is an obvious touchstone, and a number of scenes gain resonance from their intertextual linkages to the metropolitan corpus; for example, both Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* provide a clearly visible backdrop for the expedition into Africa. Over the course of the novel the dominant ideas and cultural forms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – anthropology and Social Darwinism, Blavatskian Theosophy and Spiritualism, communism, fascism, anti-Semitism and Indian nationalism – are also progressively ticked off, a gesture that does not so much elide the temporal distance between 'then' and 'now' as draw attention to the layered social texts through which perceptions of the past are refracted. These techniques provide a formal corollary for structural tropes of mixing and hybridity, with the appropriation and citation of preceding texts working to undercut notions of authenticity in favour of extemporaneous bricolage but also serving to reinforce the all-pervasive quality of textuality underpinning the narrative.

The novel's use of an excerpt from *Kim* for its epigraph signals Kunzru's awareness that the exoticisation of the colonial subject – the process of othering – was a cornerstone of imperial textuality within which literary texts played a

fundamental role. *The Impressionist* is deeply conscious of the continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an India that is both alluring and repellent, a site of mystery, wonder and sensual intoxication, but also of contamination and potential moral corruption. Rather than offering a corrective to the white romanticisation of the mystical East performed in epic tales of the British Empire produced by authors such as Kipling, the text instead reverses the orientalist gaze to make the West an object of fascination and desire. Seen through Pran's inexperienced eyes, the imperial centre is imbued with mythic qualities:

Piccadilly is criss-crossed by forces as modern and purposeful as factory machinery, and even the pigeons, fat and grey and rat-like though they are, appear to be coursing with something imperial and rare, some pigeon essence that powers their strut and their pompous inquisitiveness. In London the rain sparkles with stray energies, and the dirty water that runs in the gutters is notable because it is London water, and carries along with it Morse-code oddments, leaflets and sweet-wrappers and cigarette ends that telegraph clues to London life and thinking. (298)

England is framed as a place of magic, tempting the imagination with glimpses of occult secrets: even the detritus littering the streets of London seems to trace the outline of a deeper, hidden world that, in time, may be deciphered and revealed in its fullness. By re-situating the 'exotic' onto the metropolitan observer, the novel self-consciously alludes to the ubiquity of such tropes in both writing and reading, and in doing so brings to the surface its own inevitable imbrication with the 'commercially viable metropolitan codes' that Graham Huggan has explored in relation to a number of ostensibly oppositional postcolonial texts produced by British writers.¹⁰ Kunzru's mode of representation acknowledges the omnipresence of such codes, and implies that the legacy of imperialism is so profoundly inscribed on contemporary consciousness that even acts of cultural resistance are unable to extricate themselves from its language.

In tracking the diachronic arc of its protagonist's life history – which is also a spatial movement from the imperial periphery to the metropolitan centre – Kunzru's novel plays with the evolutionary trajectory of the *Bildungsroman*,

¹⁰ *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 81.

although Pran's growth and maturation is far from the conventional spiritual, moral and psychological development that gradually leads to an accommodation between self and society. The novel is split into distinct sections each bearing the name of his present incarnation, this formal discontinuity mimicking the ruptural transformations of Pran's identity. Rather than cohering into the unified whole that is the apotheosis of the humanist subject organically rooted in a wider cultural history, Pran spawns incommensurable versions of himself that are connected together only in memory. To emphasise the disjunctive, happenstance nature of his journey, each part of the novel tends towards the tumultuous collapse of the moorings that have momentarily anchored Pran in place: the tiger hunt that transforms into a massacre, or the anti-British riot in Bombay, are rites of purgation out of which he emerges in a new form.¹¹ On the one hand, the fragmentation of Pran's biography into a disjointed series of subject-positions – each of which disturbs the stability of the conventional elements by which selfhood is constituted – does offer the liberating vision of identity as a 'continuum' that is also an incessant process of becoming (251). This is in tune with the declaration of the sexually-polymorphous Khwaja-sara – the eunuch who oversees the harem at Fatehpur – that 'we are all as mutable as the air' once released from the spectacular tyranny of the body and the conventions of language (82). But on the other hand, as has been already suggested, Pran's transformations are politically ambiguous, at once posing a challenge to the essentialist discourse of empire yet couched in its ideological terms. Freedom from the fixity of a rigidly-demarcated subjectivity defiantly opposes the reductive concepts of purity and authenticity, yet seen from another side it also forecloses the very possibility of forging a stable location from which to articulate any kind of resistance. For Pran-as-Bobby, the cultural transit to the Englishness of Jonathan Bridgeman, colonised to coloniser, is unnaturally smooth because he has no moorings in the world, no ontological connection to place or history:

How easy it is to slough off one life and take up another! Easy when there is nothing to anchor you. He marvels at the existence of people who can know

¹¹ Peter Morey, 'He Do the Empire In Different Voices'.

themselves by kneeling down and picking up a handful of soil. Man was created out of dust, says the Reverend. But if men and women are made of dust, then he is not one of them. If they feel a pulse through their bare feet and call it home, if they look out on a familiar landscape and see themselves reflected back, he is not one of them. (285)

As if composed of 'some other element', Pran feels that 'he has nothing of the earth in him at all', his feet skimming just above its surface and leaving no trace upon it. Pran's avowal of a deracinated, in-between position projected beyond the time/space of the nation permits him to jettison the baggage of ethnicity and indigeneity, but the extent to which this liminal zone may offer itself as a site of dwelling is doubtful, and whether this journey can ultimately have a destination is a question that resounds throughout the novel.

What, then, is Pran made from, and what are the implications of an existence that has no presence beyond the immediacy of its performance? The text offers one option for understanding his mutability: 'you could think of it in cyclical terms. The endlessly repeated day of Brahman – before any act of creation the old world must be destroyed. Pran is now in pieces. A pile of Pran-rubble, ready for the next chance event to put it back together in a new order' (65). Additionally, Peter Morey observes the congruence between the trajectory of Pran's transformations and the concept of *asrama*, one of the pillars of Hinduism that sets out the four ideal stages of a religious life.¹² Pran may be seen as a *brahmacharya* (a student or apprentice) as he learns how to conduct himself as an Englishman from Privett-Clampe and MacFarlane; a householder and prospective husband (*grihasthya*) whilst in pursuit of the flighty Star Chapel; a *vanaprasthya* (forest-dweller) when he withdraws into the heart of Africa as part of Professor Chapel's expedition; and finally as a *sanyasi* (a mendicant who has abandoned material possessions and pursuits), when he renounces worldly attachment at the book's end and finds an ambiguous form of spiritual liberation. Yet this implies a level of autonomy and agency that would seem to be almost completely absent from Pran's lived experience. Spurning all but the most ephemeral moments of introspection, he remains largely unwilling to examine his own motivations, and is instead shaped and re-shaped by the desiring

¹² 'He Do the Empire in Different Voices'.

gaze of others. In one of his earlier incarnations, the reader is told that 'Bobby builds and inhabits his puppets', suggesting that his consciousness of the lack of substance underpinning his stitched-together personalities is far outweighed by the imperative that others believe in them (250). Certainly, Kunzru's novel places a great deal of emphasis on superficial details and appearances, such as precise pronunciation or the cut of a suit, even the question of body odour. In this respect, it is significant that Pran-as-Jonathan's acquisition of Englishness is figured in terms of an accretion that is only skin-deep: 'between the petting couples in the back row, he eats an ice and feels Englishness begin to stick to him, filming his skin like city grime' (303). Yet a self created solely for external consumption – understood exclusively in the terms of its outward forms and its degree of concordance with preconceived ideas and expectations – is one in which the potential for resistance against the dominant representational frameworks is seriously compromised.

Unlike Saladin Chamcha, the diabolic protagonist of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, whose artistic career as a professional impersonator bespeaks a similar capacity for mimicry, *The Impressionist* remains ambivalent about whether anything lies beneath the surface of Pran's anglophile masks. Rushdie's novel describes Saladin as 'a creature of selected discontinuities, a *willing* reinvention' in revolt against the very notion of historical being, in contrast with the angelic Gibreel who remains bound to the continuity of his cultural past.¹³ Yet in spite of the text's implicit rejection of origins and the rhetoric of homeland in favour of hybridised self-invention, the narrative's recursive movement ultimately draws Saladin back to a re-encounter with the 'true' Indian self he had left behind. Notwithstanding its efforts to distance itself from concepts that perceive identity as homogeneous and non-hybrid, Rushdie's novel is unable to disentangle itself entirely from the residual influence of such ideas. In contrast, we are told that Pran 'exists only when being observed', his assumed subjectivity as gauzy and delicate as 'tissue paper held up to the sun', and offering only an illusion of depth that tantalises and fascinates all those who come into contact with him (347, 250). Indeed, the text's depiction of identity has much more in common with the present-day play of surfaces and

¹³ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Vintage, 1998; first pub. London: Viking 1988), p. 427.

simulations than the modernist hermeneutics of depth, and Pran's pale skin is perceived to be 'not a boundary between things, but the thing itself, a screen on which certain effects take place. Ephemeral curiosities. Tricks of the light' (250). Whilst in India, Pran's assumed Englishness is construed as a reprehensible betrayal of the anti-colonial Indian struggle, in England Pran-as-Jonathan's masquerade goes unnoticed because it moulds itself seamlessly with the imperatives of his cultural location, interpellated by the desires of others and reflecting, without distortion, the gaze of the English.

The trajectory of the narrative gradually homes in on the imaginative possession of the imperial centre that has hitherto been little more than a mental abstraction mediated through the teachings of Pran's several father-figures. Despite the fact that his understanding of England and Englishness is textually preconceived, Pran's physical and cultural transit into the metropolis is some way short of a triumphal homecoming. Confronted by the vision of the white cliffs of Dover as he gazes from the deck of the steamer, Pran 'tries to feel what the others feel', but as much as his English persona is able to convince others of its authenticity, he is never able to inhabit it fully, neither properly inside nor outside the culture whose grammar and social codes are meticulously transcribed into his notebooks (293). The postcolonial reconception of 'home' as a gateway towards re-inscription and re-invention, rather than a repository of intransigent essences and origins, is thus at once taken up by Kunzru's novel and qualified by it. On one level, Pran never really arrives in England; or, more accurately, his journey brings into question the very notion of a deep, underlying connection between identity and territory. Indeed, the seamless cultural translation made possible by Pran's ontological mutability forecloses the very possibility of settling anywhere, for there can be no terminus to this process, and no final destination. The hairline gap between Pran and his partially invented second self – a gap that remains crucially visible to himself – means that his enfoldment into the mythical body of the imperium only obtains at the level of spectacle. Of course, as a creature described as existing 'only when being observed', to what extent there is an interior density concealed beneath Pran's layered selves, or merely an echoing vacancy, is an equivocal point (347). And yet, Kunzru's unease with the psychological and political implications of an identity

defined solely through its performance is clear; despite the authority of exterior form in the novel, the flattening of identity into a depthless style or image to be appropriated and exchanged seems less a mode of freedom than a sweeping away of the material staging-grounds of resistance. The liberating possibilities of endless transition expounded by the Khwaja-sara find their logical extension in the absolute erasure of grounded subjectivity: all that is solid melts into air, as in Marx's assessment of capitalist modernity.

It is significant that at the very moment Pran-as-Jonathan feels he has tunnelled into the inner sanctum of the empire's metropolitan space – conceiving of himself, as he dines at the Chapels' table, at the hallowed centre of imperialism's 'huge apparatus of name-conjuring and name-arranging' – his 'arrival' as an Englishman is almost immediately unsettled (375). In an ironic twist, Pran's amorous advances towards Star, his archetypal English rose, are rejected in favour of the allure of the black Jazz pianist, Sweets, who in contrast to Pran's staid Englishness, Star informs us, has 'soul'. Star's understanding of precisely what this denotes is less than coherent, interleaving economic dispossession, historical suffering and 'primitive emotions' with her own modern desire for novelty and distaste for conformity; and her exoticisation of blackness in fact only replicates a colonial discourse that associates it with primitiveness, albeit now with a positive spin (415). Pran's response is a desperate attempt to renounce his English construct and reprise his hidden status as both foreigner and colonial victim – 'though I may not be as black as him, I'm blacker than you think' (416) – but he cannot jettison the mask of whiteness he has cultivated for so long. Just as Star is blind to the ambiguities of Sweets's blackness, which is produced, consumed and articulated in the context of a dominant metropolitan culture, Pran cannot disentangle his assumed whiteness that represents more than simple pigmentation from the hybrid conjunction of histories. And it is this realisation of the instability of the ladder of ethnic superiority in whose image Pran has re-made himself – founded on the rigid demarcation of race with 'something shining and white at the top, and sticky blackness at the bottom' – that unleashes the colonial nightmare of in-differentiation: 'this terrible blurring is what happens when boundaries are breached. Pigment leaks through the skin like ink through blotting paper. It

becomes impossible to tell what is valuable and what is not' (417). No longer able to calibrate the shifting signifiers of blackness and whiteness, the scaffold around which Pran's life has been organised begins to collapse. In a drunken haze, he stumbles into a Parisian cabaret bar whose performers entertain the tourists by recycling facile ethnic stereotypes. The evening's main act is, fittingly, an impressionist whose skilful mimicry throws into relief Pran's own decentred, dislocated existence, and reflects back at him the grotesque tableau of an identity seen as a succession of hyperreal performances:

One after the other, characters appear. One with a deep baritone voice. Another with a little cap and a hectoring way of talking. Each lasts a few seconds, a minute. Each erases the last. The man becomes these other people so completely that nothing of his own is visible. A coldness starts to rise in Jonathan's gut, cutting through the vodka. He watches intently, praying that he is wrong, that he has missed something. There is no escaping it. In between each impression, just at the moment when one person falls away and the next has yet to take possession, the impressionist is completely blank. There is nothing there at all. (419)

Whilst this is certainly not a vision of cultural hybridity as Homi Bhabha conceives it – evoking instead the concept of identity as a chain of discontinuities, each assimilating the last – it does take the joint postcolonial and postmodernist assault on the imperial/humanist subject to its logical conclusion. If Pran's various transformations attest to the arbitrariness and fragility of the dividing lines of race or culture, they also disallow the possibility of any kind of return to the language of essences as a means of anchoring selfhood in place. Pran's loosening of all material ties to place or history permits him to make himself 'giddily, vertiginously new', but this comes at the price of stripping his incarnations of any ontological weight (298). As Simon During observes, the potential for the perfect translation of one element, whether linguistic or cultural, into another form elides the residue of specificity created through the play of sameness and difference that weaves one society into another, serving to flatten coeval identities and histories beneath the concepts of

the dominant regime.¹⁴ During's ethical appeal to what remains unexchangeable and untranslatable in the economy of imperialism carries particular force in the contemporary era of capitalist globalisation and its networks of commodified images and diasporic flows, through which the stability of roots is displaced by the transience of routes. Just as the contingency and radical relativism of postmodernity produces an ambivalent politics that can only maintain the structure of the *status quo*, Pran's own impermanence means that there is no solid foundation for him to resist the objectifying gaze of the colonial other. As gradually becomes clear to Pran after arriving in the alien environment of Africa as part of Professor Chapel's anthropological expedition, to be in an endlessly provisional state of becoming may also be considered a mode of existential evasiveness:

Becoming someone else is just a question of changing tailor and remembering to touch the bottom lip to the ridge of teeth above. Easy, except when becoming is involuntary, when fingers lose their grip and the panic sets in that nothing will stop the slide. Then becoming is flight, running knowing that stopping will be worse because then the suspicion will surface again that there is *no one running*. No one running. No one stopping. No one there at all. (463; italics in original)

Assimilation is precisely what Pran aspires to, yet by fading inconspicuously into the background he cannot intervene in the political changes happening all around him. With no stable position to occupy, and no investment in any larger social movement outside himself, he is as distanced from the Hindu nationalism that erupts in the 'Pretty Bobby' section as the anti-fascist demonstrations led by his school roommate, Paul Gertler. Indeed, Gertler's marginal location – he is both a Jew and a communist, a combination that leads to his social ostracism at Clopham Hall, and his unjust expulsion – provides an ironic contrast to Pran, who seeks only to divest himself of his marginality in order to be absorbed into the cultural centre. The anti-Semitism Gertler struggles against is merely another face of the exported colonial racism that Pran experienced in India, yet Pran's overwhelming desire to conform

¹⁴ 'Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today', in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 125-9.

leads to what he later regards as a 'betrayal' of his friend when he joins a number of other students in attending a fascist political rally (385).

Whether the profoundly disturbing blankness that the impressionist's cabaret act reveals may be viewed as a simple nothingness or a void where regeneration may be possible is a tension towards which the novel moves in its final part. Pran's journey from Europe to Africa represents an uncanny re-encounter with the colonial difference that his masquerade as Jonathan Bridgeman attempted to seal himself against, where 'objects that England made familiar, ledgers and ink pads and uniforms, have been thrown back into strangeness' (424). The acute sense of foreignness Pran experiences during his sojourn in Paris is magnified dramatically in a West Africa offering few cultural reference-points or a recognisable context into which to mould himself. The passage to the metropolitan centre occupying much of Kunzru's novel – the homing-in of the colonized subject that consolidates the dream of Britain as a transcendental site of wholeness – is thus accompanied by a reverse trajectory, the recursive movement of the white man to the empire's periphery. Unlike the early parts of the novel set in India, where Englishness is regarded as an exotic object of desire, here the ambivalent overlap between colonial mimicry and mockery observed by Bhabha becomes progressively more insistent. The 'sharp and oversized' features of the topi-wearing dolls purchased by Pran at the port where the anthropologists first arrive are indicative both of their crudity and of their intention to caricature the imperial master (425). Similarly, during the tribal dance performed by the Fotse people, whom Professor Chapel's team have come to study, traditional portrayals of the tribe's ancestors give way to impersonations of the white soldiers and missionaries, understood by the Fotse as 'European spirits' whose presence has catastrophically disrupted their collective history (455). Though in the latter instance the mimicry of the coloniser is less explicitly parodic, in both cases the spectacle of cross-cultural translation has a profoundly unsettling effect as a typified Englishness is offered back for the consumption of the imperial gaze.

Led by the Professor, whose research into the social structures and customs of the Fotse has built his prestigious academic reputation, the group of anthropologists and cartographers set off from the coast towards the fictitious region of Fotseland. The expedition travels into the interior aboard a rusting

steamer whose name, the *Nelly*, is one of the many intertextual allusions to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* shadowing Kunzru's depiction of their riverine journey. As in Conrad's text, the party make stopovers at various trading-posts to gather supplies, but Kunzru's novel explicitly distances its representation of the landscape from the impenetrable density of Conrad's Africa that threatens to crush the imperial subject:

Jonathan is waiting to be swallowed by the towering forest trees, to feel he is approaching the primeval heart of a little-known continent: this is what happens when you go up an African river. Yet instead of closing in, the country opens up, the skies widening and the foliage on the banks thinning to tracts of low acacia scrub. (437)

Indeed, in spite of the Professor's assertions that the Fotse have remained entirely cut off from the wider world, unpolluted by modernity and therefore in a condition that is ethnically 'pristine' – very much the holy grail of imperial anthropology – their association with primitiveness is continually undercut (364). Far from the primordial isolation imagined by Conrad, Fotseland is a place that is in flux, combining both indigenous traditions with rapid development: the group are astonished to learn of the ongoing construction of roads and telephone lines, attracting hundreds of people to the area in search of work.

In terms of the topography of the novel as a whole, the three main settings of India, Europe and Africa seem to map interestingly onto Raymond Williams's model of cultural process as a complex of residual, dominant and emergent tendencies, though here these lines of movement coexist on a global scale. These three spaces are by no means hermetic blocks, a notion that the text's emphasis on cultural hybridity and the flows across boundaries clearly disputes, yet viewed as hierarchical components of a developing world system, India, Europe and Africa display very different trajectories. Kunzru's representation of an India under the British Raj suggests a once powerful region in decline; the sprawling palace of Fatehpur and the conspicuous wealth of the Nawab offer a patina of authority barely masking the reality of the ruler's enforced deference to the British administration, his sexual impotence a mirror of his political weakness. The Nawab's

desperation to preserve Islamic traditions against his profligate brother's 'mania for novelty', as well as the air of *fin de siècle* decadence suffusing this part of the novel, locate India on the residual pole of Williams's tripartite schema, demonstrating an alternative, if not always oppositional, relationship with the cultural dominant of modernity (114). It is, of course, Europe, and Britain in particular, that occupies the hegemonic position here, figured as both the still centre around which the world turns and the apotheosis of modern civilisation. At one point, Pran-as-Jonathan 'feels he has stumbled into the inner sanctum of things, where patterns are rational and serene and the inhabitants live far from their acted-upon, blown-about neighbours' (375).

Perhaps most interesting, though, is the novel's alignment of Africa with the category of the emergent which, as intimated above, inverts familiar colonial renderings of the continent as a site of archaic origin. Instead of being presented as primitive savages, the Fotse's customs and social structure prefigure twenty-first century modes of social organisation, specifically that of the network. The tribe are described as 'highly decentralised, and more or less deregulated', neither living in villages nor having an obvious system of local government (460). In addition, the Fotse elder who nurses Pran back to health towards the end of the novel reveals that the tribe believe themselves to be part of a 'new society' named after an indigenous plant called 'needle grass' whose underground roots have 'no beginning and no end', thus reflecting the morphology of their society 'which has no head, no centre, which runs under the earth of Fotseland, and when the time is right will shoot up and destroy sorcery forever' (475). The term 'rhizome' is never explicitly used to denote this non-hierarchical social structure, but Deleuze and Guattari's influential concept – a foundation for much of the current research into networked subjectivities and various kinds of global flows – is certainly being gestured towards by Kunzru's text.¹⁵ Whilst this society has no single centre of governance, like Hardt and Negri's theorisation of 'Empire' it is organised around a complex web of economic transactions, negotiations and obligations that the Fotse term 'Fo', and

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the rhizome, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. and Intro. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1987), pp. 7-13.

whose practice underpins and structures their relationships and customs.¹⁶ The Fotse, then, are shown to be twenty-first-century consumers *avant la lettre*, not least because the principle of Fo also encompasses abstract commodities, such as the potential outcomes of future Fo transactions, on which it is possible to speculate in order to generate capital. Much like the hyperreal exchanges of the Futures Market – and the very name of the tribe and their goddess, Neshdaqa, playfully allude to the titles of the British and American stock exchanges (the FTSE-100 and the NASDAQ) – wealth in Fotseland is primarily defined virtually. But if the decentred and deregulated form of the Fotse's needle-grass society seems to offer the revolutionary potential of a mode of life liberated from colonialism's binary logic, this is tinged with the contemporary reader's awareness of how the modulation of planetary space from a gridded to a networked structure has enabled capitalism to penetrate ever more deeply into social life. As we shall see when the discussion turns to Kunzru's second novel, *Transmission*, the Fotse's non-hierarchical mode of sovereignty becomes a far more dubious proposition when placed in the context of technocapitalism's global networks, where power operates through channels that have become similarly flexible and contingent.

The notion of Fotseland as a fertile source from which new formations of the present may emerge provides one way of reading the gradual atrophy of Pran's selfhood that is staged in the final section of *The Impressionist*: the deconstruction of the subject-positions produced by colonialism. As the expedition journeys deeper into the rocky interior of Fotseland, Pran becomes increasingly disorientated and the tremulous contours of his identity begin to dissolve. Pran is overtaken by an impression of radical decentring during his two-hour stint on watch, a consciousness not so much of being 'lost', which implies the existence of an existentially complete self to be found, as 'dispersed through the darkness' (443). However, it is after he splits up from the group, leaving the camp on a futile endeavour to gather census data on the Fotse, that the lack of fit between Pran and Jonathan Bridgeman grows impossible to bear. Pran's awareness that his journey

¹⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000).

has brought him to the edge of his assumed persona is intriguingly framed as an ultimate lack of belief in the cultural abstractions stitching it together:

Why count the Fotse? Who could be upside down? Of course he knows why – for God and England and the Empire and Civilization and Progress and Uplift and Morality and Honour. He has it all written down in his notebooks; but though it is in his notebooks, it is not in him. He finds that he does not really care about any of those words. He does not feel them, and that lack of feeling marks the tiled bottom of the pool. Jonathan Bridgeman can go so deep but no deeper. (462)

It is notable that despite the authority of textuality in *The Impressionist*, and its recurrent emphasis on the power of the external gaze in shaping identities, the novel finds itself returning to ideas of interiority and ‘feeling’ as vital elements grounding our worldly existence. The figures of mutability, hybridity and translation that have been marshalled throughout the text against false notions of purity and authenticity come up here against their limits, their inability to account for our intuitive connections with the aspects of material experience irreducible to codified spectacle. But if Pran can no longer align himself with his current incarnation and the ideological principles that it embodies, and the extent of his ontological transformation precludes shifting back to a previous form, he also now lacks the will to unfurl a new self, for this would be to prolong the interminable process of evasion to which his life amounts.

Unable to continue his allotted duties, Pran abandons the Professor and the rest of the group and wanders aimlessly into the wilderness, shedding his equipment as he goes and before long exhausting his supply of water. Suffering from feverish hallucinations and overcome by sunstroke, a barely-conscious Pran is dimly aware of the group of Fotse tribesmen who stumble upon his body and carry him into a cave, where a nameless sage performs a rite of healing that involves wrapping him in a cocoon of mud. This scene, which has parallels with the conclusion of *A Handful of Dust*, is suggestive of an exorcism of the ‘evil’ taint of whiteness that has both possessed Pran’s body and threatens to spread into Fotse society (475). Yet the ‘uterine darkness’ of the cave simultaneously figures this as a moment of rebirth: Pran’s encasement in the clay mould inside which all becomes

'molten, formless and in flux' evokes the potent image of a crucible or chrysalis where the rigidities of imperial structurings are annihilated. There are perhaps echoes, too, of Wilson Harris's concept of the generative void of the cross-cultural imagination, where apparently monolithic categories, such as cultural differences or the diachronic binary of past and future, interpenetrate and consume each other.¹⁷ But what remains when Pran is stripped of his carefully refined identities – the tangled bundle of experiences, memories and desires that constitutes a self – is perhaps inexpressible in the language of imperialism, described by the text in turn as an 'abyss' and a 'monstrous disorder' (477).

Pran's final metamorphosis, then, is a profoundly ambiguous one. The apparent expulsion of what the Fotse understand to be a 'European spirit' leaves behind a nameless and nomadic figure who wanders across the African desert with 'no thoughts of arriving anywhere' (473, 481). Whether the deracinated traveller that Pran becomes has submitted to an eternal condition of unbelonging, since 'now the journey is everything', or has reconnected with a mode of being that either subsists beneath or is tangential to the colonizing impetus of modernity is a moot point (481). Amongst other things, colonialism involves the catastrophic rupturing of indigenous histories, therefore the 'braille of scar tissue' on the now nameless Pran's neck is richly symbolic: the patterns left on the skin by the Fotse mystic's brand are intended to irrevocably reconnect the body 'to the time and place these marks are being made, so that wherever he may drift or fall asleep, he will always be in relation to this instant' (481, 477). Colonialism itself has obviously been rejected in some sense here, although its scarring is still visible, yet the political connotations of this gesture remain ambiguous, and it is unclear whether the scene represents a prelude to the construction of a new subjectivity uninflected by the modernity with which colonialism is imbricated, or reveals an eternally silent aporia in consciousness that is the legacy of colonial contact.

The novel's portrayal of the Fotse is significant in this respect, for their desire to return to a time of wholeness before the fissure created by imperialism reflects Jonathan's ceremonial transfiguration. Nevertheless, the attempt by the Fotse to

¹⁷ For example, see Harris's *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (London: Greenwood Press, 1983).

destroy the alien white sorcery that has invaded their ancestral lands, thereby suturing the wound in their history opened up by colonial incursion, is fraught with a sense of futility: the creeping advance of modernity is evidenced by the nearby construction of roads and power lines, and the perception that change has pervaded everything suggests an epistemic leap that cannot be undone. The Fotse's realization that 'perhaps time is something that, once broken, cannot be put back together again' signals the impossibility of discarding Western modernity and forging a cultural identity that is not in some way permeated by imperial subjectivity (479). And yet, if this represents an accommodation with the fact of cultural hybridity, taking the reader back to the novel's opening moment of colonial syncretism involving Forrester and Amrita, then what is implied by Jonathan's deconstructive journey and transformation into the nameless figure apparently outside of the post/colonial structure? Whilst this may appear to constitute a reactionary retreat from the challenge of postcoloniality, culminating in the logic of reverse ethnocentrism that replaces an inauthentic imperial subjectivity with the fantasy of a recovered pre-colonial being, this would seem at odds with the novel's challenge to notions of cultural purity.

To again invoke Homi Bhabha, particularly his "'Race", Time and the Revision of Modernity', it is possible to read the ending of Kunzru's novel as the confrontation between the universalising impetus of imperial modernity and an alternative temporality that it has both interrupted and attempted to assimilate as an adjunct to its own narrative – summoning the terms 'pre-modern' or 'pre-colonial' to produce a sense of ontological belatedness that marks colonial superiority.¹⁸ Jonathan's transformation is not an escape, but a movement into the space of difference allowing a universalised modernity itself to undergo the process of translation. From the perspective of this other temporality, the enveloping imperial construction of humanity and 'civilisation' founded on ideologies of rationalism and progress is revealed to be an 'upside down' interruption, a reversal of the colonial gaze in order that it may see itself from the space of otherness (462). By opening up the temporal disjunction that modernity includes only to mark its

¹⁸ See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, pp. 236-56.

own authority, Kunzru's novel gestures towards the forging of a space where the colonised subject, and indeed the colonial signifier of whiteness, may be rearticulated in other forms than those delimited by the structures of post/colonialism. This new site of enunciation cannot be entirely outside the post/colonial, for it depends on its terms to affirm its own sense of difference, but it perhaps operates as a space-clearing gesture that recognises the mutually constitutive histories of colonialism and anti-colonialism as shaping forces of the global age whilst looking towards the development of new modes of historical understanding. What precise form these modes will take, however, remains as indistinct as the closing image of the traveller receding into the desert horizon.



While it is similarly concerned with questions of identity under modern forms of sovereignty, Kunzru has described his second novel, *Transmission*, as 'a straighter attempt to talk about the condition of people under a globalised world' than that articulated by the self-conscious intertextuality and exoticism of his first.¹⁹ The colonial system from which Pran disentangles himself by mutating into a version of the Deleuzian nomad has, in the present-day setting of *Transmission*, itself taken on a new shape, a regime that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have given the appellation 'Empire'. If *The Impressionist* tracks its protagonist's fluid movement through the relatively stable structures of the imperium – occupying the various spaces and subject-positions the colonial world makes available – *Transmission* explores the mediation of identity in the contemporary context of global capitalism, which is sustained by considerably more mobile flows of commodities, images and diasporic bodies across the globe. As outlined in the opening section of this thesis, Hardt and Negri argue in *Empire* and its companion-piece, *Multitude*, that a new logic of structure and rule has emerged to replace the imperialism of the modern era, demanding the formation of radically new discourses in order to both

¹⁹ Nick Ryan, 'Global Village Rebel', *The Scotsman*, 29 May 2004, Critique section, p. 8.

comprehend and challenge it. Transformations in systemic processes of capital accumulation, production and labour, most obviously expressed by the informatic and prosthetic technologies of the new media, have, they propose, led to the integration of discrete territories into a single spatial totality, giving rise to a cohesive world system composed of open, expanding frontiers and striated by rapid exchanges across material space. The declining sovereignty of the nation-state system, which is increasingly unable to regulate the global flows of economic and cultural material criss-crossing its fixed territorial borders, is one of the foremost symptoms of the emergence of Empire. In contrast to the regime of European colonialism, which managed economic expansion and cultural difference by setting up rigid, if always fragile, channels and barriers between centre and periphery, Empire is a smooth, fluid space of rhizomatic interconnection where there is neither an ontological 'outside' nor governing centre. These networks constantly forge new global links that accelerate the mobility of capital and open innovative, but precarious, channels of ever more profitable circulation.

The various processes brought together under the sign of globalisation, then, create a spectacle of unlimited contact and exchange: the unfettered circulation of cultural productions, information and affects across an unbounded global space. Whereas in the age of colonialism – which was a gridded system of relatively stable hierarchies and binary oppositions – mobility, contingency and hybridity operated subversively, today these are constitutive elements of a regime that ruptures every determinate ontological relationship and thrives on circuits of transfer and translation. In this changed imperial context explored by Kunzru's second novel, the belief in the revolutionary potential of the Fotse tribe's networked 'needle-grass' society finds almost perfect correspondence in the ideology of corporate capital that is similarly opposed to fixed boundaries and operates through highly differentiated and mobile structures. The image of the network may be emancipatory when set against the backdrop of the binarisms and dualistic hierarchies of modern political regimes – modes of sovereignty tracing their roots back to the European Enlightenment – but Hardt and Negri argue that political strategies affirming multiplicity, diversity and difference are only effective against the remnants of this earlier form of rule:

When we begin to consider the ideologies of corporate capital and the world market, it certainly appears that the postmodernist and postcolonialist theorists who advance a politics of difference, fluidity and hybridity in order to challenge the binaries and essentialisms of modern sovereignty have been outflanked by the strategies of power. Power has evacuated the bastion they are attacking and has circled around their rear to join them in the assault in the name of difference. [. . .] This new enemy is not only resistant to the old weapons but actually thrives on them, and thus joins its would-be antagonists in applying them to the fullest. Long live difference! Down with essentialist binaries!²⁰

To put Hardt and Negri's vision in the more succinct terms of the economist Thomas Friedman, 'the world is flat'.²¹ This is not to say that political hierarchies have disappeared or sovereignty has itself vanished, but rather that these have modulated into a decentred and deterritorialising apparatus of rule permeating all human interactions, and thus creates the very social world that it inhabits. Properly understood, *Empire* is a biopolitical regime directed towards the production, regulation and rearticulation of bodies and subjectivities: its control reaches into the depths of individual and collective consciousness, and its object is the administration of life itself.²² For Hardt and Negri, contemporary subjectivities are more intensively mediated than at any point in human history; the material and immaterial web of information and communications enveloping us is not merely a technological prosthesis extending the sensory reach of the body, but itself forms a new environment – or better, a matrix – in which both bodies and minds are reconfigured. The dispersal of power through flexible and mobile channels means that the tendrils of the capitalist world system proliferate everywhere, extending into all registers of the social order and producing new hierarchies of exclusion. But if we find ourselves enmeshed in these networks, subject to repressive mechanisms of surveillance and biopolitical control, then this also cuts the other way, with information and communication technologies opening a space of possibility for

²⁰ *Empire*, p. 138.

²¹ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalised World in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Penguin, 2006).

²² See in particular *Empire*, pp. 22-41. Hardt and Negri's use of the concept of biopower is indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, and also draws on elements of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze.

more powerful means of interaction and commonality. And this is the nub of Hardt and Negri's argument: that the medium of the network has come to define our ways of understanding the world and acting in it, and that it offers at once more insidious technologies for the maintenance of order, and the revolutionary potential for global liberation from the pernicious regime of Empire. The vehicle for this emancipation is the 'multitude' – essentially a re-casting of the Marxist proletariat for a present dominated by transnational institutions and forms of immaterial labour – whose diverse movements and modulations of form force the continual rearrangement of the global capitalist system. The multitude subverts Empire from within, its innumerable acts of resistance and insurrection not merely posed against imperial rule, but aimed at the creation of alternative forms of life.

Both of Kunzru's novels examine the construction and management of subjectivities by powers that have rendered it an object of discipline, and explore the implications of the loosening of material anchorage on its constitution. His work sets up comparisons between the colonised body that emerges from negated history and place and the cybernetic body materialising from the contemporary alliance between technology and capitalism. In *The Impressionist*, Pran's unmooring from the constraints of place or history, his exchange of cultural roots for migratory routes, is the catalyst for an existential mutability that, by the end of the novel, has become a terrifying slide through the machinery of empire. Despite the fact that Pran's shape-shifting permits him to occupy the cultural centre of white middle-class Englishness from which he is excluded by his ethnicity, the very fact of his ontological weightlessness means that he is never able to fully inhabit his assumed persona. After becoming liquid, Pran cannot simply reverse the process to re-establish a more solid incarnation, for his journey brings to light the artificiality of the very notion of a stable, homogeneous and unified self. In Kunzru's first novel Pran's mode of existence is an exception rather than the rule, yet in the changed global context of the contemporary mass-mediated world that provides the setting for *Transmission*, it has become virtually ubiquitous. According to Arjun Appadurai, the confluence between the impact of mass migration and the rapid circulation of images, scripts and sensations is creating 'a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities', and the contradictions raised by an ever more

intensely mediated and 'interactive' global culture are the driving force behind Kunzru's text.²³ In many respects the processes of global capital seem to be bringing a new complexity to our temporal and spatial relations as these are transformed by proliferating layers of mediation, but this is accompanied by a contrary trend towards the reductive homogenisation of human relationships and the atrophy of interior life. *Transmission* examines how the medial intertwining of local and global is redefining our psychic geographies, with the phenomenon of connectivity transcending the traditional spatial boundaries to human communication whilst fissuring emotional intimacy in new ways.

The novel interleaves the narratives of four main characters: Arjun Mehta, a geeky computer science graduate from New Delhi lured to America by the promise of living out his dreams in California's Silicon Valley; Guy Swift, a marketing executive whose London-based agency generates profits from the 'emotional magma that wells from the core of planet brand'; Swift's disillusioned girlfriend, Gabriella Caro, who is sent to handle PR for a Bollywood film shooting on location in the Scottish highlands; and the young star of this new movie, Leela Zahir, whose sanguine on-screen image masks a profound discontent with the demands of her increasing celebrity.²⁴ What binds these scattered stories together is the volatile cascade of effects and events set in train by a computer virus that spreads through the connective tissue of the global matrix, causing massive disruption for a world market reliant on the unobstructed flows of commodities, wealth and information. Facing redundancy from his dream job working for a computer security company in California, Arjun releases the virus in an attempt to make his own position indispensable, since only he has the necessary expertise to disable the malicious code. The virus, which Arjun names 'Leela' after his favourite film actress and which uses a clip from one of her movies to infect the host machine, is a sophisticated design: as well as replicating itself via infected emails, Leela has the capacity to mutate into new strains to stay one step ahead of anti-virus software, quickly splintering into a multitude of variants as it adapts to new digital environments. Like

²³ *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 4.

²⁴ Hari Kunzru, *Transmission* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 20. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

the so-called 'butterfly effect' used to refer to the sensitivity of dynamic systems, such as the Web, to initial conditions, with small variations producing larger deviations in the long-term behaviour of a system, the local perturbations caused by the virus are swiftly amplified, creating turbulence at a global level. The circulation of data is interrupted or diverted, databases become corrupted, and networked systems suffer inexplicable breakdowns. Arjun hopes that by providing the solution to the viral pandemic, he will be able to revive his own fortunes as well as those of his struggling employer, Virugenix, but he underestimates Leela's virulence and is entirely unprepared for the scale of global disruption that is no less than 'an informational disaster, a holocaust of bits' (258). Whereas the 'real' Leela's association with the virus catapults her to global superstardom, Arjun is transformed into a wanted terrorist on the run from the authorities.

When juxtaposed with the pandemic plot of Kunzru's novel, Hardt and Negri's assertion that 'the age of globalisation is the age of universal contagion' seems particularly evocative.²⁵ As may be inferred from this fortuitous metaphorical correlation between 'transmission' and 'contagion', the common celebrations of the unbounded flows and exchanges in our new global village also carry with them anxieties about increased contact. Just as *The Impressionist* reproduces the fear of mixing and miscegenation that was a commonplace of colonial consciousness – whether framed as physical contamination, moral corruption or psychological collapse – so too does *Transmission* articulate contemporary concerns about what lies beneath the glossy surface of the information economy and the rhetoric of the borderless world. The dark underside to the awareness of globalisation is the fear of contamination and corruption, for as the prophylactic borders of the nation-state become increasingly porous, our capacity to resist the rapid spread of undesirable or hazardous elements is proportionally diminished. Seen as an evolving biopolitical body composed of both human and non-human systems, the globe at once appears more adaptable – since each part of the whole is connected to every other – and more vulnerable to sudden, catastrophic dysfunction. In part, this is to echo Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens's diagnoses of contemporary experience as symptomatic

²⁵ *Empire*, p. 136.

of a global 'risk society', where the growing interdependency of social relations and the intensified reflexivity of networked space continually generates new hazards and insecurities.²⁶ As well as the spectres of biological pandemics such as AIDS, SARS and, recently, avian 'flu, or viral threats across the digital domain – for instance the Netsky and Sasser worms that caused widespread disruption in 2004 – one could also point towards the advent of 'global terrorism', which is habitually figured as a form of contagion that can erupt anywhere, as a potent index of this process.

The notion of 'transmission' animating Kunzru's novel carries a number of different valences. Most obviously, as demonstrated in the précis offered above, it refers to the ethereal flux of media images and codes through the virtual spaces of the networked world and their continual crossover with the material realm. But it also gestures towards the imbrication of the 'wetware' of the corporeal body with technologies of transport and communication: the new ontological fluidity engendered by the deterritorialisation of social relations. In contrast to *The Impressionist*, where identity was primarily established in terms of racial hierarchies, in *Transmission* it is shaped by the newer technologies of power wielded by global capitalism, which regulates a global politics of difference and diversity through the production of hybridity. In different ways, each of the text's main players is interpellated by the planetary flows of the mass media, the phantasmagoria of signs, images and affects both incorporating and passing through them. Though Guy traffics in the transient brand-images and sensations of consumer capitalism, Arjun immerses himself in the algebraic order of computer code, and Leela participates in the economy of fame and celebrity, it is not merely the case that these characters manipulate the various dimensions of the global mediascape; rather, they are simultaneously constituted by them.

Arjun, for example, is depicted throughout the novel as a kind of information-processor: he tries to 'reboot himself in positive mode' when feeling anxious and, after being unfairly fired from his job in Silicon Valley, attempts to retreat from a

²⁶ See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. by Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992); and Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990). Beck and Giddens argue that the expansion and heightening of the desire for control expressed through modern institutions ultimately ends up producing new and unforeseen risks.

nightmarishly erratic social world into the rational logic of numbers and their promise of stability: 'numbers were the truth of the world, numbers cloaked in materials. Find certainty by counting the things. In decimal. In binary, hexadecimal' (99). Set against the transparency and binary simplicity of cyberspace, however, the real world is perceived by Arjun as a degraded echo of this simulated ideal, its vicissitudes and unpredictabilities perceived as glitches in its core logic rather than as evidence of the limitations of the reductive framework he imposes on it. Despite his yearning for intimacy and the intensity of feeling offered by his favourite Hindi romances, there is a similarly mechanical quality to his social interactions, which are stripped of any kind of intuitive affective connection. As though unable to provide any more than a simulacrum of spontaneous emotion, he reacts to his crying mother by making 'the gestures you make when you are trying to comfort someone' (16). Similarly, Arjun's interviewer for the post at 'Databodies' – an appropriate neologism for the text's cybernetic interlacing of human and machine – is perceived less as a tangible human being than 'a communications medium, a channel for the transmission of consumer lifestyle messages' (8). Kunzru's novel suggests that under the aegis of technocapitalism, which attempts to excise every 'unproductive' element in its desire for ever more efficient modes of exchange, social interactions become increasingly reduced to the sterile transmission of packets of information.

For the globetrotting entrepreneur, Guy Swift, the notion of the world 'contracting like a beach ball' that Arjun finds so unsettling is perceived less as a sign of the self's ominous shrinkage and potential erasure than of its rapturous expansion, marking the advent of an entirely new mode of being liberated from the strictures of embodiment and the inertia of material geography (6). The market's cyclical logic of novelty, obsolescence and innovation is a fetish around which Swift's existence is moulded, with his branding agency aspiring to surf the shifting currents of global capital by harnessing the future. Early in the text, Guy perceives his body not as a mass moving through time, but rather as a conduit for the 'alien fibrillation' of futurity that flows inexorably into the present, this apparent effacement of bodily duration shooting him 'beyond the trivial temporality of the unpersonalised masses of the earth' (20-1). Indeed, it is not merely that Guy deals

in the images and affects of the global mediascape, but that his identity appears to have taken on the characteristics of the immaterial milieu he seeks to inhabit. Like Arjun, he is figured as a holographic refraction of the economic system, yet whereas Arjun's world is constituted according to the output-functions of machine code, Swift imagines his own diffusion into the vaporous transience of the media. In this sense, the feeling of 'angelic contentment' he experiences on one of his transatlantic flights is particularly suggestive: the philosopher Michel Serres, whose work will be returned to later in this chapter, traces several metaphorical connections between the celestial intermediaries of the sacred world and the contemporary systems of mass-communication that fill the heavens with a multiplicity of messengers and messages (13).²⁷ Guy dreams of his dissolution into the weightless ether, visualising his passage towards the light-speed of signals and transmissions as he breaks free from earthly friction to carry 'the message of himself from one point on the earth's surface to another' (13). However, Swift's desire to insulate himself from the turbulence of terrestrial relations and to partake in the 'sublime mobility' of this exterritorial elite 'who travel without ever touching the ground' goes hand-in-hand with the atrophy of his interior life manifested in his sterile relations with Gabriella (45). Despite his belief in the potential for brands to bring consumers together in fulfilling relationships, he is 'untouchable' in a double sense, at once emotionally disconnected and wishing to isolate himself from the 'yearners and strivers' swallowed into the consumerist mass below (12, 21).

A superstar of popular Hindi cinema, Leela Zahir's exalted celebrity profile embodies the romantic ideals pedalled by the Bollywood industry, the all-pervasive vision of *pyaar*, or Love, that the text describes as a 'glittery madness' (105). Worshipped by her adoring fans, for whom the cinematic spectacle of her 'towering luminous face' radiates a virtuous grace that appears touched with the divine, Leela is practically inseparable from the saintly persona circulating through the channels of the global media (278). Yet in contrast to the ubiquity of her image that is transmitted from billboards, movie screens and magazines, the young starlet herself is barely seen at all during the novel. The virtual invisibility of the 'real' Leela, whose

²⁷ See Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. by Francis Cowper, ed. by Philippa Hurd (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

subjectivity is all but subsumed beneath the endlessly mutable sign of celebrity, is suggestive of both the instability and the multiplicity of identity in post-millennial culture. The iconic image that has been carefully engineered to appeal to the public emerges from the complex intersections between the conventions of Hindi cinema, the discourses of the tabloid media, ideological expectations surrounding femininity and the female body, and the collective desires of her audience, whose projections play a vital part in shaping the actress's iconography and generating cultural meaning. But whilst Kunzru's portrayal acknowledges the intertextuality of her persona, it does not entirely collapse the distinction between her corporeal identity and its media simulacrum. The resentful young actress whom Gabriella meets by the moonlit loch is 'not quite the double of the dancing girl in the film clips': unlike the joyful figure in the viral video that is transmitted around the world, the sulky, chain-smoking Leela reveals herself to be bitterly cynical about the movie business in which she is forced to work by her overbearing mother – herself a faded star – who seeks to fulfil her ambitions vicariously through her daughter (162). But perhaps the contagious video file says more than it seems to, since the endless loop of the clip does symbolically underscore the hemming-in of Leela's life, a form of digital incarceration to match her own isolation and diminished autonomy. Certainly, the image of 'the girl with the red shoes, cursed to dance on until her feet bled' is evocative of her objectification and exploitation characterised towards the end of the novel as 'a kind of prostitution' (279). Whereas the virus bearing the actress's name possesses a freedom of which she can only dream, able to drift without restriction through the networks and systems of global capitalism, the corporeal Leela is fixed in place by the discursive machinery of the film industry. Just as Arjun, and even Guy to a lesser extent, are caught in the volatile flows of the world market circulating beyond the reach of personal action, Leela is subject to the play of global forces and desires over which she has little agency:

In a world built on speed, the fluidity of signs, images and bodies, and the porousness of territorial and ideological boundaries, it is movement, or rather the capacity to exert control over movement, that has become the central axis of political struggle. For Zygmunt Bauman, whose work has focused on the various tendencies and geometries of power structuring global capitalism, the very same

processes that have contributed to the new mobility of people, commodities and information are also responsible for ever-deepening divisions.²⁸ In the present historical moment, for which Bauman coins the term 'liquid modernity' in contradistinction to the previous 'solid' modernity of heavy industry, Fordist production, imperial expansion and monopoly capitalism, the relative freedom to access this new mobility and the increasingly disembedded channels of power is the main stratifying factor of twenty-first-century life.²⁹ Beneath the rhetoric of multiplicity and universal inclusion pedalled by global capitalism, the realisation of the world market is defined by the continuous imposition of new hierarchies excluding entire segments of the world's population. Such are the contradictions underpinning the imaginative and material project of globalisation, where alongside processes that dissolve the traditional spatial and temporal constraints obstructing the flows of material and immaterial commodities, localising or space-fixing processes are also at work that regulate the movement of 'unproductive' elements through the augmented surveillance and control of border zones.

According to Bauman, then, the logic of globalisation tends towards not homogenisation but an increasing polarisation of society manifested at both global and local levels. On the one hand, an elite cadre of cosmopolitan 'tourists' float free from the constraints of territorial and corporeal embeddedness, able to move across the earth, both physically and virtually, almost without restriction. This exterritorial elite, at once weightless and inaccessible, wields a power whose mobility annuls the possibility of situated resistance. On the other hand, those who are unable to mimic the nomadic habits of capital find themselves deprived of the ability to control their own geographies. These 'vagabonds' are the dark vagrant other to the touristic consumption of commodities and desires, subsisting on the margins of a world contrived to ease the passage of those with the benefit of wealth.³⁰ It is this friction-free smoothness, traversed easily on real and virtual journeys leaving no trace of material inertia, that is the ultimate expression of a technocapitalist desire aspiring to an ever greater manipulation of transience and

²⁸ *Globalisation: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 2.

²⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

³⁰ For a more extended discussion of 'tourists' and 'vagabonds', see Bauman's *Globalisation*, pp. 80-93.

the transcendence of material limits. If, as we have seen, Guy is in his element in this rarefied, and reified, domain whose very disembodiedness from any social or cultural context seems to be its source of magic, then this may be because he is one of those who reap the economic benefits of globalisation and its promise of unfettered mobility. Yet he also senses the precariousness of his aerial existence, dimly conscious of what lies beneath the consumerist dream of lightness and transience: 'the other mobility, the forced motion of the shopping-cart pushers, the collectors of cardboard boxes' (45-6).

It is this under/other world to which Arjun is introduced when he is lured to California by spurious guarantees of employment that neglect to mention the downturn in the IT sector. Though a client of an international recruitment agency, it becomes immediately obvious that they have little intention of fulfilling their contractual obligations to provide work and a comfortable salary, and without being able to afford to return home to India, Arjun is left to survive on the paltry wage provided by short-term and sporadic opportunities. The exploitation of labour here tends to replicate familiar ethnic divisions, with Arjun soon discovering that 'middle-class' is a code-word for 'white'. Starkly juxtaposed against the jet-setting Guy Swift, whose very name is a reference to kineticism, Arjun finds himself trapped in his immediate locality. From this down-at-heel perspective, exposed to the shameful secret of poverty lurking beneath the gleaming surface of California, the economic divide articulates itself in one's relative capacity to overcome the restrictions of spatial location. For Guy, the desire to transcend the limitations of time and space offers the promise of a liberty that is vertiginous and intoxicating, yet for Arjun, unable to drive or to afford transport, the concreted immensity of the urban landscape expands interminably. The image of Arjun 'trudging along the margin of a wide California highway' poignantly evokes his social exclusion, a disparity made all the more humiliating by the obtrusive sight of the others' freedom to move:

If the soccer moms zipping by in their SUVs registered him at all, it was as a blur of dark skin, a minor danger signal flashing past on their periphery. To the walking man, the soccer moms were more cosmological than human, gleaming projectiles that dopplered past him in a rush of noise and dioxins, as alien and indifferent as stars. (37)

From the celestial perspective of those who skim easily across the surface of the earth, both physically and virtually, the sedentary figures of the dispossessed are practically invisible. Two worlds rush past each other barely making contact at all, the gap between them like that of different orders of being. As Guy later remarks, 'the border is not just a line on the earth any more', no longer merely demarcating discrete territorial spaces, but traced through the ether, erecting new immaterial barriers along the fractal flows of bodies, capital and information (238).

There are clear overlaps between the reduction of Arjun to a 'blur of dark skin' on the periphery of middle-class vision and the text's satirical portrayal of the European Union's immigration policy. According to one of the officials associated with the fictional Pan European Border Authority (PEBA), who have commissioned Guy's agency to re-brand the image of European citizenship, 'the question of the border is a question of information' (237). In spite of its sugared rhetoric of 'harmonisation', PEBA's project to establish a common border policy involves the installation of invasive mechanisms of surveillance and data collection designed to reinforce its borders against outsiders. By combining a centralised electronic database with detailed biometric information, PEBA uses the same technologies that offer unprecedented levels of human interaction and commonality to construct more efficient regimes of differentiation. Guy's crucial pitch plays on these ambiguities between inclusion and exclusion, imagining a territory that is simultaneously open and closed, both hospitable and prohibitive:

We have to promote Europe as somewhere you want to go, but somewhere that's not for everyone. A continent that wants people, but only the best. An exclusive continent. An upscale continent [. . .]. Welcome to Club Europa, the world's VIP room. (272)

The prospective uniforms of the black-shirted immigration officers-cum-bouncers hint at the fascistic undertone barely concealed beneath the glossy sheen of 'Club Europa'. Though taking a different form to the spurious racial hierarchies and classifications of the colonial world, the desire to segregate the low-status and 'unproductive' migrant others who do not fit in with Europe's 'upscale' image retraces an all too familiar story. PEBA's integrated information system makes it

possible to automate the bureaucratic task of separating the 'legitimate' citizens from the *sans papiers* and swiftly deport those without the correct credentials, so bringing into being a gated community on a continental scale. There are hints here of the potential emergence of a totalitarian information state that Kunzru warns elsewhere is the potential other side to these technologies that permit the tracking of people and materials through physical and data space.³¹ Indeed, Mark Poster has critiqued the technocratic assumption that the storage and transmission of information will inevitably produce a more egalitarian society, arguing instead that the blanket electronic surveillance of the wired world marks the advent of a 'Superpanopticon', where the panoptic gaze Michel Foucault theorised as the principle disciplinary mechanism of industrial capitalism is freed of its technological limitations.³² According to Poster, the emergent technology of power in the Superpanopticon both compels the population to willingly participate in their own surveillance and constitutes supplementary, digital selves built from electronic records of their movements and transactions. Like the clusters of matched data kept on the PEBA database, these virtual subjects – shorn of their human ambiguities and thus easily manipulated – are imparted a quasi-material authenticity set above that of their human counterparts.

Kunzru's text thus signals the potentially pernicious effects of the cybernetic idealism underpinning the 'information society', where increased connectivity opens up new paths for dialogue whilst extending the reach of administrative and disciplinary regimes. The codification of bodies and social interactions has, of course, long functioned as a primary means of political control, but the development of more integrated networks of exchange promises increased levels of efficiency in the systematic production and regulation of boundary spaces. The informatic order depends on bracketing the complexities and ambiguities characteristic of lived experience, flattening the heterogeneity of terrestrial space into a uniform, readable plane where social relations are rendered fully visible to the panoptic gaze of instrumental power and may be submitted to disassembly,

³¹ 'Rewiring Technoculture', *Mute* (Jan 1997) <<http://www.metamute.org/?q=en/node/6101>> [accessed 22 May 2006].

³² *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), pp. 97-9.

reassembly, investment and exchange. In this context, there are obvious overlaps between the Leela virus and the *sans papiers* targeted by the border authorities in the novel. Both are perceived as dangerous forms of contagion contaminating the systemic order of material and virtual space, and in both cases their menace stems in large part from their invisibility to a system whose ideal horizon is a world of absolute transparency and legibility, where all may be codified and controlled. As we have already seen, *Transmission* repeatedly blurs the distinction between human beings and the bursts of data coursing through the networked channels of the global matrix, which models both organisms and machines in the terms of information transmission and communications engineering. From the perspective of the emerging technologies of power, those elements obstructing the drive towards unlimited transfer and convertibility are conceived as forms of 'noise' that must be excised to preserve systematic efficiency.

What are the implications of this fetishisation of information and the cybernetic desire to create a world of perfect communication for the production of subjectivity? Linking the alliance between global communications networks and transnational corporations with the emergence of the new imperial order, Hardt and Negri suggest that the informational colonisation of being is fundamental to the new biopolitical structuring of social relations, which are integrated, guided and channelled within this communicative machine.³³ In a comparable way, Kunzru's novel portrays the citizens of the globalised world as prostheses of the economic system and its political order. As we discovered in the previous chapter, Lawrence Norfolk's evocation of past forms of empire in *Lemprière's Dictionary* and *The Pope's Rhinoceros* also articulates the diminution of individual autonomy and agency under these regimes. But whilst *Lemprière's Dictionary* signalled the machine-like qualities of eighteenth-century imperialism through an emphasis on robotic structures and the figuration of people as automatons, *Transmission* presents contemporary modes of identity as transparent media or conduits through which the planetary flows of symbolic materials are routed. The mechanistic interaction between Guy Swift and an attendant on board a transatlantic flight is

³³ *Empire*, pp. 31-4.

indicative of the text's wider attenuation of the material aspects of subjectivity, which is repeatedly made subordinate to the circulation of disembedded images and intensities:

He enjoyed the attendant's android charm, the way this disciplined female body reminded him that it was just a tool, the uniformed probe-head of the large corporate machine in which he was enmeshed. He (or rather his company) was paying this machine to administer a calculated series of pleasures and sensations. (12)

What appears to please Guy above all is the naked transparency of this relationship, the reduction of its specificities to the abstract calculus of exchange, whereby the corporeality of the body, and its potential illegibility to the objectifying gaze, dissolves almost entirely beneath the diffusion of messages and sensations. Here, any sense of opacity or alterity in the confrontation between self and other is effaced by the reinforcement of the self-identical: this is less the discursive negotiation between coeval identities than an interface between common components of a subsystem where all relations slot into their preordained place. The flight attendant is perceived as no more than the facilitator of a particular service or the delivery device for commodified affect, her selfhood stripped of the complexity and ambiguity that could distort the purity of the signal. A similar attenuation of subjectivity is manifested in the text's depiction of the service-sector workers in the hotel where Swift stays whilst on business in Dubai, whose uniforms come complete with badges bearing Westernised names in a strategy apparently designed to minimise the cross-cultural 'noise' of ethnic particularity in their transactions with the guests.

Kunzru's novel thus sets up some evocative parallels between the distribution of people through the global networks and the disruptive code of the Leela virus that spreads through its connective pathways. Indeed, the autonomy of the self-replicating computer virus possesses many of the same characteristics that are considered necessary components of living existence, such as self-reflexivity,

reproductive capacities, self-propulsion and context-based decision-making.³⁴ In the age of intelligent, self-developing machines, it is no longer clear where the divide between the natural and the artificial may be situated or how to distinguish human from non-human actors. As Donna Haraway observes, 'biological organisms have become biotic systems, communications devices like others. There is no fundamental, ontological separation in our knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic'.³⁵ The metaphorical crossing between computational and biological domains is authorised by their common translation into problems of coding: just as cybernetic systems are constructed by the semiology of information processing, organisms are conceptualised in the terms of genetic cryptography. This is simultaneously to suggest that there is no longer an external standpoint of pure, unmediated life beyond the interlinking assemblages of interactive and mutually constitutive relationships that subsume all ontological foundations into the plane of immanence. But if the text renders both the Leela virus and corporeal beings as mobile forms of transmission disseminated through the channels of the global order, they are differently located within its geometries of power. Whilst the movements of Kunzru's cyborg bodies are regulated by the interconnections of the global communications networks, the virus, though it is parasitically dependent upon this environment, continually disturbs the apparatus of command. As mentioned earlier, the infectious fragment of computer code generates a swarm of variants as it adapts itself to colonise new virtual domains and elude the protective measures of firewalls and anti-virus software. Echoing the protagonist's ontological mutations in *The Impressionist*, this flexibility allows it to pass unchecked through the security mechanisms of cyberspace; but whereas Pran's transformations worked within the discourses of imperial authority, Arjun's virus works against the master-code of information upon which the new Empire's control systems depend. Echoing Hardt and Negri's concept of the global multitude, whose diasporic mobility expresses a refusal of authority and a desire for freedom from conditions of

³⁴ See Otto Imken, 'The Convergence of Virtual and Actual in the Global Matrix: Artificial Life, Geo-Economics and Psychogeography', in *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations*, ed. by Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 92-106.

³⁵ 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism In the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-81 (pp. 177-8).

exploitation – a desire that is afforded new opportunities in the era of mass migration and communications – the Leela virus is figured as a nomadic horde subverting the hegemony of late capitalism from the inside, a ghostly quintessence in the virtual machine that disrupts its disciplinary logic. Yet this is where the comparison ends, for in Hardt and Negri's formulation the destructive capacities of the multitude must be accompanied by the creative potential to produce a new global vision and a new way of living within the world, a task that is beyond the virus that is, after all, only a simulacrum of life.

The virus, then, provides a suggestive metaphor for emerging modes of networked subjectivity; but it also may be read as an image of the ineluctable residue frustrating the technocapitalist drive towards the ever smoother, cleaner and tightly integrated systematisation of exchange. It is the noisy interference and granular excess whose material inertia hinders the pacification of spatial heterogeneity by the frictionless circulation of information and commodities; and thus the virus is a figure of mediation itself. To elucidate this statement, a brief detour through recent understandings of mediality in information theory, supplemented by Michel Serres's philosophy of connections, will be necessary. The classical model of communication distinguishes between a sender and a receiver, between whom a signal passes, and a medium through which this message is conveyed. In ideal terms, perfect communication is understood as the transmission of a signal from sender to receiver without interference or distortion, allowing for no ambiguity or equivocation in its reception. According to this conception of information exchange, noise is an unwanted middle term disrupting what would otherwise be a clear connection between sender and receiver, an unnecessary obstruction that, it is hoped, could be eliminated by more efficient modes of transmission. Here, noise is placed in a position exterior to the communicative relationship, a backdrop against which communication happens (or fails to), but one whose role is extraneous to the functioning of the system. According to Michel Serres, however, whose dense body of work circulates incessantly around humanity's tortuous relations with mediation in its manifold forms, the 'noise' generated by the space of transmission is essential for communication to take place

at all.³⁶ Serres' argument, which builds on the pioneering work of Claude Shannon amongst other earlier information theorists, hinges on a logical paradox: the possibility that a condition of absolute clarity and transparency could exist between sender and receiver would serve to make communication superfluous, since for such a situation to occur the communicating parties would have to be entirely self-identical and immediate to each other. Serres summarises the problem in this way: 'Given: two stations and a channel. They exchange messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum and immediate, it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means it has failed. It is only mediation.'³⁷ In other words, optimum communication requires that mediation vanishes into immediacy, for it is only in this instance that the potential for equivocation in the reception of a signal is reduced to zero and the integrity of the message is guaranteed. As Steven Brown observes, 'such a relationship, of course, is not really a "relation", but rather the absolute harmony of similarities'.³⁸

But at the very least, communication requires the presence of two different entities and a means of moving between them, a medial zone to carry the message from one point to another. The channel that carries the flow of information cannot simultaneously disappear in the act of communication, since then, properly speaking, communication could not have taken place at all. Instead, the medium's irreducible materiality emerges in the relationship through the traces it leaves on the signal passing through it, the happenstance deflections, deformations and distortions that reveal the space of mediation to be far more volatile than the ideal, and unattainable, image of the passive and inert interface would suggest. For the sender, these intermedial traces are perceived as corruptions and distortions of an original purity – the fact of mediation appearing to stand in the way of a more direct communication – yet from the perspective of the receiver, the interference that necessarily accompanies the signal has its own informational value, even if this

³⁶ An interview between Kunzru and Serres is published on the author's website; see 'Art, Writing: Michel Serres', unpublished interview for *Wired* (Jan 1995) <<http://www.harikunzru.com/hari/serres.htm>> [accessed 26 July 2006].

³⁷ *The Parasite*, trans. by Lawrence Schehr (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 79.

³⁸ 'Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 19.3 (2002), 1-27 (p. 7).

is unintended: the production of meaning is, after all, a dialogical process. Noise, then, is supplementary in the Derridean sense, since what it represents is no less than the presence of the medium through and across which messages pass, which is also the environment or context in which communication takes place. Put simply, 'there are channels and thus there must be noise'.³⁹

In Serres's philosophy, the figure of the 'interface' that has gained such wide currency in the digital age – which suggests an immediate encounter between communicating parties and seeks to neutralise the middle term that is part of the chain – misrepresents the true complexity and instability of transmission. Indeed, the notion of a wholly transparent and ethereal medium of exchange imagines a thoroughly processed, purified and predictable interstitial space, absorbing the complexities of the environment into a serene spatial abstraction. In place of this friction-free zone of mutuality that effaces any hint of material inertia, Serres offers the disorderly concept of the 'milieu', which is less a smooth, efficient plane of traversal than a tangle of shifting temporal and spatial involutions and volatile fluctuations.⁴⁰ According to this dynamic model of communication, order and integration are not achieved by closing down the noisy multiplicity of space, but actually emerge from its heterogeneous midst, with its agitated movements and mutations precisely what hold elements of a system together. Without wanting to be drawn into a more involved comparison, there are obvious points of commonality between the notion of the milieu offered by Serres and the concept of the 'third space' introduced by Bhabha in the context of colonial discourse.⁴¹ For both, this liminal position between communicants and cultures is a site of translation and invention where the alchemical mixing of elements creates new hybrid forms and subjectivities. Opposing ontological essentialisms and discourses of purity and originality, the in-between spaces of transformation are not merely what afford relations between humans, but the very conditions for human

³⁹ *The Parasite*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ For a more involved discussion of the milieu in *The Parasite* and a number of Serres's other philosophical works, see Steven Connor, 'Michel Serres's Milieux' (2002) <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/skc/milieux>> [accessed 23 June 2006].

⁴¹ See 'The Commitment to Theory', in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, pp. 19-39.

existence itself, which is continually emerging from the shifting flux of networked relations.

Serres's theory of the 'parasitic' nature of mediation seems especially apposite when applied to the figure of Kunzru's virus. In French, *parasite* has connotations beyond the familiar social or biological implications of the term, referring also to the static or noise that interferes with communication. Yet these different senses of the word share the common principle of interference that upsets an existing set of relations or pattern of movement: whether biological, social or informational, the parasite compels its host to readjust its internal workings in order to either accommodate or exclude it. It should consequently be understood less as an obstructive/destructive property acting on relations and more as a creative force prompting a system to constantly reorganise itself to incorporate the disturbance, thereby refiguring the parasite as 'a catalyst for complexity'.⁴² Likewise, the proliferation of the Leela virus in *Transmission* short-circuits what Donna Haraway terms 'the informatics of domination', since it reintroduces the friction, inertia and opacity that networked capitalism must suppress in its desire to subordinate all relations and exchanges to its transcendental authority.⁴³ If this authority dreams of the final abstraction of the world's multiplicity into the universal register of the Baudrillardian code – a world shorn of distance and difference – then Kunzru's text offers the materiality of noise as a perennial spanner in the works.

The corruptive logic of the virus/parasite is encoded in the formal arrangement of Kunzru's novel, which is divided into two uneven parts entitled 'Signal' and 'Noise'. The considerably longer 'Signal' constitutes the main body of the narrative, shifting its focus between the disparate, yet mutually interdependent, stories of Arjun, Leela, Gabriella and Guy, and depicting the catastrophic transformations of their lives as the virus passes 'effortlessly out of the networks

⁴² Steven D. Brown, 'Michel Serres: Science, Translation and the Logic of the Parasite', p. 16. See also Steven Crocker, 'Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben', *CTHEORY*, 1000 Days of Theory, td053 (March 2007) <<http://ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=574>> [accessed 20 May 2007].

⁴³ 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism In the Late Twentieth Century', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-81 (p. 161).

into the world of things' (258). Leela touches everyone in some way: Arjun becomes a fugitive on the run after the virus is traced back to him by the American authorities; Guy's agency is one of the many crippled by the collapse of the networks on which his business relies; Leela goes into hiding to escape the intense publicity generated by the viral proliferation of her image; and Gabriella is given the unenviable task of managing relations between the reclusive starlet and the gathered media. The trajectory of 'Signal' maps an entropic slide towards disorder as Arjun's creation and its manifold variants hijack the infrastructures of the global market; under 'Leela's brief period of misrule' the systemic efficiency of capitalism's apparatus of command, like the Bakhtinian carnival updated for the intensively technologised present, is 'completely overturned' (4). Confusion and doubt similarly cloud attempts to chronicle these events, and in the same way that the spreading plotlines of *Lemprière's Dictionary* bring about the dispersal of singular meaning, the narrative coherence of Kunzru's text is progressively corroded by the parasitic noise of mediation:

At the boundaries of any complex event, unity starts to break down. Recollections differ. Fact shades irretrievably into interpretation. How many people must be involved for certainty to dissipate? The answer, according to information theorists, is two. As soon as there is a sender, a receiver, a transmission medium and a message, there is a chance for noise to corrupt the signal. (147)

As we saw previously with the layered texts of Lawrence Norfolk's *In the Shape of a Boar*, the mediation that makes it possible to forge symbolic links with other times and places also makes the fact of our material separation oddly palpable. But while the final part of Norfolk's text imagines an impossible interface between past and present – allowing the reader to follow the Greek heroes into the darkness of the boar's cave – Kunzru's novel suggests that the passage of meaning is inevitably fraught, subject to unpredictable deviations and cross-contaminations on its journey.

Kunzru has alluded in interview to the 'network form' of *Transmission*, which may be read as an aesthetic response to a world increasingly being conceptualised

as a dynamic field of interlinked systems, scapes and flows of various kinds.⁴⁴ But although the ‘arbitrary leap into the system’ performed in its opening pages mimics the decentralised modality of the world system, the text is animated by the traditional narratorial desire to isolate and trace patterns of cause and effect. The narrative attempts to reconstruct the chain of events giving rise to the moment known as ‘Greyday’, denoting the peak of the global disruption generated by the Leela pandemic, a period of ‘appalling losses, drop-outs, crashes and absences of every kind’ (258). Yet as the clarity of ‘Signal’ fades into ‘Noise’, the ‘topological curiosities’ wrought by the virus finally force its collapse into representational undecidability (4). ‘Signal’ comes to a close with each of the protagonists poised on the threshold of a journey into the unknown. Arjun has fled to the tightly-policed southern border with Mexico, this abstraction marking ‘the outer limit of his imagination’ that is also the edge of the shallow seductions of the American Dream (252). After impressing directors in Brussels with his crucial pitch to ‘re-brand’ the European Union’s border security, Guy celebrates with a drink and drugs binge, and in his inebriated state agrees to accompany a prostitute into the city’s dark, anonymous suburbs. Gabriella, whose relationship with Guy has always been one of mutual convenience rather than affection, finally makes the decision to leave him following his clumsy attempt to buy her love with a tackily expensive gift. Lastly, the young starlet Leela is found to be missing from the hotel room where she has been holed-up whilst feigning illness to delay the shooting of the film in which she is the less than willing lead.

Despite the fact that it opens with what is described as a ‘simple message’ – the email whose infected attachment transmits the computer virus – Kunzru’s text suggests that there can be no such thing, a problem that has only intensified in our media-saturated present. The fiction of direct interaction and unmediated dialogue is, of course, sustained as much by the technology of the novel as that of cyberspace, and *Transmission* offers dissemination and dispersal as correctives to the idealism of a fully integrated and homogeneous world. As suggested above, the rift fissuring the uneven halves of the novel is the period known as ‘Greyday’, where

⁴⁴ Fredrick Luis Aldama, ‘Hari Kunzru in Conversation’, *Wasafiri*, 45 (2005), 11-14 (p. 13).

the precarious equilibrium of the global information system teeters on the brink of collapse. Here the crashing of networks and the corruption of databases expose the disjunction between information and meaning-creation, establishing 'a moment of a maximal uncertainty, a time of peaking doubt' that the narrative cannot penetrate (258). Finally unable to reconcile the extant 'records of events which may not have taken place' and the possibility of other events that 'took place but left no record', the unity of the text disintegrates into a tangle of loose ends and missing links (258). Throughout the novel, the imperial desire to manage and direct material and immaterial flows across border spaces hinges on the supposed inviolability of information, which promises to bring into being a fully transparent, and thus controllable, life-world of absolute temporal and spatial synchrony and consistency, expunged of zones of darkness and disorder. Yet 'Noise' suggests that such a gesture is an act of futile hubris, gesturing instead towards the interval between terrestrial material and the conceptual registers we use to make the world amenable to order and sense:

We have drenched the world in information in the hope that the unknown will finally and definitively go away. But information is not the same as knowledge. To extract one from the other, you must, as the word suggests, inform. You must transmit. Perfect information is sometimes defined as a signal transmitted from a sender to a receiver without loss, without the introduction of the smallest uncertainty or confusion. In the real world, however, there is always noise. (257)

The obsessive gathering of data is a fetish that borders on paranoia, for there can never be enough information; but far from reducing the complexity of spatial relations into the depthless horizontality of a totally integrated world, the penumbra of information obscures as much as it reveals. Furthermore, in making the important distinction between information and knowledge, the passage draws attention to what remains irreducible to mere accretions of data.

Against the narcissistic vision of depthlessness that collapses all reality into media power, Kunzru's novel poses noise as the trace of the world's substantiality and otherness, the material excess that overflows the limits of our enframing narratives. As Kevin Robins and Frank Webster argue, the neo-Platonic ideal of

perfect communication imagines the final transcendence of mediation to create an immediate and self-present intersubjectivity; yet this grand, global vision of transparency and uniformity nullifies both the passage of meaning and the meaning of passage.⁴⁵ Without ambiguities or absences, global space would be flattened into a static, readable plane, deprived of any sense of nearness or remoteness. Indeed, Doreen Massey observes that the imagination of the world's geography under the aegis of global capital as 'an immense, unstructured, free, unbounded space and of glorious, complex mixity, at times seems to glorify in the triumph of space whilst speaking of its annihilation'.⁴⁶ In spite of its celebration of plurality, heterogeneity and hybridity, real difference is incompatible with the ideology of the world market, which desires the assimilation of all interactions and exchanges into its modulating hierarchies. Yet this particular cartography of power/knowledge represents just one possible trajectory of the process of globalisation, whose singularising logic is striated by innumerable dissonances, absences and ruptures attesting to the dynamism of spatial relations properly understood as a multiplicity of durations and becomings. Just as *The Impressionist* closes with the tableau of Pran's ambivalent movement beyond the structures of colonial subjectivity, 'Noise' is a site of dynamic reversals and transformations where the viral contamination of systemic order is framed less as failure or loss than an opening out to alternative times, spaces and identities.

The gap between 'Signal' and 'Noise' is one that the narrative is never able to bridge, and the reconstruction of what precisely happens to Arjun, Leela and Guy on their passage into this murky zone is overwhelmed by the proliferation of possible events and explanations. Whilst Arjun and Leela vanish entirely, Guy at least does return from his journey, albeit utterly transformed by his experiences, and it is his story that is recounted with the greatest degree of narratorial certainty. In a suitably ironic twist, it emerges that Guy had been picked up by immigration officers on an operation designed to showcase the coordinated efficiency of the nascent Pan European Border Authority, the very institution to which Guy's agency

⁴⁵ *Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁶ *for space*, pp. 81-2.

had been making its crucial pitch. Contamination by the Leela virus corrupted the newly integrated EU immigration records and biometric databases, leading to a number of cases of mistaken identity, and Swift was one of the legitimate citizens deported to some of the world's more troubled territories. The patent absurdity of his false identification as an Albanian national is the upshot of the presumed infallibility of these information systems. There are carnivalesque echoes in the reversals of power here: Guy is converted from a figure closely approximating Zygmunt Bauman's aforementioned description of the cosmopolitan 'tourist' into an embodiment of one of his 'vagabonds' following a simple database error, while through the medium of the virus Arjun's influence is increased immeasurably. Indeed, the man who returns after this forced incursion into the underworld of the deprived and disenfranchised from which he has always insulated himself is, in every respect, an inversion of his previous self. If during much of the novel Swift is implicitly associated with the transcendental element of air – unfettered by territorial constraints, 'raking all of London with his gaze' from his gated penthouse, his commerce the hyperreal abstractions of brands and marketing 'solutions' – he is remade as a creature of the earth (114). The new Guy Swift lives a life that is resolutely anti-modern, domiciled in a remote stone cottage far from the 'geopathic stress' of the city and unhooked from the volatile networks and flows of contemporary life (263).

Guy's retreat into isolated locality is paralleled by the opposite movement of Arjun and Leela, whose respective escapes take the form of a global expansion, a final dissolve into the network. This attrition of identity retraces the same path as Kunzru's previous novel, where Pran is stripped down to a nameless and nomadic blank, a purified medium shorn of all content; yet there are also interesting differences reflecting changes in the mechanisms of imperial rule. As individualised, material subjects, both Leela and Arjun slip beyond textual representation, perhaps fading into, to draw on Lacan, the sublime site of the Real that remains unnameable by the symbolic order. While it may be assumed that both continue to exist on an ontological level as discrete corporeal bodies, like the Greek heroes of Norfolk's *In the Shape of a Boar* there is no trace of their passage; and all that remains are two hotel rooms, resonant with vacancy and littered with the detritus of objects left

behind. If the 'real' Leela and Arjun do in a sense disperse into invisibility, flitting beyond the surveillance of a world suffused by 'electronic trails, log files, biometrics and physical traces of every kind', they also become strangely ubiquitous, their images disseminated around the globe (275):

There are sightings of Arjun Mehta and Leela Zahir around the world, sometimes alone, sometimes in company. She is seen begging in the streets of Jakarta and talking on the phone in the back of New York cabs. He is spotted one day at an anti-globalisation demo in Paris and the next coming on to the pitch in a hockey match in rural Gujarat. He has got enormously fat. She has been surgically altered to look like a European. (281)

The Leela and Arjun of 'Noise' are at once everywhere and nowhere in particular, both local and global together, their disparate avatars circulating around the media networks and endlessly shifting into new forms, never remaining stable enough to be fixed in place with any certainty. Despite the accumulation of speculative material by various researchers, conspiracy theorists, and other 'Methtologists', the occlusions surrounding their respective disappearances remain unfathomable and, if anything, are actually made more obscure by the sheer volume of conflicting interpretations of the rather sketchy information available. Indeed, echoing the modern myths of Watergate or the Kennedy assassination, the possibilities, imaginative speculations and tenuous connections that accrete around the central mystery lend it an impenetrable density. The event itself remains opaque and indeterminate, yet freighted with an excess of narratives which scatter like gossamer threads, dispersing into a cloud of contesting articulations. If the desire to abolish the unknown and the uncontrollable in its various forms runs throughout 'Signal', then 'Noise' gestures towards the humble acceptance of multiplicity and discontinuity.

Through its refusal to resolve the story, to absorb conflicting possibilities into 'one pattern that makes sense' (281), the novel's ending reverses its opening leap into the system, complementing its inward-tracking focus with a movement outwards that brings about the final diffusion of the narrative into the white noise of global communications. As much as 'Noise' playfully mocks the absurdities of the various theories purporting to explain Arjun and Leela's disappearance, it does not

try, or is simply unable, to provide a more comprehensive account that fills in the gaps and absences fissuring the text. This response to issues of meaning and mediation differs markedly from that expressed by Lawrence Norfolk's work, particularly *In the Shape of the Boar* which, it will be recalled, ends with the imaginative reconstruction of an event that has passed into the darkness and silence beyond historical record. In Norfolk's fiction the palimpsestic texts through which the past is articulated in the present can only obscure, betray and distort the ontological purity of original events, but for Kunzru the noise of mediation is conceived as a mode of survival in a world where information has become both a valued commodity and a means of exploitation and control. The cacophony of conflicting speculations ultimately overwhelming the plot offer a 'vocabulary of imperfection' to counterbalance the inflated rhetoric often surrounding global communications and its ideological vision of a transparent, manageable and, above all, efficient world (257). Against the sterile topography of this purified and pacified space, *Transmission* poses the immanent complexity, contingency and heterogeneity of terrestrial relations – a spatial dynamism that is always unfinished and in the process of becoming – and therefore holds open the possibility of alternative forms of global politics.

As in *The Impressionist*, the ending of Kunzru's text looks towards the development of new modes of life unencumbered by the limits imposed by the traditional staging grounds of identity construction, such as nation, ethnicity, people and race. Whereas Pran becomes a nomadic figure no longer defined by his connection with any particular place, Leela and Arjun undergo a form of networked dissemination as their identities are diffracted across material and immaterial space, an ending that imagines a gathering of migrant multiplicities and a new kind of shared future. However, though the perfection of Zahir and Mehta's elopement may be tinged with the wistful sentimentality of the Bollywood romances that *Transmission* both satirises and cherishes – with the lonely protagonists united beyond the law in loving anonymity – the novel is ambivalent about the nature of their freedom. On the one hand, the final dilatory image of Arjun and Leela scattered across the globe echoes Donna Haraway's fable of the cybernetic diaspora liberated by the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of

boundaries. In this context, the young couple are reconfigured as viral bodies whose unfettered mobility and 'power of metamorphosis' make it impossible to filter their corporeal selves from the media chatter (108). On the other hand, it is questionable to what extent their conjoined lines of flight really allow them to regain control over their own lives or their capacity for self-fashioning. Far from destroying her celebrity persona, the revelation of Leela's history of personal problems serves only to intensify her deification by her fans, with the star's off-screen suffering becoming invested with saintly piety. Similarly, Arjun – 'Gap loyalty-card holder and habitué of Seattle Niketown' – is appropriated as the putative figurehead for a range of anti-capitalist movements, from disaffected computer hackers to neo-Marxist politicians (272). Transmuted into mythical figures bearing little resemblance to the real personages, both are continually remodelled by the shifting currents of the networked desires of millions around the world. The mediated forms of Leela and Arjun possess an influence far exceeding that of their corporeal bodies, yet they have no control over how their images are wielded and directed by others.

In spite of these issues, it is tempting to read the final dispersion of subjectivity and narrative at the end of Kunzru's novel as the imagined passage towards the emergence of Hardt and Negri's multitude. No longer limited by the ties of belonging to a nation, an identity and a people, Leela and Arjun's nomadic exodus evokes the vision of a new, global mode of citizenship, where the local connects directly into the universal. In addition, Kunzru illustrates how the representation of globality seems not only to frustrate a desire for omniscient viewpoints – as exemplified in classical realism and challenged throughout the twentieth century by the introspection of modernism and the fragmentation of subjectivity in postmodernism – but questions the fictional validity, if not morality, of single narratorial viewpoints. This leads in multiple ways to the sedimented and celebrated stories of David Mitchell, discussed in detail in my final chapter, who eschews the pessimism of Kunzru's politicised and almost polemical atomised, mediated identities but makes use of multiple first-person narratives to convey the heterogeneous connectivities that must now be acknowledged in a globalised world.

4

David Mitchell: Networks and Narratives

The best prospects for a humane globalisation come from imaginations wedded not to the monolithic, dominating blocs of old continents, but to the concept of the archipelago, loose-linked islands in an open sea.¹

Like the writings of Lawrence Norfolk and Hari Kunzru, David Mitchell's work to date demonstrates a profound consciousness of the emerging global topographies upon which individual life-narratives are shaped. As has been suggested over the course of this thesis, the complex of processes denoted by the concept of globalisation are giving rise to new understandings of subjectivity, which is increasingly being regarded as the volatile product of flows and networks – of people, cultural forms, mediated images and affects, dreams and desires – that operate on a properly global, rather than merely national or international, scale. But if the centre of gravity of Norfolk's historical novels tend to dwell on the genealogy of Western modernity – albeit one whose dissonances, ruptures and aporias demonstrate its coevalness with other modes of understanding – and Kunzru's narratives triangulate between Europe, India and Africa/North America in their explorations of past and present forms of empire, Mitchell's polyphonous and variegated texts shuttle across vast tracts of time and space, seeming to have become as fluid as the heterogeneous world that they represent. Following his ambitious and consistently inventive debut, *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* (1999), Mitchell has both received high critical acclaim and found significant commercial success; and he is considered to be one of the most exciting young authors to emerge in the new

¹ Jennifer Birkett, '(En)countering Globalisation: Resistances in the System', in *Globalisation and its Discontents*, ed. by Stan Smith for the English Association, *Essays and Studies*, 59 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 47-69 (p. 47).

millennium.² *Ghostwritten* weaves a series of discrete first-person narratives, each articulated by a diverse range of speakers and shifting between a multitude of geographical settings, into a tapestry of stories that make subtle connections between apparently unrelated lives. Mitchell's Man Booker-shortlisted third novel, *Cloud Atlas* (2004), is reminiscent of his first in many respects, interleaving six successive narratives that move from the colonial era of the nineteenth century to a dystopian future where warring tribes battle for resources after an unknown apocalypse. Similarly, the novel sets up textual and thematic echoes that resonate through its separate, but interlocking, parts and bind together its dispersed voices, the layering of stories gradually building towards a sense of global space as at once gloriously various – composed of diverse, heterogeneous elements – and forming a densely interconnected matrix in which individual subjectivities coalesce into a global diaspora.

A more detailed discussion of *Ghostwritten*, *Cloud Atlas* and Mitchell's latest novel, *Black Swan Green* (2006), will be undertaken later in this chapter. Before this, the focus turns towards the author's second novel, *number9dream* (2001), whose more conventional structure and sustained engagement with a single narrative consciousness may serve as an accessible point of entry into his body of work. In contrast to the ambitious, globe-spanning architectures of *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, *number9dream* zeroes in on a single location: Tokyo. Considering that Mitchell lived in Japan for a number of years, and has recently returned after a brief sojourn in Ireland, the use of this particular setting is hardly surprising. In some respects, the text may be approached as a negative of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*: whilst Ishiguro's book plays with the myths and stereotypes of Englishness embodied in the figure of Stevens, the dutiful butler, Mitchell explores a Japanese society that is filtered through the Western consumption of popular cultural productions such as manga, anime and video games. A long shadow is also cast over Mitchell's writing by the work of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami,

² As well as appearing in *Granta* magazine's list of best young British novelists in 2003, a recent special issue of *Time* named Mitchell amongst the hundred most influential people in the world. See *Granta*, 81 (2003), ed. by Ian Jack; and *Time 100* (2007), available online at <http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1595332_1616691,0.html> [accessed 20 May 2007].

whose influence extends beyond the common inspiration for the titles of their fiction (both *number9dream* and Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* borrow their names from John Lennon compositions). The significance of dreams, the nested layers of stories within stories, and the mixing of texts and genres – both high-cultural and popular – in Mitchell's novel have clear stylistic affiliations with, in particular, Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, a literary debt consciously alluded to by the implication that Mitchell's protagonist is reading this same text. But the ultra-contemporary urban landscape of Japan's sprawling capital is also a microcosm of the excesses of global technocapitalism and thus provides a powerful imaginative locus for the exploration of modes of identity in the twenty-first century. Like Kunzru, Mitchell's work seems fascinated by the new articulations of subjectivity opened up by the contemporary proliferation of mass-communications and new media technologies where concrete and virtual spaces, bodies and machines, have become inextricably intertwined. Just as both *The Impressionist* and *Transmission* offer different, but related, perspectives on the fluidity and impermanence of identity in a networked global culture whose social relations are increasingly disembedded and deterritorialised, *number9dream* repeatedly blurs the apparent polarities between the realms of the material and the immaterial, dreams and reality.

The plot of *number9dream* centres on the experiences of the twenty-year-old Eiji Miyake and his search for a father he has never known, a man who abandoned both him and his twin sister, Anju, shortly after they were born. Having spent most of his young life in the sleepy rural backwater of Yakushima, a tiny southern island in the Kyushu region, Eiji arrives in the sprawling metropolis of Tokyo on a quest to track down the parent whose regular maintenance payments, paid through a lawyer, is the only contact he retains with his children. It emerges that Eiji and Anju were products of an extra-marital affair that the traditional Japanese codes of family honour demand be kept secret. The very fact of their existence is seen as shameful evidence of this past infidelity and the absent father has attempted to sever all ties with his illegitimate offspring and their mother. His callous rejection of his former mistress and children has had serious repercussions on Miyake and his family, contributing to the mental instability and alcoholism of their mother –

necessitating her self-enforced absence for much of their upbringing – and the death of Anju nine years before, who disappeared whilst attempting to swim towards a partially-submerged rock off the coast which the children, believing it to have magical properties, named the ‘whalestone’.³ Cut loose from his immediate relations and finding little warmth from his surrogate family of a grandmother and various aunts and uncles, Eiji dreams of a future reunion with his parent that he hopes will anchor the aimless drift of his life and restore a sense of significance to his world. This blank, father-shaped focus of desire is thus invested with a transcendental authority over Miyake’s existence, conceived as a repository of truth that holds out the promise of meaning and existential plenitude for which he yearns. However, Eiji’s search for his father’s identity and, by extension, his own is hindered at every turn, with the man’s anonymity being preserved by the legal wrangling of his attorney as well as the intervention of his repellent ‘real’ wife and daughters who have no wish to publicise the shameful family secret.

The motif of the absent parent is, of course, a traditional route by which metaphysical questions of selfhood may be approached, one that can be traced back to the earliest examples of the novel form. Yet it is significant that this device recurs in the writings of all three of the authors on whom this thesis has been concentrating; the vacancy that sets in motion Pran’s multiple transformations in *The Impressionist* and the ontological lack affecting each of Lawrence Norfolk’s protagonists. It may be that these struggles to reclaim personal histories and restore biographical continuity key into a wider sense of dislocation and rootlessness intensified by the pressures of globalisation. Indeed, the relatively recent discursive explosion around the concept of identity should be interpreted as a response to changing life conditions, where categories and boundaries that once appeared solid have now become fluid and unstable. The quest for selfhood goes hand in hand with the erosion of the traditional cognitive frameworks used to narrate individual experience and joint history, a process coupled with the privatisation and atomisation of life politics under the banner of consumerism. At the same time, the systemic structure of capitalism slips ever further out of the

³ David Mitchell, *number9dream* (London: Sceptre, 2001), p. 52. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

reach of the agencies invented by modern democracy, its destabilising networks of power apparently all-pervasive but exceeding the local capacity to intervene. The attempt to rehabilitate old or create new shared communal identities is therefore not a pre-globalisation residue, but a natural companion to it made visible in the rise of indigenous and ethnic movements across the world. Whilst it is possible to read the preponderance of quests to reconnect with a lost mother or father as footmarks of an eternal oedipal drama, as a response to the present material context it would seem to signify a desire for a clearly-identifiable figure of authority – in the sense both of a stable centre of control and a tangible site of origin.

As Eiji swirls around the labyrinthine streets, a self-styled private detective on the hunt for clues about his father, his quest is repeatedly subject to unexpected detours, deferrals and disruptions: he tries to hold down a job at a railway lost-property office, becomes the unwilling participant in a Yakuza turf war, uncovers an illicit network harvesting human organs for profit, embarks on a love affair with a beautiful music student blessed with ‘the most perfect neck in all creation’, and re-establishes contact with his estranged mother (4). For much of the novel, the hazy figure of Miyake’s father is little more than a symbolic projection where naïve fantasies of love and forgiveness commingle with feelings of bitter resentment. Unsurprisingly, considering the all-encompassing nature of his paternal search, Eiji’s voyage through the labyrinthine city spawns a succession of father-figures, from his landlord, Buntaro, to the Yakuza ‘father’ who ‘educates’ him in the ways of the violent criminal underworld that thrives in Tokyo’s shadowy spaces. Miyake’s febrile imagination conjures up a range of romantic scenarios where shadowy conspirators keep him apart from his parent, preferring these fantasies to a more plausible, and emotionally crippling, reality. When Eiji finally comes face to face with the man in whom he has invested so much significance, however, his dreams of fulfilment are brutally crushed. Though it is never clear whether their meeting is the product of a hidden destiny or merely a fortuitous ‘card trick that Tokyo has performed’ – Miyake finds himself delivering a pizza to the very person for whom he has been searching – what Miyake experiences when he confronts the affluent and conceited individual whose almost mythical persona has underpinned his quest is less the triumphant consummation of his selfhood than profound shame and

disappointment (370). Not recognised by his father, Eiji chooses to slip away anonymously rather than revealing his identity. As he puts it, 'I feel sad that I found what I searched for, but no longer want what I found', yet if the culmination of his voyage brings little sense of personal resolution, it does at least permit him to cast off the father-fetish that has obsessed much of his young life, allowing him to establish a more sympathetic relationship with his mother, who is convalescing in a mental institution (375).

Like *The Impressionist*, Mitchell's novel manipulates the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* to reflect the fragmentation, or more precisely, proliferation, of subjectivities in the post-millennial world. Whereas Pran's ontological mutations were set against the rigid hierarchies of the colonial regime, however, Eiji's development takes place within the matrix of more recent commercial and technological transformations. As is the case in the author's other novels, *number9dream* eschews traditionally linear narrative in favour of a more episodic approach. The text is divided into eight roughly equal sections providing a series of snapshots of Miyake's seven-week stay in Tokyo, with these relatively self-contained vignettes building into a mosaic of the disparate edges of human experience. The connected tales could be read as an elaborate succession of solipsistic reveries – the epigraph, taken from Don DeLillo's *Americana*, proposes that 'it is so much simpler to bury reality than it is to dispose of dreams' – but they also offer a multi-faceted vision of a contemporary life disseminated across a multitude of interdependent ontological settings. Arjun Appadurai has captured this fluid quality of global relations with the analogy of planetary space as an amalgam of shifting landscapes, or better, seascapes, composed of financial, cultural, technological and demographic movements.⁴ These distinct, but confluent, dimensions provide the globally defined fields of possibility for the production of a constellation of 'imagined worlds' by historically situated persons and groups around the planet. Miyake's narrative demonstrates similarly rhizomatic qualities: each segment of the novel evokes a distinct narratorial texture that keys into a

⁴ *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 27-47.

different mode of reality, and together the novel's layering of disjunctive textual scapes constructs a fractal geometry of current cultural formations.

In the same way that Kunzru's *Transmission* works on the volatile interface between abstract ideals and material forces, Mitchell's fiction explores the border zone between dreams and reality. But if the opposition between signal and noise in Kunzru's text maintains the dividing line between the subjective frameworks that constitute the world as an object of sense, knowledge and affect, and those terrestrial elements exceeding the limits of this process of enframing, in *number9dream* the question of precisely where Eiji's consciousness ends and the external world begins is raised from the very first pages. The novel's opening section, entitled 'PanOpticon', is a model of this ontological instability where, reflecting contemporary rearticulations of space as a confluence of ongoing processes and oblique trajectories of becoming, the real and imaginary dimensions interpenetrate each other. As Eiji sits in a café, staking out the imposing PanOpticon building where he has learned that his father's lawyer, Akiko Kato, is employed, his narrative segues between a series of extravagant scenarios that jolt through different levels of reality. Perhaps influenced by the handheld 'vidboy' being played by one of the other customers, one of these sees Eiji conducting a daring raid on the building, evading high-tech surveillance systems, shooting Kato as well as her cyborg double, and escaping with the secret documents that will reveal the true identity of his father (6-15). Featuring cloud-draped skyscrapers, sci-fi 'bioborgs', and exotic firearms, the register of this passage is situated somewhere between *James Bond* and *Bladerunner*, with Miyake's incarnation bearing more relation to the bulletproof avatar of a video game than the callow youth that comes into focus as the narrative shifts back to the café, revealing the preceding events to have taken place only in his caffeine-stimulated mind. 'PanOpticon' is actually a succession of aborted openings serving to continually disorient the reader: other episodes spawned by Eiji's imagination involve, firstly, a flood of biblical proportions in which he drowns, and then the pursuit of Kato to a run-down cinema where he watches a bizarre film – also named *PanOpticon* – in which a prisoner in a psychiatric hospital claims to be the creator of the universe. When he eventually plucks up the courage to leave the sanctuary of the café, however, Miyake's

humiliating and inept attempt to gain access to Kato's office contrasts starkly with his alter-ego's successful raid on the building, throwing into relief the awkward lack of fit between his fantasies and his real experiences.

Whilst in the 'PanOpticon' section the fabulated displacements of imagination are explicitly juxtaposed with the more prosaic actuality of Tokyo, whose frantic pace threatens to sweep the protagonist away completely, the novel progressively dissolves any absolute distinction between the two. Indeed, by opening the novel with a chapter that textually interfuses fantasy and reality, Mitchell instils a kernel of doubt in the reader's mind about the veracity of the narrative's subsequent episodes, many of which appear equally fantastical. But if it invites us to separate the strands of the real and the immaterial, the hybridity of the text may be intended to make the point that in a world shaped by an array of different mediums this polarity itself seems increasingly anachronistic. The duality of material and immaterial is no longer an adequate way of framing the complex intertwinings of virtual and physical flows – organic and technological networks – whose dynamic interplay structures contemporary consciousness, which inhabits both of these dimensions simultaneously. Just as the bifurcations of Arjun and Leela at the end of *Transmission* make it impossible to disentangle their corporeal bodies from the circulations of data, Mitchell's protagonist shifts fluidly between the material-immaterial scapes of modern subjectivity, cycling through different versions of himself that are also diverse inflections of our composite being. This is in marked contrast to Lawrence Norfolk's aesthetic strategy in *In the Shape of the Boar* where, it will be recalled, the struggle is to reclaim the real heroes of the Kalydonian boar-hunt from the scattered textual traces of the myth that at once reveal and veil the quiddity of their existence. Where Norfolk's text funnels towards the singularity of the boar's cave, Kunzru and Mitchell's fictions diffuse into textual multiplicity; and this divergence reveals differing orientations towards the fact of mediation. For Norfolk, whose third novel, in particular, is animated by a sense of ethical responsibility towards the lives, objects and events that once existed yet have passed into obscurity, the mediation of the past is an insistent dilemma, at the same time enabling and inevitably disrupting the pursuit of meaning. Yet for Kunzru and Mitchell, whose work is less concerned with the philosophical problems of

historiography, the proliferation of the means of transmission is interpreted less as something that insulates the subject from an intuitive encounter with the real than as a process by which the life-world is opened up to heterogeneous temporalities and multiple trajectories of becoming.

Mitchell gestures towards the governing architecture beneath the novel's loosely thematic chapters when, in 'The Language of Mountains is Rain', Eiji dreams of 'a mind in eight parts', thus mirroring the structure of the novel (417).⁵ It is certainly possible to produce a taxonomy of the specific mental topographies mapped by each section – for instance, the sci-fi and cyberpunk infused fantasising of 'PanOpticon'; the recursion to Eiji's fragmented childhood memories in the aptly-named 'Lost Property' where much of the back-story is fleshed out; or the nightmarish imagery of the underworld, both psychological and metropolitan, in 'Reclaimed Land' – but this would suggest a rather schematic formal diagram. On the contrary, the fluidity of the narrative works against the synchronic, spatialised notion of the text as a kind of rigid cognitive map, for as well as Miyake's central narrative that cuts across the various parts, the thickening web of connections and continuities is suggestive of a far more dispersed structure that lies somewhere between neat synthesis and chaotic disjunction. In this respect, the world of Mitchell's novel has more in common with the dynamic properties of non-linear systems that, like the 'Europe-machine' of *Lemprière's Dictionary* and the volatile networks of *Transmission*, adapt and co-evolve through the interplay of order and chaos that is unpredictable but not arbitrary. For example, the ubiquity of the number nine in the text implies an underlying pattern, code, or, to draw on the terminology of chaos theory, 'attractor' whose hidden logic leaves its traces on the surface flux, yet the text is constantly mutating into new forms as narrative doors open up unexpectedly onto other stories, each of them separate but resonating together as part of a larger whole.

As much as it is a portrait of a city where 'not a single person is standing still' – criss-crossed by the turbulent flows of 'rivers, snowstorms, traffic, bytes, generations' – *number9dream* is also a journey through the networked constitution

⁵ See also Jerome Urquhart's interview with Mitchell, 'You May Say He's a Dreamer', *Independent*, March 24 2001, Features section, p. 11.

of twenty-first-century subjectivity (3). This is to suggest that identity is articulated in the text neither through the opposition nor synthesis of the Cartesian dualism of inside/outside, but instead emerges as part of a web of mutating and mutually defining connections that braid together the dimensions of 'self' and 'world', each of which is always already embedded in the other. On two occasions the unusual kanji that form Eiji's name are alluded to, but the subtle differences between the translations hint at this interpenetration of subject and object. In the first instance, we are informed that Eiji's name breaks down into 'incant' (*ei*) and 'world' (*ji*), suggesting that the reality depicted through Miyake's first-person narrative exists only in the magic circle of his consciousness (258). Later on, however, 'incant' becomes 'incantation', this transition from active verb to acted-upon noun implying that Eiji may equally be seen as an expression of the world's diverse worlding (339). Certainly many of the episodes occurring later in the novel, particularly the grotesque violence Eiji witnesses between rival Yakuza families, may have no more concrete reality than his earlier daydreams. Similarly, the disparate characters who emerge from the volatile tumult of the city that moves at 'a thousand faces per minute' are no less unstable, oddly refracted through Miyake's memories and desires or appearing to represent alternative versions of himself (3). His various 'fathers' have already been mentioned, but he is also haunted by the memory of his dead sister whose body was never recovered: the stray cat that visits Eiji's apartment in the 'Lost Property' section, and which later reappears after being thought to have died, has the same 'bronze-spark Cleopatra eyes' as Anju (92, cf. 51), and Miyake's burgeoning love for Ai – she of the beautiful nape – is textually interfused with his love for his lost sister in the dream-narratives of the final chapter. In addition, the persistence of certain textual echoes, images and motifs combine to suggest that Eiji is distributed through the world that he simultaneously constitutes and is constituted by, immanent in the text for which he is the medium. Examples of these include the symbol of the whale, which may be a coded reference to the whalestone; the trope of falling, which appears to reconnect with Eiji's infant experience of being pushed down the stairs by his mother; and recurrent fragments of text, such as 'the lockless knob twizzles uselessly' (387; cf. 209, 266). Throughout the book, illusion contrasts both with reality and disillusion,

memory turns the past into present realities; reality shapes and is in turn shaped by dreams.

The fragility of the borders between dreams and waking life becomes particularly evocative when we find ourselves jettisoned alongside Eiji in the 'Reclaimed Land' section of the text. As intimated above, here the protagonist unwittingly stumbles into a gang war between rival Yakuza factions battling for control of Tokyo, sucked into a lawless hinterland built on fear and the ubiquitous threat of violence. Filtered through a cultural mythos established by decades of movies, manga and novels, the Morino organisation with which Miyake becomes involved is described as 'gargantuan, nameless and many-headed', a loose syndicate of gangsters, shady businessmen, corrupt politicians, and crooked law enforcers (337). Morino's network operates in collusion with state authority and extends its influence into all areas of Japanese life. As Eiji is informed by Yuzu Daimon, son of a wealthy Tokyoite who he meets by chance during one of his nocturnal meanderings,

you straight citizens of Japan are living in a movie set, Miyake. You are unpaid extras. The politicians are the actors. But the true directors, the Nagasakis and the Tsurus [rival Yakuza families], you never see. A show is run from the wings, not centre-stage. (165)

Indeed, it gradually emerges that Eiji has himself been kept under surveillance by Morino, who wrongly suspects him of being involved with his sweetheart. As well as receiving a series of cryptic messages while using his bank's ATM machines, which he later learns to have been sent by Morino's organisation, when Miyake finally meets his pursuers they possess such detailed information about him that it is as though they hold 'the skeleton key to the basements of minds' (196). In one especially gruesome scene, Miyake is forced to take part in the torture of three thugs from a rival clan: a game of bowling that uses their heads as pins. How much of this is real, or whether these experiences are merely the paranoid delusions of a disconnected young dreamer atomised by the urban environment, is a slippery question, and Mitchell's literary allusion to Coleridge's opium dream in naming of the Morino-owned leisure complex 'Xanadu' only compounds our uncertainties.

In part, the shadow world of 'Reclaimed Land' could be said to represent the repressed underside of the social imaginary of capitalist modernity. The rampant consumerism in contemporary Japanese life is, of course, evident throughout the novel, but the fact that the profits of the Morino organisation come chiefly from selling for exorbitant sums the bodily organs of unfortunate victims takes this commodification to its logical extreme. This is a buried terrain, a social order stripped down to the savage doctrine of 'the weak are meat, the strong eat' that, as we shall see, also runs through Mitchell's third novel *Cloud Atlas* (341). The topography of the chapter traces a lawless border territory of skeletal construction sites just beyond the bounds of the encroaching metropolis; and in doing so the vast, uncompleted leisure complex, the bare frameworks of half-formed malls, and the unfinished terminal bridge sited on a reclaimed wasteland sketch the contours of Japan's collective unconscious. The novel hints at the atavistic drives that subsist under the veneer of civilisation, the undercurrent of violence running beneath what one of Morino's men terms the 'land tamed and grazed by our softer, fatter, modern, waking selves' (190). Like the release valve of fantasy fulfilment made concrete, the casual destructiveness and extravagant cruelty meted out by the Yakuza are eruptions of desires prohibited by the social order. Indeed, the exaggerated brutality that takes place on the reclaimed land, as the leading figures of both the Morino and Nagasaki factions are obliterated in an orgy of hallucinated bloodletting is, truly, the stuff of Eiji's nightmares:

The men who are out of the glare of the headlights are shadowy piles, but the ones who fell in the light – red as a slaughterhouse floor. Most of the torsos still have their legs attached, but the gun hands are blown away. And their heads – imploded by their combat helmets – are nowhere. I never learned the vocabulary I need to take this in. Only in war movies, horror movies: nightmares. (200)

If the violence of 'Reclaimed Land' is almost cartoonish in its voyeuristic extravagance – Eiji remarks that 'not for the first time today, I feel I have strayed into an action movie' – its juxtaposition with the 'Video Games' chapter further blurs the distinction between the simulated and the real (197). As demonstrated by the increasing popularity of internet-based virtual worlds such as *Second Life* –

where users interact through imaginative visual personas, create and trade virtual commodities, and even maintain virtual businesses generating real profits – the cybernetic dimension has opened up new avenues of experience that cut across traditional oppositions between the material and immaterial. Led by Yuzu Daimon, Eiji's journey through Tokyo's pleasure quarter paints the portrait of a garish sim-city pulsing to the electronic bleep of games arcades and soaked in the neon glow of 'love hotels' promising cheap, disposable sex. The narrative continually jump-cuts between the digitised universe of the video screen – offering an experience of reality that Daimon describes as being 'realer than the real thing' (108) – and the pair's drunken wandering through the city's bars and nightclubs that are no less hyperreal. In the 'Merry Christmas Bar', for instance, patrons can enjoy a commercialised parody of the Yuletide season every day of the year, whilst the 'Queen of Spades' seems to have slipped out of time altogether: its mahogany and leather décor is the perfect replica of a 1930s smoking room, complete with a mechanical parrot and player piano. The hostess's assertion that 'the days don't find their way up this far' is apposite, for the 'Queen of Spades' floats free from its historical context, decked out in the textures and commodified styles of a past that is endlessly recycled as nostalgia (113). Saturated by the flickering phantasmagoria of sights, sounds and information, 'Video Games' mimes the permeation of contemporary consciousness by the electronic landscapes of the media. Indeed, in the spectacle of signs and images beamed into Eiji's consciousness there is more than a hint of the terminal depthlessness of reality imagined by Jean Baudrillard:

I savour my pineapple muffin and watch the media screen on the NHK building. Missile launchers recoil, cities on fire. A new Nokia cellphone. Foreign affairs minister announces putative WW2 Nanking excesses are left-wing plots to destroy patriotism. Zizzi Hikaru washes her hair in Pearl River shampoo. Fly-draped skeletons stalk an African city. (125)

The lack of differentiation between the various images – news stories of war and famine possess no greater authenticity or ethical charge than the parallel domain of advertisement – evokes a uniform topography where any sense of perceptual proximity or distance is diffused into the all-enveloping penumbra of information.

Considering this radically flattened mode of consciousness, it is hardly surprising that one of the most popular video games amongst the novel's Tokyoites – entitled *Virtua Sapiens* – enables the user to cultivate relationships with a range of pixellated interlocutors generated by the software in lieu of face-to-face interactions. As Eiji observes, 'these are days when computers humanise and humans computerise', and Tokyo is depicted as a node of the world system where the confluences between capital and technology generate new forms of subjectivity and subjectification (6). Drifting through the text are the teeming multitudes of faceless workers – described by Miyake as 'drones', 'clones' or 'bioborgs' – whose ceaseless migrations between work and home are figured as the lubricant for a city that is imagined as 'one massive machine made of smaller components' (56). Trapped by a ruthless economic logic that diminishes them to 'a bank balance with a carcass in tow', the rivers of salarymen (and women) flowing through Mitchell's dream-city are cast in a similar mould as the dehumanised automata populating the eighteenth-century London of *Lemprière's Dictionary* (16). If the enlightenment dream of the modern polis straddled the secular and the sacred in its vision of a construction that would affirm the creative power of human civilisation, then Ai's declaration that 'people used to build Tokyo. But that changed somewhere down the line, and now Tokyo builds people', suggests a paradoxical reversal, as human beings become mere cogs in an irresistible mechanism (330).

The light-speed of communications, though, represents only one strand of Mitchell's kaleidoscopic narrative. During 'Study of Tales' the focus turns towards another kind of virtual space routing through the lattice of networks where the mobile, malleable figure of Eiji is distributed. In this section, Miyake recovers from his encounter with the Yakuza in a quiet suburban house owned by his landlord's mother who, it transpires, is also a well-respected writer. As much as it is a suburban haven from the frantic pace of urban life, and from an outside world that, following Eiji's terrifying ordeal, has taken on a more menacing aspect, this place is also an overtly aestheticised realm. The dusty garret hidden away at the top of the house, a room that is 'sentient with books', is figured as a purified space of literary art where Miyake is able to recover from his trauma through the consumption of stories (210). Here he immerses himself in the manuscript of a surrealistic fable

featuring three part-human and part-animal characters: the author, Goatwriter, who wakes to find that his precious fountain pen has been stolen along with his tales; his hen-like housekeeper, Mrs Comb; and a prehistoric ape-man named Pithecanthropus. Their journey through a bizarre dreamscape, which includes an encounter in cyberspace with the evil Queen Erichnid who intends to 'digitalise' the literary cosmos (246), are characterised by a playful linguistic excess whose Joycean inspiration is pointedly referred to by the 'stream of consciousness' in which Goatwriter swims near the end of the story (256). Like Joyce's writing, the linguistic experimentation and the punning allusiveness of the prose foregrounds the materiality of language, teasing away at the tension between its referential and rhetorical functions.⁶ While 'Video Games' works on the axis of the image, 'Study of Tales' articulates the narrative dimension in the construction of consciousness; and it is significant that following his rehabilitation, Eiji's perception of the world has transformed from chaotic flux into 'an ordered flowchart of subplots' (259). At one point Miyake asks himself whether 'I am a book too' (210), implying that his sojourn amongst the whispering volumes lining the study is bringing about his corporeal dispersal: 'I gather up any sign of me and stuff it into the plastic bag under the sink. I must clean up traces of myself as I make them' (213). This sense of self-dissolution into textuality and the putative serenity of the aesthetic is ambiguously mirrored in Goatwriter's quixotic quest for 'the truly untold tale' that can only be accomplished by sloughing off his material body (207). Goatwriter's symbolic pursuit of the inarticulate and the unarticulatable is thus revealed to be a desire whose fulfilment is a form of death, and similarly Eiji's retreat into literary seclusion, where time itself appears to be suspended, must give way to a reconnection with the clamour of the material world.

The overlap between the mythic and the prosaic similarly animates Mitchell's most recent fictional work, *Black Swan Green*, which, like *number9dream* also experiments with the form of the *Bildungsroman*. The discussion will turn towards this novel a little later in this section; in the meantime, let us continue to track the

⁶ Though there is not the space here to explore the point in more depth, the engagement with Joyce in 'Study of Tales' provokes wider comparisons with *Ulysses* in particular. Indeed, there are thematic and stylistic correspondences in the overall architecture of Mitchell's novel, which is similarly a presentation of a young man's quest for a father-figure and a portrait of a city.

narrative orbit of *number9dream* as it leads away from the perplexing mirror-world of Tokyo and the cartography of the present. The novel's portrayal of Japan reveals it to be as much a place of residual beliefs and traditions as a site of rampant postmodernity. The island of Yakushima, from which Miyake's journey originates and eventually returns, invokes a fertile bucolic idyll that contrasts with the stifling concrete grid of the metropolis where everything is 'so close up you cannot always see it' (3). But even though these spaces pulse to contending temporalities – Tokyo's frenetic rhythms are juxtaposed with the island's rooted communities and unhurried pace of a predominantly rural subsistence – both places occupy the same historical moment. Contrary to accounts of globalisation that acknowledge only its homogenising tendencies – characterising it in the terms of depthless horizontality and mass-mediated instantaneity – this unevenness points towards the heterogeneity of contemporary relations, which comprise the simultaneous coexistence of histories with distinct, though certainly not unconnected, characteristics and trajectories. For Eiji, neither city nor country, modernity nor tradition, is absolutely other and his narrative straddles both of these worlds. Presided over by the sacred temple of the thunder god, Yakushima is associated with the persistence of ancient wisdom, ritual and the 'deep time' of myth, the numinous currents that continue to flow beneath the accretion of modern reason and technology (392). The presence of the Jomon cedars on the island, which are, the reader is informed, 'the oldest living things in the eastern hemisphere', suggests a landscape of primordial origins whose rooted permanence counterbalances the exhausting cycle of novelty and obsolescence that has subsumed the urban centres of mainland Japan. In part, Eiji's return to the island could be seen as a redemptive journey of familial and personal reconnection – having exorcised the stultifying symbol of his father and after sowing the seeds of a reconciliatory relationship with his absentee mother, Eiji is finally able to resolve his own sense of guilt about his sister's suicide – yet it also represents an accommodation with the inevitability of change signifying his matured perspective. The view from the thunder god's overgrown temple is tinged with an elegiac nostalgia that accompanies the young man's consciousness of historical flux:

Every winter his believers become fewer. So gods do die, just like pop stars and sisters. [. . .] Over half the rice fields in the valley have fallen into disuse. Farmers die too and their sons are making money in Kagoshima or Kitakyushu or Osaka. Rice field terraces and old barns are allowed to collapse – typhoons are cheaper than builders. The valley belongs to insects, now. (415)

In a similar way, the 'Kai Ten' chapter stages an encounter between residual tradition and modernity, opening up a dialogue between a present-day society shaped by the doctrines of consumer capitalism and the spectre of another Japan overlain, but not completely effaced, by the passage of history. This episode involves Eiji meeting his biological grandfather, Takara Tsukiyama, who responds to an article Miyake places in the local newspaper appealing for information about his father. Interleaved with the narrative are the pages from a journal gifted to Eiji by Tsukiyama recording the experiences of Takara's late brother, Subaru, while serving in the Imperial Navy during the final stages of the Second World War. It emerges that Subaru was amongst a select group of personnel chosen for the 'Kaiten' project, a nautical version of the kamikaze tactics developed by the Japanese air force. The Kaiten was essentially a modified torpedo controlled by a pilot who, once inserted into the vessel, was left no means of exit; these miniature submarines were then guided manually towards their targets, with the warhead detonating as it rammed into the hull of the enemy ship. Through the device of Tsukiyama's journal, the novel juxtaposes anachronistic codes of honour, self-sacrifice and patriotism that structured Japanese society in the past with the fragmentation of community and shameless decadence so prevalent in the contemporary rendering of Tokyo. Although Takara's espousal of archaic social mores where 'blood-lines are the stuff of life' seems a reactionary response to a perceived decline in moral principles that reduces ethics to 'logos on sports clothing', the journal compels Miyake to contextualise his own historical location with Subaru's Japan that died with surrender (274-5). The revelation that his great-uncle was the same age as him when he perished invites Mitchell's protagonist to question whether, if the circumstances of his birth had been different, he would have sacrificed his life for the glory of the Emperor. He is suddenly struck by the historical contingency of his own existence – coming to understand his[†] identity as neither entirely self-generated

nor the sum of his personal experiences, but as emerging from ‘the Japan that did come into being’ – and by the unbridgeable passage of history that separates these lives. Though Subaru is denied the glorious death that he believes will imbue his life with meaning – his Kaiten bounces off the hull of an American cruiser and plunges into the seabed after the warhead fails to arm, leaving the young man to scribble down his final thoughts before asphyxiating in his iron coffin – no judgement is passed on the validity of his desire to consummate his being through self-sacrifice. Rather, through the medium of the journal Eiji is able to forge an imaginative connection with his great-uncle that at once acknowledges the distance/difference between them – he agrees with Ai that surrendering one’s life for ‘the vainglory of a military clique’ seems more foolish than noble from the standpoint of the present – but also resonates with his own quest for identity.

Returning to the island of his birth to honour the memory of his sister at the end of the novel, Eiji’s personal development allows him to open up a broader vista on his past that takes in the ‘whole frame’ of his difficult childhood, releasing him from the anger and resentment so visible in the earlier chapters. Instead of closing the circle of his voyage in a gesture of mythic homecoming, however, the ‘ending’ of *number9dream* merely marks the beginning of a further stage in the journey. After drifting off to sleep in his grandmother’s house, Miyake is awoken from a peculiar dream that alludes, in part, to the creation myth of Japanese Shintoism by a radio announcement that a massive earthquake has struck the Tokyo region causing widespread destruction. If for much of the book the distinction between dream and reality has been indefinite, here the actuality of the event is vigorously affirmed, with Eiji’s fantasies appearing to finally give way to a catastrophic eruption of the real into his oneiric consciousness:

I would give anything to be dreaming right now. Anything. Are the airwaves and cables jammed because half the phone users in the country are trying to call the capital, or because Tokyo is now a landscape of rubble under cement dust? Outside, a century of quiet rain is falling on all the leaves, stones and pine needles of the valley. [. . .] I imagine a pane of glass exploding next to Ai’s face, or a steel girder crashing through her piano. I imagine a thousand things. (418)

Paralleling the trajectory of Pran's journey in *The Impressionist*, Mitchell rejects the traditional closure of the *Bildungsroman* in favour of the dissemination and dispersal of narrative and identity. It will be recalled that after transgressing the ontological frameworks of the colonial world, Kunzru's protagonist is ultimately unable to inhabit any of the subject-positions made available to him, and is reborn as a figure of the Deleuzian nomad whose migrant lines of flight evade territorial constraints. In a similar way, Eiji's narrative spreads beyond the formal boundaries of the novel's architecture. Supplementing the eight chapters whose shifting textures map the kaleidoscopic scapes of psyche and world is an untitled ninth section that is left tantalisingly blank, at once inside and outside Miyake's symbolic dream of 'a mind in eight parts'. For John Lennon, who crops up in one of the visions punctuating 'The Language of Mountains is Rain', the recurrence of the number nine at important moments during his life imbued it with a superstitious resonance; and the innumerable references to it flickering through Mitchell's text are suggestive of an esoteric numerology underpinning the patterns of coincidence that link together its various episodes. Comparisons may be drawn with the portentous motif of the broken circle running through Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary*, but whilst that novel's emphasis on plots and patterns evokes a framework that is potentially oppressive and deterministic – flattening lived existence into the unfolding of hidden codes – the ubiquity of the digit in *number9dream* seems intended to evoke the reassuring sense of an ordering force underpinning the happenstance, an idea that, as we shall see, also threads through *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*. Expectations that the ninth part will provide a hermeneutic key to unlocking the numeral's symbolism are met with an opacity that is finally impenetrable. Nevertheless, one possible way of reading the ninth chapter is as a moment of birth culminating nine months of foetal gestation, a notion that situates Eiji's narrative within yet another kind of matrix, this time that of the maternal body rather than that of cyberspace. Early in the novel, Eiji pointedly suggests that 'to people in wombs, what is real and what is imagined must be one and the same thing', and his own tendency to confuse levels of reality is established from the very beginning (21). Whether or not Mitchell's text is merely a palimpsest of dreams in the mind of a figurative unborn child, the refusal to

resolve the narrative leaves a space pregnant with imaginative possibility. 'The ninth dream begins after every ending' is the wisdom that John Lennon passes to his acolyte in Eiji's fantasy, and ultimately the content of the ninth chapter is left for us to dream on.

On the surface, *number9dream* would appear to share much with Mitchell's most recent novel, *Black Swan Green*. Both are coming-of-age tales focusing on the internal development of a young male narrator prone to flights of the imagination and struggling to find his place in the world. Both novels also take the form of a collection of discrete episodes which, though they may be read as stand-alone stories, gradually coalesce into a more complete account of a short period in the narrator's life. But whereas *number9dream* presents an effervescent, even disturbing, portrait of identity at the beginning of the third millennium, stretched across the tenuous borderlines of the virtual and material worlds, *Black Swan Green* offers a view of the early 1980s refracted through the concerns of a thirteen-year-old boy growing up in a provincial Worcestershire village.

In contrast to the epic canvases of *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, and the exuberant experimentation with modes of perception and dreamlike diversions of incident in *number9dream*, it is the domesticity of Mitchell's fourth novel that is most surprising. Narrated by the voice of Jason Taylor – a covert poet who submits his literary creations to the Parish magazine under the pseudonym Eliot Bolivar – the book covers thirteen months in the wilderness separating childhood and adolescence, a series of vignettes charting the slow collapse of his parents' marriage, the torments of school, his first crush, his first cigarette, and his first encounter with the world of ideas beyond the confines of *Black Swan Green*. In the background, the Falklands conflict briefly intrudes and the social upheaval inaugurated by Thatcherism and economic globalisation makes itself felt in the changing rhythms of rural village life. Seen from the interior space of boyhood, these large-scale geopolitical movements are mainly peripheral to Jason's everyday anxieties, yet parallels could be drawn between the gradual unfolding of his cramped adolescent world and the opening up of the nation to global flows of capital and culture that accelerated during the 80s. Perhaps inevitably, this historical snapshot is reconstructed in part from the resonance of redundant brand

names: the text is littered with references to products of the time, from Scalextric and *Asteroids* to Chopper bikes and Angel Delight. The fact that Mitchell grew up in Worcestershire and that both he and his protagonist share a stammer – which is given the sobriquet ‘Hangman’ by Jason – has led many reviewers to read the text as semi-autobiographical, though in interviews the author has preferred to make a distinction between the ‘personal’ and the autobiographical.⁷ It is certainly the case that the more conventional style and parochial setting of *Black Swan Green* has more in common with a first novel than a fourth. But if here Mitchell seems to have reined in his tendency towards narratorial kineticism and formal dexterity, the novel retains a subtle complexity that belies the conventionality of the plot.

Each of the book’s thirteen parts represents a month in the protagonist’s life, beginning in January 1982 and ending in January 1983. These episodes introduce or continue the development of threads that pulse through the work, such as an inherited watch that is broken and concealed, an old lady living in the woods who both heals and haunts, and intimations of a parent’s possible infidelity. Imbued with the quality of miniature epiphanies or spots of time, each section centres on a different aspect of Jason’s experience – his stammer, his relatives, his initiation into a secret society, the end of year disco at school – and some assembly is required to discern the full shape of the year. These often conclude on cliffhanging notes of drama before jolting into an entirely different mental and narrative state as a new chapter begins, with incidents evaporating as though they had never happened or diminished to mere footnotes in subsequent chapters. Whilst the division of linear narrative into self-contained but interwoven fragments is an approach common to all of Mitchell’s writings, its adaptation for this particular story neatly captures the flux of early adolescence, where each month encompasses so many changes that identity hardly seems contiguous at all. Without snug resolutions, each scene of instruction, humiliation and, briefly, the approbation of his peers, is subsumed by the next equally monumental experience, the whole being not so much glued together as suspended in the character of Jason himself. As we shall see later, this diffuseness echoes the form of Mitchell’s first novel, *Ghostwritten*, where

⁷ For example, see Julie Wheelwright, ‘Making a Connection’, *Newbooks*, November/December (2006), 9-13.

narratorial coherence gradually emerges from the tangle of metaphor and reference that runs beneath every incident.

Despite the parochial setting and comparatively straightforward narrative of *Black Swan Green*, the stratum of the exotic and the otherworldly threading through Mitchell's *oeuvre* is never far from the surface. A voracious reader of novels, particularly the science-fiction and fantasy genres that are the staple of male adolescence, Jason's charged imagination imbues his narrow, mundane world with adventure and mystery. As in *number9dream*, the dividing line between the fabulous and the real is porous, making it difficult to tell which parts of the narration relate actual events and which are concocted within the protagonist's mind, though here this technique seems intended to evoke the textures of childhood rather than simulate the fractal flows of contemporary life. In the opening section, Jason accidentally breaks the irreplaceable watch bequeathed to him by his late grandfather and, fearing punishment, conceals the fact from his parents. This secret provides much of the novel's narrative tension, but on a figurative level it implies the suspension of adult temporality, signalling the interpenetration of the mythic and the prosaic in a story that knowingly draws on a range of fictional conventions and expectations. In particular, the woods adjacent to the village are depicted as a liminal zone existing on the threshold of reality and fiction; here, Jason sees the ghost of a drowned boy who circles the frozen lake in skates and, after slipping on the ice and injuring his ankle, is aided by a mysterious old woman whose isolated cottage – furnished with an oven 'big enough for a kid to climb in' – is reminiscent of a Germanic fairy-tale.⁸ Literary woods have long functioned as places of escape and licence, fear and fantasy, yet the self-conscious flaunting of these fictional tropes suggests that Jason is as aware of this as his creator, hinting that his narrative, whose breathless style and darting focus aspires to transparency and immediacy, may be more knowingly composed than it initially appears.

Similarly, the 'Bridle Path' chapter, which is taken up with an expedition to find the 'mysterious end' to a trail where it is rumoured that an old Roman tunnel

⁸ David Mitchell, *Black Swan Green* (London: Sceptre, 2006), p. 24. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses following the quotation.

leading through Malvern Hills may be found, is peppered with episodes that resonate with symbolism, as though wandering through a lucid dream (87). During his picaresque personal odyssey, Jason experiences nearly all of the stock tests of manhood in a single day: he watches a fight between two of his schoolmates; is toyed with by Dawn Madden, the secret object of his fantasies, in an encounter suffused with incipient sexual desire; and spies on a pair of older children having sex beneath the tree in which he is hiding. As he continues along the bridle path, such conventional incidents are replaced by more fabulous events. Upon confronting a strange figure lit up by 'a well of brightness' and surrounded by a swarm of bees, Jason and his friend stumble off the bridle path and onto the lawn of what is subsequently revealed to be the local lunatic asylum, where a party is in progress (116). They are accosted by one of the residents, who announces herself as Yvonne de Galais and interrogates the boys about the whereabouts of man called 'Augustin Moans' before being ushered away by one of the nurses. Though the literary reference is lost on them, the allusion is to the characters and plot of Henri Alain-Fournier's short piece, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, perhaps the paradigmatic novel of adolescence and one of the touchstones for Mitchell's text. As though he has slipped into an alternative domain, Jason's passage through the woods mirrors Augustin Meaulnes's journey in Alain-Fournier's novel, where the protagonist happens upon a grand country estate after becoming lost and takes part in the preparations for a fairy-tale wedding. In making these parallels explicit – along with numerous other intertextual allusions to fictions of this genre, from *Lord of the Flies* to *Cider with Rosie* – Mitchell is, in part, drawing attention to the generic nature of his own text, a self-awareness that underpins the exaggerated naturalism of the prose and the almost parodic conventionality of Jason's experiences.

Mitchell has revealed in interview that he likes 'digging tunnels between books' and in *Black Swan Green*, as for his other writings, the fictional world is deepened by the reappearance of characters from previous novels, underscoring the author's fascination with the interconnectedness of people and texts.⁹ As we shall see, this technique is particularly obvious in *Cloud Atlas*, which gives central

⁹ See James Urquhart's interview with the author, 'David Mitchell: You May Say He's a Dreamer', *The Independent*, Features section, 24 March 2001, pp. 11-13 (p. 12).

roles to two characters who played secondary parts in *Ghostwritten*. Here, though, Jason becomes acquainted with an aristocratic escapee from *Cloud Atlas* named Madame Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck, barely a teenager in that novel but now an elderly lady who is renting the old vicarage in the village. Having been impressed by the boy's poetry, this bohemian émigré takes in hand his artistic development and challenges him to further refine his work. The chapter appears exactly at the midpoint of the novel's disjointed journey through the seasons of the year, a fulcrum upon which Jason's narrative pivots and a key passage in his intellectual and emotional growth. Commenting on the writings that he has submitted pseudonymously to the Parish magazine which, intriguingly, bear the same titles as chapters we have just read, Mme Crommelynck asserts that 'beautiful words ruin your poetry' and 'a poet throws all but truth in the cellar' (185, 196). Besides providing aesthetic guidance, this exotic foreigner also offers a window onto a wider vista beyond the confines of rural Worcestershire, fuelling her protégé's hunger for a world of music and literature where his artistic sensibility is not an object of ridicule. The scenes that take place in the book-lined solarium have an archetypal resonance paradoxically commingling temporal stasis and flux. This is intensified by the repetition of particular images and textual fragments; particularly suggestive are the subtle changes in the descriptions of Mme Crommelynck's hallway as she is visited on three successive occasions. On his first meeting, Mitchell's narrator observes a blue guitar and a framed painting depicting 'a bare lady in a punt drift[ing] on a lake of water lilies' (180). A week later, both picture and guitar seem to have undergone accelerated physical and narrative decay, as though time has sped up in this sanctified aesthetic space: the riverine scene now depicts 'a shivery woman sprawled in a punt on a clogged pond', and the text describes a 'knackered blue guitar' left on a 'broken stool' (191). Jason's last visit to the vicarage bears witness to the final stages of these objects' decrepitude: 'the guitar's blue paint'd flaked off like a skin disease. In her yellow frame a dying woman in a boat trailed her fingers in the water' (208). As well as exemplifying Mme Crommelynck's lessons, via Susan Sontag, about the impermanence of beauty in the face of 'time's relentless melt', the variations in these passages demonstrate the young poet's artistic maturation under her tutelage (199). Exhorted to resist the

lure of cliché and to jettison superficial figurative adornment in favour of aesthetic clarity and precision, Jason's narrative bears the influence of his instruction at the same time that it is related to the reader. Even though the aristocrat's sudden deportation back to Belgium at the end of the chapter abruptly closes the door on the aesthetic sanctuary of the solarium, her influence compels Jason to discard the persona of Eliot Bolivar and to continue to search for his own artistic voice.

The notion of the 'Solarium' chapter as a threshold in the narrative throws into relief the subtle linguistic changes marking the poetic development of Mitchell's artist as a young man. If early in the text, Jason's interior language is scattered with the florid touches of a talented novice – sentences such as 'blind boars of wind crash through the nervy woods' suggest a straining toward literariness – these infelicities become progressively more infrequent following the encounter with Mme Crommelynck (20). Over the course of the novel, however, what appears to be a well-worn tale of personal and artistic growth becomes somewhat more evasive. The correspondences alluded to above between the titles of several of the novel's sections and those of Jason's poems introduce a metafictional element to the text that grows increasingly insistent as the narrative unfolds. Indeed, there are strong implications that the various stories comprising *Black Swan Green* are not simply articulated *in medias res* by the adolescent narrator, but are in fact careful compositions of his own perhaps written long after the fact. Jason is exposed to be not merely the text's narrator but also its author, with the details of his painful, mundane life being filtered through a range of literary tropes and conventions. Thus, the novel offers itself as both a record of his artistic becoming and as the product of it, an act of self-mythologisation that, if it manipulates the 'truth' of events, also introduces the idea of identity as something that is less discovered than enacted through narrative. Jason's stammer makes spoken interaction a minefield of potential humiliations, yet Mitchell's surrogate author finds through writing a control of language that allows him to remake both himself and the world.

With its provincial setting, unadorned style and relatively straightforward narrative form – rooted in one place, one year and one character – *Black Swan Green* is something of an anomaly in Mitchell's body of writing to date. Though

praised for its subtlety and restraint by some reviewers, others felt that the domesticity of the novel inhibited the author's imagination. The text's unusually intimate and personal focus, which clearly mines Mitchell's own life for material, may perhaps be understood by placing it in context. Having established a reputation for being a virtuoso of many voices but with something indistinct about his own, particularly in the aftermath of the huge success of the *Cloud Atlas*, it is possible that *Black Swan Green* is a literary response to this perception, one that is also motivated by a desire to engage with aspects of his life approached only tangentially in his previous fictions, such as the stammer that similarly afflicts the anthropomorphised protagonist of the Goatwriter section of *number9dream*. In addition, after the globe-spanning panoramas of *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, which barely touch down in Britain at all, it may be that Mitchell wanted to concentrate his narrative attention more fully on his homeland, albeit frozen in the early 1980s and filtered through memories of this period, in much the same way that other postcolonial migrant writers have done. The novel perhaps has little to say directly about the experience of globalisation and its impact on literary fiction; nevertheless, it is an interesting departure in Mitchell's work, and may yet turn out to be a transitional novel in an already intriguing career.



In his recent survey of contemporary British fiction, Richard Bradford includes Mitchell amongst a selection of writers that he labels the 'new postmodernists', who are united less by a shared aesthetic vision than by the eclectic range of techniques, devices and effects manifested in their work. Following David Lodge's notion of the production and consumption of fiction as an 'aesthetic supermarket', Bradford argues that the author's formal experimentation and mixing of styles, genres and voices demonstrate both a grounding in the radical concepts that filtered into English Literature courses during the 1980s and an intention to make

these complex ideas consumer-friendly.¹⁰ For Bradford, Mitchell is a 'domesticated post-modernist', dressing his fiction in the accoutrements of critical theory whilst retaining a commitment to textual referentiality and the readerly desire for conventional storytelling. In contrast, one of the main contentions of this thesis has been that the modes of representation articulated in the writings of Norfolk, Kunzru and Mitchell are not merely superficial stylistic inflections, but rather may be seen as deeper aesthetic responses to the changed material conditions that have been collectively termed 'globalisation'. Indeed, one could question the continuing utility of literary frameworks such as postmodernism, which emerged against a backdrop of Cold War relations that has transformed dramatically over the last twenty-five years. As Hardt and Negri suggest, the discourses of postmodernism and postcolonialism challenge forms of power that impose relatively stable hierarchies and operate through binary structures, strategies of rule that have changed decisively under the dominance of corporate capital and the modulating networks of the world market.¹¹ These discourses are therefore most usefully understood as symptoms of passage delineating the emergence of new political paradigms, while arguably offering a rather limited perspective on present circumstances. Whereas Bradford proposes that Mitchell's experimentation with structure is less a symptom of a wider aesthetic and cultural condition than borne out of more narrowly commercial interests, the thrust of this chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, is that the new stylistic directions expressed in the selected fictions reflect recent developments in the structures underpinning contemporary experience.

To further draw out the affiliations between Mitchell's aesthetic approach and the new perceptual avenues opened up by contemporary transformations, the remainder of this chapter will turn to the author's first and third novels, *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*. Unlike *number9dream* and *Black Swan Green*, whose fragmented episodes are held together by a single consciousness that establishes a level of narrative continuity, both *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* are an amalgam of competing voices and styles that cycle through a mélange of temporal and spatial settings. The subtitle of *Ghostwritten* presents it as 'a Novel in Nine Parts', and its

¹⁰ Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 62-8.

¹¹ *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 137-59.

formal arrangement comprises nine discrete first-person narratives that, linked together, trace an imaginative passage from East to West that encircles the globe. Beginning with the chilling interior monologue of a terrorist hiding out on the island of Okinawa, the novel takes in such diverse speakers and locales as the account of a corrupt expatriate lawyer struggling for self-reconciliation in Hong Kong, the memoir of an elderly tea-shack proprietor on Mount Emei in Sichuan, the fable of a disembodied soul searching for its birth-story in the vast expanses of Mongolia, and the tale of a gangster's moll working in a St. Petersburg art gallery. The novel does eventually pass through the more familiar 'centres' of the global economic and cultural economy, yet roughly the first half concentrates on places that have been perceived as alien and mysterious by the Western cultural imagination. Japan, Hong Kong, China and Mongolia have all found themselves refracted through the prism of Eurocentric discourse, with their particularity effaced by the orientalist exoticism of the 'mystical' and 'inscrutable' East, although these locations are, of course, no more or less imaginary than the construct of 'the West'. If the modern capitalist and imperialist project saw world history as radiating outwards from its 'developed' centres – mapping spatial differentiation and distance over a linear temporal sequence according to which 'difference' is made to mean occupying a different point on the developmental timeline – then the structure of Mitchell's text has the effect of disrupting modernity's Eurocentrism. This trajectory is not a *reversal* in the sense of moving from the less developed and primitive margins to the contemporaneity of the centre(s), but a recognition of global con-temporality and coevalness for which such a rigid structure, perhaps even the traditional notion of structure itself, is impossibly inadequate, an acknowledgement that the West's global framework is also a home for other histories, cultures and identities. As argued in the opening chapter of this thesis, the static synchronicity of a closed system where the future is always already delimited in advance is an unsuitable way of conceiving the global, for this merely echoes the modern, universalising dreams of totality and completeness. For globalisation not merely to be understood as a further, and perhaps terminal, extension and intensification of the West's self-producing image of what constitutes authentic human existence – the culmination of an organised, fully integrated and irredeemably sterile world – it must be

reconceptualised as a more dynamic unfolding of multiple, heterogeneous temporalities whose shifting interrelations constantly reconfigure global space.

As opposed to offering any kind of overarching plot, *Ghostwritten* works through a process of contiguity and connection. The novel evokes a subtle tension between the singularity of its individual narratives – each of which introduces a mode of being that is distinctive, insistent and powerfully itself – and the intersections and confluences between these heterogeneous and superficially incompatible perspectives on the world. The formal segmentation of the text may suggest a world held still in cross-section, but as it moves between parallel lives and locations by turns exotic and familiar there emerges the sense both of humanity's multiplicity and its congruity, an interconnectedness and interdependency that undercuts tribal boundaries without congealing into liberal-humanist orthodoxy. The slices of the world that the novel depicts are less a series of internally coherent and bounded spaces than nodal points of a globally extended network constituted by dynamic interactions stretching from the infinitesimal to the immeasurable. Like the fictions of Lawrence Norfolk and Hari Kunzru, Mitchell imagines a global space striated by the simultaneous coexistence of a multitude of diverse, but not unconnected, (hi)stories and trajectories of becoming. Indeed, the Deleuzian figure of the rhizome again seems apposite: Mitchell's text progresses through a kind of textual spread and dissemination whereby individual narratives continuously exceed their boundaries and flow into other stories. The skein woven by these slender lines of association is as tenuous and ephemeral as a spider's web: characters from one narrative appear in another, glimpsed *en passant* in the background or playing a more pivotal role, and akin to expanding ripples on the surface of a pond, actions and events in one chapter generate unforeseeable consequences in other parts of the book.

The novel's dislocated chronology – jump-cutting between various historical points from the early 1960s to an unspecified moment in the near future – militates against constructing a linear model of cause and effect, but it is possible to sketch some schematic lines of connection. Apparently inspired by attacks carried out by followers of the Japanese religious group *Aum Shinrikyo* in 1995, the novel opens with the account of a terrorist responsible for detonating canisters of Sarin nerve

gas on the Tokyo subway, who is known within his millennial cult by the pseudonym 'Quasar'. Increasingly desperate as he hears of the capture of his fellow 'cleansers' and the arrest of other high-ranking members of the Fellowship, Quasar dials the number of the cult's Secret Service and gives the coded call for assistance: *'the dog needs to be fed'*.¹² In the next chapter, Satoru, the teenage manager of a specialist jazz shop in Tokyo is about to close up for the night when he is interrupted by a telephone call. The voice on the other end of the line is Quasar's, but Satoru fails to understand his oblique plea for help and hangs up, mystified. However, this seemingly random misconnection – an uncanny coincidence that is also a quotidian banality in the era of mass communications – is the catalyst for Satoru's incipient relationship with Tomoyo, a young jazz-lover who had previously visited the shop. The delay in closing means that Satoru is still there when Tomoyo returns later, and this fortuitous event marks the beginning of the couple's relationship. A third narrator, the Nick Leeson-esque figure of the corrupt banker, Neal Brose, who is involved in a complex money laundering scam for Russian gangsters, recalls his visit to a Hong Kong café where the happiness of the young couple sharing his table caused him to reflect bitterly on the atrophy of his own marriage. This is obviously Tomoyo and Satoru, though refracted through Brose's rather narrow-minded, not to say racist, consciousness, and his train of thought turns back repeatedly to the image of these young strangers who have come to represent a romantic ideal that now seems unattainable in his own life. Brose's death at the end of 'Hong Kong', a corollary, the reader later learns, of undiagnosed diabetes, spawns consequences and connections across a number of other chapters. For instance, it is directly responsible for the murder of an ambitious art-thief in the 'Petersburg' section whose own criminality was bound up with Brose's money-laundering activities. Elsewhere, it transpires that the Chinese maid with whom Brose was having an affair – coincidentally also the illegitimate daughter of the tea-shack owning narrator of 'Holy Mountain' – has prospered from her employer's untimely death, having been bequeathed, or more likely having stolen, Brose's fraudulent wealth.

¹² David Mitchell, *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* (London: Sceptre, 1999), p. 27. Italics in original.

Like the concept of the 'butterfly effect' used to describe the behaviour of complex, non-linear systems that, as I suggested in previous chapters, finds both spatial and temporal equivalences in the narratives of *Transmission* and *Lemprière's Dictionary*, small perturbations in one part of the novel's global architecture produce unpredictable ripples of effect that spread through the medium of human interaction. What drives Mitchell's novel are the curious intersections of lives that traverse each other in a community of material interdependence and obligation that takes the globe as its frame of reference. The sparks produced by criss-crossing lives and narratives – impinging on each other in ways that, from the perspective of any one particular viewer immersed in their own time-space, are so subtle as to be practically invisible or so profound that the connections are unfathomable – illuminate the simultaneity and immanence of human existence one character describes as a 'holistic ocean' (375).

Beyond these causal linkages, the novel's networked narratives establish a collective density through the recurrence of various tropes, images and ideas that become exponentially more resonant as they echo through the work. As in *number9dream*, the effect of the strange repetition of particular phrases and fragments of text is to imply the existence of spectral patterns beneath the flux of events. Comparisons could be made with Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, a novel that also proceeds through a range of speech modes and makes use of an analogous technique to connect together a patchwork of diverse texts. Likewise, Barnes's narratives depend on accidental or ironic juxtapositions, parallels and contrasts, to bind them loosely together, thickening the texture of the novel by means of repeated motifs that gesture towards more enduring continuities, though the focus here is more temporal than spatial. And yet, in spite of the range of ventriloquistic impersonations performed by Barnes's novel, there is a consistent ironic inflection to the narrative voice that is conspicuously absent from *Ghostwritten*, a sense of the instability and inadequacy of representation that seems ultimately crippling. Perhaps this is due to the comparatively narrow frame of reference of Barnes's text, which, rather perversely, explores the 'history of the world' through a thoroughly Eurocentric lens, deconstructing the claims of history while still relying on its universalising parameters. Mitchell's novel does not provide

such a long historical view, but it is certainly more conscious of the loose ends and missing links that striate and fissure the West's vision of modernity, opening it out to what Doreen Massey terms the 'simultaneity of stories-so-far'.¹³

To offer some cursory examples of how this strategy operates, in both 'Okinawa' and 'Petersburg' we find the otherwise unremarkable sentence 'high streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose' (12, 217); and the description of a structure in Hong Kong as 'a giant bicycle pump [. . .] cranking itself up and hissing itself down' is translated *verbatim* from Neal Brose's account to Mo Muntervary's in 'Clear Island' (77, 99, 339). Similarly, the peculiarly incongruent memory of a rabbit being skinned puncturing the narrative in 'Hong Kong' finds a distorted doubling in the insult spat by the warlord's son at the child he has just raped in the 'Holy Mountain' section (74-5, 117). Elsewhere, the image of 'a foreign woman on a hill, watching a wooden pole sinking into the ground' that invades one of Quasar's dreams takes on a new significance when, in the 'Petersburg' chapter, Margarita Latunsky describes her own dream of Christ's crucifixion in which a 'slitty-eyed' figure, presumably Quasar, is also present (20, 239). In these examples, apparently innocuous descriptions accrue a subtle but probing irony through repetition. What is interesting is not so much the content of these phrases, but rather their recurrence in the putatively autonomous texts of different narrators, as if depicting minds unconsciously in counterpoint across temporal/spatial distance. There is also a range of more subtle motifs, such as metaphorical references to tunnels and catacombs, walls and barriers, comets, cherry blossom and camphor trees, the theological figures of Buddha and Gabriel, and ghosts in a number of guises, all of which resurface and mutate provocatively in new contexts. Most of these are not substantial enough to coalesce into any kind of overall thematic pattern, but at the level of the text they act as a rhythmic pulse that holds together each of the solo performances, involving Mitchell's characters in a choreographed dance of coincidence, connection and fluid, intuitive meanings. Although they never become aware of the connections they share with others, these scattered lives are shown to be woven into a globally-extended web of dependency and determinism

¹³ *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 9.

where, as one of the narrators suggests, 'phenomena are interconnected regardless of distance' (375).

Against readings of globalisation framing it as a process of integration and assimilation that homogenises cultural difference, this thesis has indicated that contemporary relations are more helpfully understood in terms of a dialectical nexus of globalising and localising forces. In this context, the specificity of places, cultures and histories need not be conceptualised in opposition to the abstract universality of planetary space, since each feeds into and is constituted by the other. This is to suggest that whilst the local perspective may give priority to reterritorialising barriers or boundaries above the mobility of deterritorialising flows, the claim that it is possible to (re)establish local identities that are in some sense outside and sealed against the global movements of people, information and capital ignores the reality of their mutual imbrication. Indeed, the site of the local is criss-crossed by innumerable paths of movement with varying speeds and directions, and is better seen as an articulated moment in networks of relations that link with and reflexively shape the wider world.

In a similar way, Mitchell's novel neither insists on the self-containment of its separate parts, nor does it collapse the distinctness of its voices into a totalising vision of architectural wholeness. Instead, it positions itself within this networked milieu of interchanges, the modulating circuits of differentiation and identification through which both individuality and collectivity are composed and dissolved.¹⁴ Each of the narratives is embedded in the locality of a particular place and consciousness differently situated in the global geometries of power – interpellated in a complex fabric of relations with the inequalities or opportunities bequeathed by history, gender or culture and informed by various, and conflicting, ideological and ethical codes – but the reader's movement through these mental and physical landscapes encourages both an imaginative engagement with their individual contingencies, and a relational detachment that is able to move beyond mere contextualisation. The succession of fragmented interior perspectives offers no

¹⁴ In this, there are perhaps echoes of Peter Hallward's characterisation of the ontological category of 'the specific' that is held in tension between the opposing poles of the 'the singular' and 'the specified'. See *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

stable, transcendent plane from which the whole may be appraised, and therefore the imperatives of the singular and universalising gaze must give way to the endless challenge of translation, the movement *between* a multitude of partial viewpoints. In this sense, *Ghostwritten* attempts both to pay due consideration to the demands of specificity, to the particular matrix of relations within which an individual subject is interpellated, and to achieve a mobility of representation that flows across the boundedness of territorial location.

Like *number9dream*, then, *Ghostwritten* is animated by the plurality and the mutability of contemporary forms of identity, with its multiple narratives mapping the outlines of an embryonic global citizenship that incorporates diverse modes of being. The novel's macrocosmic journey through the disparate worlds brought together in the 'global village' created by mass migration and communications finds interesting parallels in the peripatetic narrative of the 'Mongolia' chapter. This section portrays the wanderings of a mysterious disembodied entity that lives by transmigrating between the minds of various human hosts, scouring their consciousnesses and assimilating their secrets, pleasures and memories into its own. Though perhaps existing on a sub-cellular or bio-electric plane, since the transmission between minds is dependent on the hosts having made physical contact with each other, this being is the consummate nomad, drifting between different mental terrains as travellers move across national boundaries. Indeed, the ghostly narrator compares its itinerant life with that of the backpacker whose mind it inhabits at the beginning of the chapter:

We live nowhere, and we are strangers everywhere. We drift, often on a whim, searching for something to search for. We are both parasites: I live in my hosts' minds, and sift through his or her memories to understand the world. [. . .] To the world at large we are both immaterial and invisible. We chew on the secretions of solitude. My incredulous Chinese hosts who saw the first backpackers regarded them as quite alien entities. Which is exactly how humans would regard me. (160)

In an intertextual allusion to a 'writer in Buenos Aires' with whom the narrator claims it debated metaphysics and co-authored stories – presumably Jorge Luis Borges whose eclectic fictions may well provide the imaginative stimulus for

Mitchell's own creation – we learn a possible name for this floating consciousness: a '*noncorpum*' (172). The *noncorpum*'s sense of freedom is vertiginous; it compares the experience of transmigration to 'a trapeze artist, spinning in emptiness' or 'a snooker ball lurching round the table' (165). Yet this liberty is accompanied by a profound feeling of loneliness and a longing to exchange diasporic displacement for existential dwelling (165). This search for the authenticity of place beneath fragmentation and flux echoes the experiences and desires embodied in the contemporary figure of the postcolonial migrant, as well as that of the postmodern tourist who, as Caren Kaplan observes, quests for the ultimate 'Real' in ideal 'vanishing' or 'endangered' locations supposedly untouched by Western modernity.¹⁵ The narrator's own quest is also haunted by a melancholic nostalgia for plenitude, its journeying motivated by the desire to recover its lost memories – of which the Mongolian folktale that haunts its consciousness is a tantalising fragment – and thereby to reveal the origins of its existence.

Following various leads as it transmigrates between several hosts – a movement that is allusive of both touristic consumption and colonial appropriation – the *noncorpum* hears of a folklorist, Boodoo, who is collecting together local myths and tales, and much of the chapter recounts the search for the man across the country's vast desert landscape. The narrator eventually learns that Boodoo has been killed by a fascistic KGB agent named Suhbataar who has likewise been tracking him, but not before this same figure, who also appears in 'Petersburg' and even crosses between novels to resurface in the 'Reclaimed Land' section of *numbr9dream*, murders the host that the narrator is currently occupying. The *noncorpum*'s greatest fear is to be inhabiting a human at the moment of death, and in the peculiar scene that follows the narrator awakens inside a tented dwelling, known as a 'ger', that appears to be a spiritual gateway for the souls who pass through its curtain from one world to the next. After one of these passing spirits intervenes, a monk wearing a distinctive yellow hat who, the reader may infer from later revelations about the narrator's origins, is perhaps its former master executed in communist purges, the *noncorpum* is transmigrated into the body of an unborn

¹⁵ *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 60-3.

child, and experiences the terror of birth as the ger's numinous curtain resolves into the pulsing viscera of the womb and is torn aside. This figure of passing between worlds is one of the novel's most consistent motifs, a sudden rupturing of the narrators' frameworks of understanding as they are confronted with forms of alterity that exceed the limits of their conceptual registers. By either uncanny coincidence or sublime design, the grandmother of this newborn child is the keeper of the narrator's displaced history, having waited patiently since her childhood for the owner of these memories to return to reclaim them. Passing from the baby's body into the elderly woman's consciousness, the lost soul bears witness to an epiphany of recognition as it skims through 'a canyon of another's memories' running across her mind, and plunges into it to enter its own past, reliving the final moments of embodied life in front of a firing squad (199). Here the truth of the *noncorpum's* identity is elucidated: this floating consciousness was once a young boy, condemned to death alongside the rest of his Lamaist sect for the crime of 'Feudal Indoctrination'; and it was his master's aborted attempt to transmigrate him into the body of a young girl nearby, and thus save him from death, that caused the child's mind to become untethered from the memories already transmitted into his prospective host. The narrator is offered a choice by the woman who has guarded its memories: whether to return to the body of the newborn girl that, it emerges, is a merely a 'shell' whose true soul and mind is the narrator's or to continue its rootless existence (202). The *noncorpum* weighs up this dilemma, whether to exchange the freedom of disembodied levity, endlessly traversing the globe to sample limitless experiences in the minds of 'presidents, astronauts, messiahs', for the vicissitudes of mortality (202). Its yearning for the kinship of human community, for the social and emotional ties that at once constrain and liberate, compels the narrator to accept a more circumscribed existence bounded by the contingencies of embodiment.

Echoing the migrant figures of Pran Nath in Kunzru's *The Impressionist* and the Leela virus in *Transmission*, Mitchell's *noncorpum* is a potent symbol for the contemporary forms of identity and citizenship defined by mobile, hybrid circulations of people and ideas. As suggested above, the concept of the *noncorpum* provides a metafictional analogy for the larger design of the novel, which similarly

shifts the site of articulation between a variety of hosts and places the reader in the position of a silent interlocutor or *voyeur* at once within and yet supplementary to the individual narrators' consciousnesses. But if this section of the novel hints at the notion of the reader as a *noncorpum* parasite on the text, it also reflects on Mitchell's own aesthetic approach, which similarly inhabits a range of styles and idioms and ranges across the ontological boundaries of history, language and identity. In the same way that the disembodied narrator of 'Mongolia' is fascinated by the plurality of the human species – 'all minds pulse in a unique way, just as every lighthouse in the world has a unique signature' – Mitchell's texts gesture towards both the heterogeneity and the commonality of human life (160). Indeed, beyond a traditional liberal-humanist accommodation with diversity, Mitchell's writing invokes Iain Chambers's vision of 'a diverse worlding of the world' where humanity lives in difference on a planetary scale, bearing witness to the contingencies of its narrators' worldly locations without permitting these differences to become fixed and immutable.¹⁶ For the *noncorpum*, identity is a potentially endless process of transit, transformation and translation, and the kaleidoscopic arrangement of Mitchell's novel opens out the linear temporalities of 'modernity' and 'globalisation' encoded in the abstract body of the humanist subject to reveal alternative paths of becoming. This modulating perspective refuses to route difference through the shared contours of a common map, and Mitchell's Mongolia is rendered both from the outside – viewed through the minds of the western backpackers as a 'carnival of aliens' and fetishised as 'the last place' uncolonised by modern explorer-tourists – and articulated from indigenous perspectives finding little romance in the country's dilapidation or the daily struggle for survival on the margins of the global economy (156, 159).

The title of *Ghostwritten* alludes in part to the spectral qualities of its narrative form, whose rootlessness mimics the disembeddedness of contemporary identity that is caught up in the turbulence of global forces. Like the ghostly trace of Mitchell's own authorial voice, which roams amongst a fantastically diverse range of characters and inhabits them fully but invisibly, the figure of the *noncorpum* may be

¹⁶ *Culture After Humanism: History, Culture, Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 177.

additionally read as an inflection of the fertile but ambiguous trope of the 'ghostwriter' threading through the disparate parts of the novel, albeit one that longs for the cessation of its restless exile. This also introduces important questions of autonomy and agency, for the *noncorpum* is not a passive inhabitant of its hosts' minds, but rather is able to access their memories and manipulate their thoughts and behaviour according to its whims. Indeed, as Mitchell's ethereal narrator acknowledges, the very fact of its existence shadows the notion of subjectivity with the possibility of an ontological *mise-en-abyme* that is profoundly disturbing: 'how do I know that there aren't noncorpi living in me, controlling my actions? Like a virus within a bacteria?' ([sic], 191). Similarly, the extent to which we are authors of our own lives, or whether existence is itself a form of biographical ghostwriting – scripted by forces both material and spiritual that are beyond our influence and understanding – is an issue that is continually raised by the text. Indeed, Mitchell's epigraph is taken from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), a novel where the disastrous collapse of a Peruvian bridge becomes the stimulus for a metaphysical exploration of the tension between celestial design and individual will. Like Wilder's fictional work, Mitchell's text meditates on the mysteries of causality and subjective experience, but rather than offering any kind of answer, *Ghostwritten* functions as a neural network of thoughts and ideas. For the millennial cultist, Quasar, the apocalyptic coming of the 'New Earth' is an inevitability prophesied by his Guru; the life of the unnamed tea-shack owner in the 'Holy Mountain' section is caught in the machine of patriarchal history, her rape by the son of a warlord symbolic of her subjugation and exploitation; the pioneering scientist, Mo Muntervary, finds paradoxical structure in the 'syntax of uncertainty' articulated by the subatomic universe of quantum physics (373); while Marco, the professional musician and ghostwriter who narrates 'London', stakes his existence on the beneficence of serendipity. From the always partial and contextual perspective afforded to each of the narrators it would appear that human agency has little purchase on larger material and metaphysical forces. Yet the prismatic structure of the novel also permits us to step outside of the limitations of embodiment and spatio-historical location, revealing the subtle and profound effects that individual lives have on others in distant parts of the world. The surges

of cause and effect rippling through the text may remain largely invisible to the local actors – the consequences of their actions impossible to predict or control – but Mitchell suggests that agency is everywhere immanent, albeit unequally, in the networked lives and narratives forging the common horizon of globality.

The absence of subjective mastery and the precariousness and perniciousness of single, all-encompassing perspectives are familiar themes in literary texts responding to the material conditions of globalisation. As we have seen in earlier chapters, both *Kunzru* and *Norfolk* play in different ways with notions of authorial omniscience, textual representation and narratorial coherence. Yet the mosaic structure of Mitchell's text arguably constitutes a more radical attempt to give aesthetic form to entrenched and enduring patterns of global interconnectedness and interdependence. The novel's suspicion of the abstract universalising gaze finds particular focus in the 'Night Train' section, which recounts a series of broadcasts from the eponymous radio show hosted by late-night New York DJ Bat Segundo, during which a mysterious caller known only as 'Zookeeper' makes a number of appearances. The precise temporal setting is ambiguous, but this part is clearly narrated from a point in the near future where the apocalypticism that shadows much of the rest of the novel resolves into a more tangible vision of catastrophe: the splintering of humanity into tribal factions and a runaway escalation in military technology. These horrifyingly real threats of total annihilation merely compound a *Zeitgeist* of widespread paranoia, and Segundo's show is regularly beset with calls from deluded fantasists who testify to 'viruses in cashew nuts, visual organs in trees, subversive bus drivers waving secret messages to each other as they pass, impending collisions with celestial bodies' (386-7). As the narrative unfolds, the nature of Zookeeper's identity is gradually revealed. It emerges that this entity – a kind of cybernetic reimagining of the *noncorpum* consciousness appearing earlier in the novel – is the product of Mo Muntervary's ground-breaking work on 'Quantum Cognition', a technology originally intended to have civilian applications but since appropriated by the military. Previously, the 'Clear Island' chapter portrayed the scientist's flight to a remote corner of rural Ireland in an attempt to take refuge from the shadowy agencies competing to secure control of her research, yet its closing pages saw Mo reluctantly agreeing to continue her work in the employ of the

American Defence Department at a secret institute in Saragosa, Texas.¹⁷ In the intervening period, it would appear that her utopian vision of creating an autonomous information system based on the principles of Quantum Cognition has been realised. The Zookeeper is a fully sentient hybrid of artificial intelligence and networked communications designed to protect the world from its potentially catastrophic entanglement with technology.

This digital organism is able to monitor events in its 'zoo' through the extensive network of 'EyeSats' orbiting the Earth, their powerful lenses offering a celestial vista over the planet. Like the Leela virus in Kunzru's *Transmission*, though committed to maintaining rather than disrupting social order, the Zookeeper is a kind of ghost in the machine, an ethereal quintessence with no more substance than the fibre-optic pulses and packets of data streaming through the global networks. Similarly, it is worth remarking on the apparently boundless mobility of this being, which is able to 'scroll' across the globe as if the world's surface has been translated into the display on a monitor. Coupled with the capacity to access any form of digitally stored information, Zookeeper is the ultimate (dis)embodiment of panoptical surveillance whose all-seeing eye does not merely unfold global space, but also offers a depth of vision inaccessible, and even inexplicable, to the humans below:

This world of trees is still dark, to human eyes. Nocturnal eyes and EyeSats can see deeper down the spectrum. There are no names for the colours here. On the roof of the forest canopy, a spider monkey looks up for a moment. I can see the Milky Way and Andromeda in its retina. By image enhancement I can identify EyeSat 80B^K, lit by a morning that hasn't arrived yet. The monkey blinks, shrieks and flings itself into the lower darkness. (414)

The Zookeeper's omniscient perspective calls to mind the angelic figure of Septimus in Norfolk's *Lemprière's Dictionary* who oversees the weblike proliferation of the novel's plot. Described by Segundo as an 'archangel' and a 'floating minister of justice', the Zookeeper is a form of technological deity or *deus ex machina* –

¹⁷ Incidentally, to draw out another one of the intertextual strands that connects *Ghostwritten* with *number9dream*, this is the same institute to which Eiji's computer-hacker friend, Suga, finds himself transferred after cracking the Pentagon's security system. See *number9dream*, pp. 344-7.

albeit created by the humanity over whom he watches – whose role is to preserve order in the zoo by adhering to a system of laws that governs its decisions (410, 427). On ‘Brink Day’ when the escalation of international tension brings the world to the verge of nuclear holocaust – indeed, both sides in the conflict actually order the launch of their missiles – it is the intervention of this cybernetic consciousness that causes the weapons systems to malfunction and averts disaster. Despite the fact that its intentions are benevolent, the Zookeeper’s ethical imperatives are given a sinister edge by its ability to take control of an orbital battery of satellite weapon systems, named ‘PinSats’, that allow the immediate and utterly ruthless punishment of any transgressions. The destruction of the military installation at Saragosa and the vaporisation of a hack writer whose latest conspiracy thriller, *The Invisible Cyberhand*, stumbles rather closer to the truth than its author imagines, are just two instances of the consequences befalling those who, whether wittingly or unwittingly, violate the core logic within which the Zookeeper believes ‘the origins of order’ inheres (426). Its absolute control of the flow of information – ‘every image on every screen, every word on every phone, every digit on every VDU’ is routed through a global matrix that is entirely under its authority – is the foundation for a regime of blanket electronic surveillance which, as we saw in the last chapter, seeks to pacify the ambiguities and unpredictabilities of material interactions. However, the fact that the zoo remains in a state of ‘chaos’ exposes the perverse narrowness of the Zookeeper’s panoptical worldview, which reduces the complexity human relations to instrumental problems of optimisation and rational organisation. Ultimately, the mounting evidence of the inadequacy of its strategies of top-down control – civil wars claim hundreds of lives every day, rivers are polluted and ecosystems destroyed, famine and disease blight the poorest countries – forces Zookeeper to confront the gap between its programmatic ethical system and a far messier reality:

I believed I could do so much. I stabilised stock markets; but economic surplus was used to fuel arms races. I provided alternative energy solutions; but the researchers sold them to oil cartels who sit on them. I froze nuclear weapons systems; but war multiplied, waged with machine guns, scythes and pick-axes. (425)

The Zookeeper's faulty conception of the world as a form of organic machine or logical system means that its scrupulously planned 'solutions' have simply precipitated 'the next generation of crises' (426). From one perspective this could be seen as a resigned recognition of the human race's endless capacity for self-destruction and the inevitable failure of every utopian project. But from another, more optimistic, point of view the 'chaos' of the zoo bespeaks the dynamic openness of global space and repudiates the technocapitalist vision of a fully integrated and predictable world.

By subordinating the unity of any single subject-position to the splintered multiplicity of voices and identities, one could accuse Mitchell's text of submitting to perspectival relativism at the expense of a broader examination of humanity's collective conditions of existence and ethical obligations. It is certainly the case that the narrators' disparate belief systems and representational schemas become increasingly unstable as they are brushed up against each other, with the consequence that the moral centre of *Ghostwritten* remains, perhaps appropriately, indeterminate. Yet the novel seems intended less to be an argument for a particular position than an echo chamber of conflicting ideas, a shifting mosaic of the human condition at the end of the second millennium. Like the metropolis of Tokyo that is described by one of the characters as 'so big that nobody really knows where it stops', the global extension of Mitchell's novel poses urban sprawl as an epistemological condition (34). But in this world of incoherence, fracture and dislocation, where the impossibly complex machinery of everyday life seems to be sweeping away established cartographies, the text implies that we must learn to detect the meaningful connections that pass between us, thus writing the ghostly outlines of a new global community that is emerging at the beginning of the new millennium. As I have argued throughout this thesis, whilst recognising that the collective experiences of economic and cultural globalisation are differently articulated in particular contexts, they represent a common milieu for contemporary human interaction unimpeded by the barriers erected by the nation-state. From the transformation of the sacred temple atop the 'Holy Mountain' into a destination for foreign tourists surrounded by shops selling 'glittery things that nobody could ever use, want or need', to the colonisation of Hong Kong by

corporate capital, to Neil Brose's description of himself as 'a man of departments, compartments apartments' in the same chapter, each part of *Ghostwritten* is concerned with questions of identity and belonging that, taken together, offer diverse responses to a shared historical situation and emerging system of values (146, 103).

From this perspective, the violent and intolerant religious fanaticism expressed in the terrorist's narrative bookending Mitchell's novel should also be understood as a reaction to the contemporary social order. Quasar's millennial cult offers spiritual kinship and sanctuary from a modern world that is perceived as decadent and morally vacuous, saturated by the 'mindtrash' of consumer culture (11). Combining notions of racial purity, national honour, and a belief in traditional practices, the Fellowship's fundamentalist discourse is engaged in an effort to recreate a putatively lost world unblemished by the global flows of modernity. The group's leader, known as 'His Serendipity', espouses apocalyptic purification as the only means of redemption, prophesying a future 'nation without borders' where the taint of the unfaithful is eradicated and a fallen humanity may be reunited in immaculate wholeness (9). While this desire is imagined as a return to a past social formation, it is in fact a new invention constructed retrospectively through the lens of contemporary anxieties and fears. The rejection of the values of the world market may be linked with the resurgence of primordial identities conceived as a kind of historical backflow, but it is actually a refusal of the historical passage in course, a political project directed against the contemporary social order. This is to suggest that whilst the current global tendencies toward increased mobility, indeterminacy and hybridity are seen by some as a kind of liberation, for others they represent the exacerbation of their suffering. Indeed, competing passions for escape and belonging are experienced to varying degrees by all of Mitchell's narrators. Quasar's is perhaps the most extreme response to contemporary feelings of atomisation, one that the novel's formal and thematic emphasis on humanity's interconnectedness and interdependency implicitly condemns. But by giving voice to opinions that, in the current climate of global terrorism and resurgent fundamentalisms, are ever more insistent, the text demands that we attempt to understand these discourses on their own terms.

Although Quasar's monologue expresses rigid opposition to the interpenetrations and hybridisations emerging from the flows and networks of global relations, the final part of *Ghostwritten* articulates the irreducible imbrication of lives and narratives. In 'Underground', we return to the mind of Quasar at the moment he releases canisters of Sarin gas into a packed metro carriage, an event that has been alluded to at a number of points in the novel but never confronted directly. As the tenth chapter in Mitchell's 'novel in nine parts', this section functions as a kind of coda that loosely draws together the strands of the text, presenting itself as a node through which the rest of the stories pass or perhaps as an underworld that threads together different levels of reality. The terrorist's struggle to escape from the carriage after setting the timer that will release the poison is rendered in dreamlike prose where people and objects take on a mythic resonance. In his panic, the integrity of Quasar's narrative begins to collapse and the line between the real and the imaginary becomes increasingly blurred. Images alluding to each of the other chapters bleed into his consciousness, with people and objects being translated into peculiar echoes of the stories that we have just read. The interpenetration of voices, texts and sensations here is perhaps intended to suggest both the multiplicity of Quasar's identity and the liminality of the boundary between clean and unclean that orients his worldview. Although Quasar's brutal act is dependent on a violent suppression of compassion and empathy – the imaginative sympathy that is necessary in order to see oneself as another, and which flickers briefly when he sees himself reflected in the eyes of a baby – his fleeting apprehension of the submerged lines of connection that will come to proliferate from his actions offers a sliver of hope. Rather than providing any form of conclusion, though, the 'ending' of *Ghostwritten* directs the reader back to the beginning, with Quasar's final thoughts as the train disappears into the darkness mirroring those with which 'Okinawa' opens: the unanswered, even unanswerable, question 'who is blowing on the nape of my neck?' (436).

David Mitchell's third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, is strongly reminiscent of his first in terms of form and structure, once again making use of intricately interlinked first-person narratives that shuttle between locations scattered across the surface of the globe. If the pan-global daisy chain of *Ghostwritten* evokes the interconnectedness

of people across vast geographical distances, the dizzying vista across which *Cloud Atlas* ranges displays an even more expansive transhistorical sweep. The novel's sextet of narratives is arranged chronologically: the first is the diary of an American notary named Adam Ewing travelling across the South Seas during the mid-nineteenth century who, at no little risk to himself, befriends a stowaway Moriori tribesman; the last is the yarn spun around a campfire by a Pacific Islander named Zachry Bailey who bears witness to a distant, annihilated future where 'the candle o'civ'lise is burnt away', with the surviving vestiges of humanity having fallen into the superstition and violence of a new Dark Age.¹⁸ In between, there are a series of letters written by an aspiring English maestro called Robert Frobisher, who is scratching a precarious living serving as an amanuensis to an older, more established, composer living in Belgium between the First and Second World Wars; a pulp thriller set in 1970s California in which a courageous young journalist named Luisa Rey – a character first met in the 'Night Train' section of *Ghostwritten*, where she is one of the callers on Bat Segundo's radio show – attempts to expose an industrial conspiracy involving the construction of a nuclear reactor; the contemporary memoir of a London-based vanity publisher, Timothy Cavendish – also reprised following a cameo in Mitchell's debut novel – who finds himself wrongly incarcerated in a home for the elderly; and the pre-execution testament of a genetically engineered 'fabricant' named Somni-451, who inhabits the dystopian cityscape of a near-future Korea. In keeping with the polyvocal exuberance of the author's previous fictional works, *Cloud Atlas* contains multitudes. The distinct voices and vocabularies of each of its narrators once again demonstrate the fluidity of Mitchell's own authorial voice and his capacity for aesthetic ventriloquism. These disorientating changes of tone and register are more than mere stylistic pyrotechnics, for the novel's shifting textures and modes of narrative transmission are linguistic correlatives for diverse temporal settings, cultural milieus, and existential horizons, building blocks for a series of intensely imagined worlds.

This dizzying transit through time and space is simultaneously a journey across the generic and stylistic boundaries of narrative. Certainly, *Ghostwritten* also

¹⁸ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Sceptre, 2004), p. 255. Further references to this edition will include the page number in parentheses after the quotation.

experiments with a number of recognisable genres, including science fiction, romance, fairy-tale, crime thriller, and picaresque farce, yet in *Cloud Atlas* the shifts in language and form are more pronounced. Indeed, whereas *Ghostwritten* threads together its separate parts by means of delicate causal, thematic, and figurative counterpoints and connections, the narratives of *Cloud Atlas* cut violently across each other. With the exception of Zachry's story – which forms the structural and thematic centrepiece of the novel – none of the five preceding narratives is allowed to proceed uninterrupted, but instead each is abruptly broken off in the middle. The technique brings to mind the vertiginous textual regression of Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, where the reader is confronted with the curtailed openings of ten different narratives in turn, each indirectly connected with the next, but differing in setting and style. However, Mitchell's novel also subverts its own influence by completing each of the stories that it has begun. Thus, the first half of the text sees the five successive tales progressively falling away, their reverberations sounding across the post-apocalyptic epicentre of Zachry's story, which is the still point around which the novel turns. The second half of the book regathers the abandoned narrative threads, but it does so in reverse order, pulling the reader backwards through history to return to the original point of departure in the nineteenth century. The effect of this back and forth movement as the novel tunnels through the strata of history is to offer a vision of time and narrative that is at once linear and cyclical, both a succession of discrete moments causally connected and an infinitely extended network in which interlaced people, events and stories resonate together.

Mitchell's text is punctuated with a number of allusions to its novelistic architecture, which are also meditations upon the nature of temporality and identity. In the 'Letters From Zedelghem' section, Robert Frobisher toils away on the composition that, at the tender age of twenty-three, he knows to be his masterwork, an artistic gesture that encompasses his life and will stand as the enduring monument to it. In one of his epistolary outpourings to his lover, Rufus Sixsmith, he describes his magnum opus as a 'sextet for overlapping soloists' in which each part is interrupted by another played on a different instrument speaking 'in its own language of key, scale and colour' (463). Frobisher's piece, whose

arrangement sketches the novel's overarching framework in miniature, is pointedly named the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. Like *Ghostwritten* and, to a lesser extent, *number9dream* and *Black Swan Green*, *Cloud Atlas* could be read as a compendium of short stories or loosely connected episodes; but the image of Mitchell's novel as a musical composition suggests that each of its narratives should be approached as symphonic movements of a larger whole.

Another paradigm is put forward in the 'Half-Lives' chapter by the nuclear scientist, Isaac Sachs, shortly before the aircraft in which he is travelling is blown apart by a bomb concealed in the hold. Meditating upon the unfathomable vectors of past, present and future, Sachs proposes a model of time as 'an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments', where at every instant we exist within the ever-accreting 'shells' of virtual pasts – one of which is also the real past – and encase within our present a multitude of possible futures, of which only one will ultimately come to pass (409). As suggested above, the text possesses a similar kind of nested structure, whereby each of the six narratives is contained in the tale immediately preceding it, but also carries within itself the story that is to follow. What connects the sequence of narratives is the metafictional device of each of the subsequent narrators stumbling across the very same texts we have just read; thus the tales of their predecessors become incorporated into their own. For example, the reason for the sudden abridgement of Adam Ewing's story only emerges in the next section, where Frobisher, who has been supporting himself by selling rare books pilfered from the estate's library, comes across a torn volume entitled *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*, of which the second half is missing. Similarly, after the untimely death of Rufus Sixsmith – who, it transpires during the 'Half-Lives' segment, is now a renegade atomic physicist refusing to buckle under corporate pressure to approve plans for an unsafe nuclear reactor – Luisa Rey discovers the letters from Frobisher amongst his personal effects. The first half of the manuscript of *Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery* arrives on the desk of Timothy Cavendish in the fourth section, whilst in the fifth, Cavendish's own memoirs have been made into a filmic picaresque, with the first frames of this now ancient and proscribed movie offering Sonmi-451 a brief glimpse of a world long since lost. At the zenith of the novel's narrative arc, Sonmi has become a deity worshipped by the Valleysmen

of 'Ha-Why' who are under threat of enslavement by a warlike neighbouring tribe. Her last testament is recorded holographically in a device known as an 'orison' carried by one of the mysterious visitors who cross the ocean to barter with Zachry's tribe. After befriending one of these 'Prescients', whose name, Meronym, alludes to the theme of connectedness, Zachry tells of how he came to be gifted the strange object, and his narrative comes to a close with him showing his son the concluding part of Sonmi's legacy, and so setting in train the reader's recursive journey back through the novel's palimpsestic layers of text and history.

Despite the fact that they remain marooned in their time and place, then, the novel's characters forge connections with each other through the act of reading and writing. Similar to the figure of the ghostwriter in Mitchell's first novel – or really just another iteration of this idea that commingles the spectrality of identity and text, each bleeding into the other – the concept of narrative transmission both knits together the disparate parts and opens up channels of exchange between worlds that, from the inside, appear entirely self-contained. In spite of the sometimes vast expanses of time separating the sextet of narrators, the translation of these necessarily provisional, context-bound stories into other settings – both textual and material – evokes a vision of overlapping lives where the boundaries of the past and future soften into permeable interface. At the same time, the structure of the novel implies the mutual interdependency of these disseminated consciousnesses, since each narrator is able to complete his or her predecessor's tale. Sonmi is granted her dying wish to see the final scenes of Cavendish's filmed memoir where the protagonist gains his freedom; Cavendish obtains the second half of *Half-Lives* to prepare for publication; Luisa Rey acquires the remaining correspondence between Frobisher and Sixsmith; and Frobisher encloses the concluding pages of Adam Ewing's journal with his final letter, which is also his suicide note.

One of the characters in *Ghostwritten* remarks that 'the human world is made of stories, not people', and *Cloud Atlas* articulates a similar blending of narrative and subjectivity as stories and memories, life and fiction, merge into each other (386). Whilst reading the last eight letters Robert Frobisher wrote to Sixsmith, Luisa Rey wonders whether 'molecules of Zedelghem Chateau, of Robert Frobisher's

hand, dormant in this paper for forty-four years' may now be 'swirling in my lungs, [. . .] in my blood', an image combining the transmission of narrative with the transmission of identity (453). In a similar way to *Ghostwritten* and *number9dream*, *Cloud Atlas* also makes use of repeated phrases, images and ideas to indicate its characters' collective imbrication in networks that extend both spatially and temporally, but this is supplemented by the strong implication that its narrators may represent different incarnations of the same transmigrating soul. As well as each of the narrators sharing a distinctive comet-shaped birthmark, their stories are haunted by acute remembrances and foreshadowings of experiences appearing to originate from other lifetimes. Luisa Rey, for instance, becomes entranced by a piece of music in the Lost Chord Music Store whose vivid familiarity makes her feel as though she is 'living in a stream of time', subsequently learning that this piece is a rare recording of Frobisher's *Cloud Atlas Sextet* (425). In another time and continent, Sonmi-451 flees from the authorities in a car driven by members of the resistance movement; as it swerves off the road, the sudden drop shakes free 'an earlier memory of blackness, inertia, gravity, of being trapped in another ford [Sonmi's word for a car]' that has no source in her experience, but recalls Rey's plunge off a bridge at the end of the first part of her narrative (330). Given additional philosophical bolstering by Nietzsche's concept of time's eternal recurrence – whose 'elegant certainties' are at the heart of Robert Frobisher's music – Mitchell's text offers the notion of identity as at once singular and multiple, the strands of each single life utterly unique yet woven into a collective tapestry wherein the contingent and the local feed directly into the universal (490). Each narrator is necessarily circumscribed by the specificity of their place in culture and history, which simultaneously reveals and obscures their particular horizons of possibility, but they are also attuned to each other's voices as they reverberate down the corridors of history. Certainly, the most profound moments of perception are achieved when the novel's characters catch the momentary glimpse of the larger epic in which their own story is encompassed. Zachry Bailey's narrative is at the apex of *Cloud Atlas*, and it is he who is granted the clearest view of humanity's shared journey through time, with his eloquent expression of existence providing a key to the novel's title:

I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o'that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow? (324)

Just as clouds are amorphous, ever-changing coalescences of water molecules, so too, Mitchell suggests, is the human species at once infinitely diverse and bound together in a diasporic global community cutting across the boundaries of ethnicity, race and nation.

The conceit of literary metempsychosis forms the novel's connective tissue, but the lifeblood of Mitchell's text is drawn from a different source. Whereas in *Ghostwritten* the multiplication of perspectives and subjectivities rendered its ethical underpinnings decidedly ambiguous – its competing voices each offering a specific and necessarily narrow view of the world – *Cloud Atlas's* nested narratives are given thematic and philosophical coherence by the twin refrains of the Nietzschean will to power and the eternal recurrence of human subordination that lie at the heart of the 'many-headed hydra of human nature' (529). From the brutality of colonialism witnessed firsthand by Adam Ewing during his sojourn on the Chatham Islands, to the state-sanctioned biotechnological apartheid of Nea So Copros, where genetic clones like Sonmi are bred to serve the ruling class of 'purebloods' (191), to more intimate portraits such as the petty tyrannies suffered by the elderly Timothy Cavendish in a nursing home or the parasitic relationship between composer and amanuensis in 'Letters from Zedelghem', the novel traces a rapacious cycle of cruelty and exploitation that spirals through human history. As in Lawrence Norfolk's fiction, the chaotic flux of time resolves into repeating patterns that signal a deeper logic or structure, but if for Norfolk this constellation is generally framed in mythical or metaphysical terms, in Mitchell's text the 'cycle as old as tribalism' is exclusively the product of human actions (360). The necessity of struggling against what Adam Ewing names as 'the entropy written into our nature' is the humanist imperative animating the novel, pitching individual acts of heroism and resistance against the Darwinist vision of tooth and claw predation that emerges at every point of the narrative web (528). If during the first half of the book

humanity appears to be shackled to its apocalyptic destiny – the will to power that compels the strong to subjugate the weak ultimately begetting the Hobbesian nightmare of civilisation’s destruction – the reversal of this forward momentum in the second half allows Mitchell to open up an alternative perspective. Rather than the future being impossible to resist – an outcome hard-coded into our biological or social nature and thus already etched into the trajectory of history – the novel emphasises that it is fashioned by ethical choices made by individuals and societies, thereby reasserting the potential for political agency.

Ewing’s journal bookends the chronology of civilisation’s fall, and offers itself as a template for later episodes as the shells of Mitchell’s Russian doll progressively fall away. Berthed on a vessel bearing the suggestive name of the *Prophetess*, Ewing’s narrative records his struggle to square his faith in the civilising, beneficent aspects of colonialism with what he sees before him on the Chatham Islands, ‘that casual brutality lighter races show the darker’ (31). He learns of the archipelago’s history, specifically the fate of the indigenous Moriori people who, having lived in isolation for hundreds of years, were decimated firstly by the arrival of foreign settlers who brought disease and competed with the native population for resources, and later by the invasion of Maori tribes – supplied with weapons and transport by the British – who claimed the land for their own, massacring the peaceable Moriori and enslaving those remaining. Ewing is also disturbed by the treatment of a vulnerable young sailor, who eventually takes his own life after suffering weeks of verbal, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of the rest of the crew. These patterns of exploitation are replicated in the American’s relationship with a fellow passenger named Henry Goose, who claims to be a doctor and diagnoses Ewing’s bouts of illness as the symptoms of a rare parasitic worm that incubates in, and ultimately destroys, the brain of its host. Unbeknownst to Ewing, Goose is a confidence-trickster seeking to procure the (imagined) riches contained in his trunk; the cocktail of drugs that he administers are not a treatment, but rather a poison that is gradually killing his ‘patient’. For this quack-doctor, the notions of progress, civilisation, and the divine sovereignty of the white races underpinning the imperial project are merely fatuous mystifications of the single, immutable law that the strong prey on the weak, these concepts no more than

intellectual fig-leaves deployed to legitimise a predatory rapacity that is universal. A similar point is made by a disillusioned missionary with whom Ewing becomes acquainted on his journey, whose parable about a breed of ants known as 'slave-makers' resonates with the natives' forced labour on church plantations:

'These insects raid the colonies of common ants, steal eggs back to their own nests, & after they hatch, why, the stolen slaves become workers of the greater empire, & never even dream they were once stolen. Now if you ask me, Lord Jehovah crafted these ants as a model, Mr Ewing.' Mr Wagstaff's gaze was gravid with the ancient future. 'For them with the eyes to see it.' (510)

The abundant evidence of the desecration of lives and habitats under the banner of the Christian mission, not to mention his own experience as the prey of Henry Goose, shakes Ewing's belief in the ladder of civilisation and the moral superiority of the white European. Yet if he comes to abandon these seductive fictions, Ewing understands that Goose's savagely nihilistic doctrine need not take their place; after all, this 'truth' is itself just another narrative, a story whose validity is a function of belief. The bond he develops with a stowaway Moriori tribesman, whom he defends against the Dutch Captain who would have him thrown overboard, opens his eyes to the possibility of a different future. Ewing's charity in saving Autua from an almost certain death is repaid to him in kind when the Moriori courageously rescues him from his sickbed on the *Prophetess*, managing to carry his body to a Catholic mission where he is nursed back to health. At the end of the book which, as the narrative arc comes full circle, is also close to its beginning, Ewing reaches the conclusion that 'one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. [. . .] For the human species, selfishness is extinction', a prophecy that has already been revealed, though not to our 'naïve, dreaming Adam', in the dystopian futures mapped by Sonmi and Zachry (528-9). But against this cataclysmic vision, he affirms both the necessity of the ethical struggle towards a more equitable world and the capacity of individuals to actively shape their collective history, finally pledging himself to the Abolitionist cause. For, as Ewing suggests, 'belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world', and the dominant order, no matter how grounded in 'reality' or seemingly bound to

'material' necessity, can only maintain its sovereignty so long as its narratives are subscribed to (528). *Cloud Atlas* demonstrates throughout the myriad misuses of fiction, from the lies told by grifters, CEOs and politicians to maintain their power, to the larger cultural narratives that legitimise the expansion of empires and rewrite the past to justify present political aims. But it also puts forward a continued faith in the potential for narrative to shape a different world, and even after the collapse of civilisation it is significant that the impulse to tell stories survives.

What binds the narrators of *Cloud Atlas* together most strongly, then, is their common experience of political oppression and exploitation, whether colonial or corporate, economic or tribal. The narrative strategy of Mitchell's text seems intended to capture both the particularity and the commonality of human existence; its shifts of perspective between different social settings and modes of life depicting humanity as a kind of diasporic multiplicity scattered across time and space. If the subjugation of the weak by the strong throughout the novel is a constant refrain, then so are the repeated acts of resistance opposing these violent divisions. Without wishing to force the comparison unduly, one interesting way of approaching the dispersed vignettes of both *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* may be as the literary expression of Hardt and Negri's concept of the global 'multitude'. To reiterate, Hardt and Negri argue that the multitude is the vitalistic underside of technocapitalism's global networks of power; the productive, creative subjectivities whose movements, modulations of form and processes of mixture and hybridisation embody the infinite desire for liberation from false hierarchies and seek to establish new geographies and forms of life. Whilst the spread of Empire's fluid hierarchies and divisions across the world is one facet of globalisation, another is the creation of new circuits of cooperation and collaboration stretching across nations and continents, an open and expansive network allowing for unlimited encounters. In a similar way, Mitchell's narrators are connected through common needs and desires that have no regard for the borders and boundaries parcelling up their world. Though separated from each other by enormous geographical and temporal distances, their struggle to assert their humanity against inequality, discrimination and various forms of subjugation and exploitation is a universal impulse uniting them in their difference. Hardt and Negri describe the multitude as

‘constellations of singularities’, and this also seems an accurate approximation of Mitchell’s vision of subjectivity in the changed conditions of the post-millennial world, where new forms of community and citizenship are emerging to overturn established structures.¹⁹ Whilst his characters remain embedded in their material circumstances – their narratives couched in the ideological and moral atmospheres of their time – Mitchell’s work is motivated by the connections that cut across the divisions of time and space, and across the divisions of his own texts, to reveal a more profound ontological drama. Against the idea that individuals are powerless to intervene in the large-scale historical processes in which they are swept up, the final lines of Adam Ewing’s journal, and also of *Cloud Atlas*, articulate a quiet belief in our capacity to open up new paths of becoming away from localised misery and exploitation, and towards a new terrain of humanity. Anticipating the response inevitably marshalled against such idealistic sentiments, that these gestures are futile because a single life amounts no more than ‘one drop in a limitless ocean’, Ewing, and Mitchell, leave us with the rhetorical question, ‘what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?’ (529). This vision of human existence as an infinite sea neatly counterpoints Zachry Bailey’s figuration of souls as clouds, and both of these figures link together to form a composite image of the planet’s hydrologic cycle, whose perpetual motion – both geographical and incorporating processes of mixture and hybridisation – is the motor of endless self-renewal.

To conclude this chapter, it may be interesting to meditate on the way that Mitchell himself ‘ends’ his texts. The author’s reluctance to provide what many would regard as conventional endings has been touched upon during the preceding discussions of his work. *Ghostwritten* comes to a close with a section that merges together the various parts of novel but at the same time consciously resists narratorial resolution. Rather than attempting to tie up the loose ends, the text loops back to the start, inviting the reader to begin again and to continue the process of tracing the intricate web of causal linkages, intertextual associations and thematic correspondences. In a different way, the final chapter of *number9dream* also leaves the narrative open to connections yet to be made, with the blankness of

¹⁹ *Empire*, p. 60.

the ninth section opening a space for its protagonist's continued becoming. Although the nested structure of *Cloud Atlas* does satisfy the readerly desire for the closure of each of its interrupted stories, the concepts of narrative transmission and the transmigration of identity underpinning the novel's architecture suggest that endings are always provisional and arbitrary, germinating new beginnings. What more distant future lies beyond Zachry's narrative? What incarnation precedes Adam Ewing? *Black Swan Green* provides the most conventional resolution of any of Mitchell's novels so far, but even here there is an uneasiness with the notion of conclusions: 'it's not the end' are the valedictory words of Jason's sister (371). Of course, this has much to do with the way that he structures his texts, favouring the juxtaposition of vivid fragments over the teleological drive of linear narrative. If the guiding principle of his writing is that of the connectivity of people and stories, then this suspicion of endings is understandable, for the proposition of the world as a multiplicity of ongoing histories is fundamentally opposed to ideas of totality and completeness. The networked quality of Mitchell's fictions creates a form appropriate for the interconnected, globalised times in which we live, buffeted among billions by the flows of the world market. Whether Mitchell's approach to fiction traces the emergence of new kind of consciousness and a new mode of experiencing the world is too early to say, but the emphasis on fragmentation and flux, as well as on the barely visible but increasingly powerful matrix of connections reshaping the fabric of social being, represents a provocative vision of the nature of human community in the twenty-first century. The necessity of addressing the complexities and interconnections of our wired world has only become more urgent after the shock of recent terrorist bombings in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005), perhaps whose most enduring legacy, as I will go on to suggest in the concluding chapter of this thesis, may turn out to be a deeper awareness, particularly in Western societies, of the paradoxes, surprises and unintended consequences that flow from the multidimensional processes of globalisation.

5

Conclusion: Best Destiny?

Our best destiny, as planetary cohabitants, is the development of what has been called 'species consciousness' – something over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility. Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators, and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear.¹

The words of Martin Amis, published a week after the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Centre in 2001, expressed the urgent challenges now facing the Western imagination, which demand a fundamental reappraisal of what it means to live in a world knitted ever more closely together by capitalism and technology. Since the violence of September 11, the complex dynamics of globalisation articulated in the fictions of the three British writers explored in this thesis have been placed at the very centre of contemporary theory and politics. 9/11 and its aftermath dramatised that globality has become, in both material and perceptual terms, the defining reality of our post-millennial present, revealing in a particularly traumatic way the darker consequences of living in a networked environment where the worldwide flows of people, products, technologies and ideas are abolishing the old boundaries that insulated the Western subject from previously invisible conflicts and traumas. The intention of the attacks was to shatter the neoliberal hubris of a 'new world order' that held up the virtues of the free market even as the ruthless march of capital devastated the lives of billions of people living outside the West, and whilst the attacks resulted in a catastrophic loss of life – though eclipsed in scale by the mounting civilian deaths arising from the retaliatory conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq – it is as a symbolic gesture that they were arguably

¹ Martin Amis, 'Fear and Loathing', *Guardian*, 18 September 2001, np. Available online at <<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/politicsphilosophyandsociety/story/0,,553923,00.html>> [accessed 10 October 2007]. The concept of 'species consciousness' is taken from Karl Marx.

most powerful. People around the world were able to watch the second of the hijacked aeroplanes crash into the south tower in real time, making the events of 9/11 a historically unprecedented global media event. This spectacle was also a profoundly aesthetic one, with the horrific convergence of passenger plane and corporate high-rise, figures of American mobility and wealth, resolving into a fantastically vehement tableau that expressed the humiliation and rage of populations ruthlessly exploited by Western cultural, financial and military institutions. Video footage and photographs of the destruction have become iconic as a result of their worldwide proliferation, used both by radical Islamists to demonstrate the vulnerability of the epicentre of global capitalism and Western power, and by the United States and her allies to legitimate the ongoing 'War on Terror' that is in principle without end.

Whether or not 9/11 and its aftermath has fundamentally reconfigured the global landscape, and it is too early to tell what the long term consequences will be, it is certainly a transformational moment that makes violently clear the new context of power that has been emerging since 1989. As this thesis argued in the opening chapter, the sudden and rapid collapse of the Soviet Bloc as an opposing force to Western capitalism created a world where the neat dichotomies of Cold War relations no longer obtained and it became increasingly difficult for any one nation to manage global order. Although the 1990s were marked by the overwhelming domination of the United States over international affairs, the underlying drive of the expansion of the global market and the development of a global media system was to steadily erode the nation's geopolitical hegemony and its moral authority. Events at the beginning of the new millennium brusquely punctured complacent assumptions of national isolation and self-sufficiency, which could no longer be sustained as the West was forced to confront the reality of its imbrication with territories and populations that cannot be passively integrated into its definitions of reality. Many spoke of the attacks as marking an 'end of innocence' – implicitly suggesting that the deaths of nearly three thousand people, mostly American, had a greater significance for the Western imagination than those millions who perished during the 1990s in genocidal conflicts in Rwanda (1994) and Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo (1991-9) as well as a more general consequence of the

global production of poverty – but what they revealed was that the West’s sense of innocence was no more than luxurious and anachronistic self-delusion. Though Ian McEwan excoriated the lack of empathy demonstrated by the hijackers towards their victims, observing that ‘imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity’, the exploitation of much of the rest of the world’s population to feed Western consumerism surely involves a comparable failure of the imagination.² Just as isolationism and unilateral politics seem increasingly untenable in a world constituted by a shifting, networked field of global flows and forces, so too are modes of consciousness unable to project a future beyond traditional principles of geo-historical differentiation. A world population whose disparate experience, practices and economic and environmental fates seem more closely entwined than at any point in history makes it imperative to cultivate new forms of creative cohabitation and belonging.

For many commentators, especially in the West, the events of 9/11 were perceived as a ruptural historical moment, ushering in the spectacle of a bipolar world that is at once contemporary and oddly anachronistic, coded as a Manichean struggle between the forces of civilisation and destructive barbarism. Texts such as Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* and Benjamin Barber’s *Jihad vs. McWorld*, both of which posit a world torn by inexorable clashes between bifurcated blocs, were frequently put forward as providing lucid accounts of current conditions.³ Yet these dualistic models, which seem to desire a return to the stable oppositions and conceptual certainties of the Cold War era, fail to grasp the complexities of the current geopolitical situation, occluding the differences, hybridisations, contradictions and conflicts within and between these conjoined cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, as this thesis has already observed, the emergence of fundamentalist doctrines should be understood not as a residual pre-modern archaism, but rather as a contemporary response to the pressures of global capitalism, one that has spread most widely amongst those who have been further subordinated and excluded by recent

² ‘Only Love and Then Oblivion’, *Guardian*, 15 September 2001, np. Available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/wtccrash/story/0,,552408,00.html>> [accessed 15 October 2007].

³ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996); Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).

transformations and feel most threatened by the increased mobility of capital.⁴ If the contemporary spectre of 'global terrorism' has led to the construction of new figures of alterity alongside the reinforcement of geographical and ethnic hierarchies and segmentations, a situation that can only serve to intensify existing tensions, this is by no means the only possible future. Globalisation is a process that, in generating its own resistances, opens up the prospect of an alternative world order founded not on the inequalities of power and capital, but on a shared commitment to a fragile planet and a common and universal culture. Indeed, for Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose work has been a constant reference point in the preceding chapters, the biopolitical logic of Empire may only be productively challenged at an equally global level. Their concept of the emerging social body they term the 'multitude' is the living opposition to the relations of technocapitalist exploitation: an ontological network constituted by the expressive and productive capacities of individuals and social groups around the globe whose desires, movements and hybridisations trace alternative spaces of political agency and paths of life at the same time as they embody humanity's collective entanglements with technology and the world market. This recasting of subjectivity represents a shift away from the preoccupations with individual identity characteristic of postmodernist and postcolonial discourse, and towards understandings of collective modes of being that are at once singular and multiple, and are thus able to challenge social atomisation and the unequal distribution of wealth and power within global capitalism.

Whilst there has been a number of recent fictional responses to 9/11 and its aftermath, the predominant response amongst authors in Britain and America to the new social and ideological terrain has been to withdraw into the sphere of the domestic and the personal. The notion that the event has fundamentally jolted 'our' perception of the world, altering the texture of the most routine moment, seems to have prompted not an expansion of novelistic focus but its contraction, perhaps as a mode of psychic defence against new feelings of vulnerability and ontological precariousness. Rather than incorporating the larger forces of history, politics and

⁴ See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 146-50.

economics shaping the lives of millions around the globe, those writers who have directly addressed the trauma of 9/11 have tended to do so through the emotional and existential struggles of individuals. Indeed, as Pankaj Misra observes:

Composed within the narcissistic heart of the west, most 9/11 fictions seem unable to acknowledge political and ideological belief as a social and emotional reality in the world – the kind of fact that cannot be reduced to the individual experience of rage, envy, sexual frustration and constipation.⁵

Mishra's examples from American fiction include such novels as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007). In the British literary context, Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005), which won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, has been lauded for its restrained portrayal of the submerged uncertainty of life since 9/11. Yet here too there is a narrowing of perspective to concentrate on the shifting currents of interior life, a move that seems rather reactionary when set against the changed modalities of public and private experience under globalisation. *Saturday* describes a day in the life of London-based neurosurgeon, Henry Perowne, whose almost parodically comfortable and contented life – he is affluent and happily married, enjoys fine food and wine in his large central London home and is the proud father of two artistic prodigies – is rudely invaded after a minor accident with a car driven by a diminutive thug and his two minders. The consequences emanating from this apparently trivial event evolve into a thinly-veiled parable of the confrontation between rational Western liberalism and extremism, as Perowne and his family are ultimately held hostage in their home by the vengeful assailant and his knife-wielding accomplice, inevitably recalling the hijackers armed with Stanley knives whose actions shattered America's precarious illusions of security. Though the collision between 'civilised' humanist values embodied in Perowne and the derangement of his neurologically damaged attacker, which McEwan's protagonist diagnoses as a symptom of Huntington's disease, may seem a rather crude novelistic and political device, the text does raise subtle and ambiguous questions

⁵ 'The End of Innocence', *Guardian*, 19 May 2007, Review section, pp. 4-6 (p. 6).

about the extent to which it is both legitimate and possible to insulate oneself from the world's concerns (threaded through Perowne's narrative are peripheral glimpses of the march protesting against Britain's support of the invasion of Iraq). *Saturday* resonates with the buzz of menace that lies just beneath Perowne's bourgeois self-absorption, capturing the contemporary shift in an occidental consciousness newly attuned to the fragility of the domestic world. However, the anxieties and feelings of vulnerability suffusing McEwan's novel remain inchoate and dispersed for the most part, intruding upon the routines of daily life but without seriously disturbing them, and thus seem not to provoke any more than a superficial engagement with the cultural and ideological scaffolding supporting Western perceptions. Even if the brutality that threatens Perowne's family is raw and terrifyingly intimate, the fact that it is 'explained' by the assailant's mental instability (brought about by a defective gene) means that its origins and ramifications are placed at a comfortable distance – the violence is made to seem a kind of individual aberration perpetrated by alien and dangerous 'others' rather than something deeply implicated in the logic of economic globalisation that plunges identities into fundamental instability.

As we have already seen, the existential incoherence articulated in the fictions of Hari Kunzru and David Mitchell is particularly evocative of the bewildering imbrication of lives and narratives in a world of ever-shifting flows, routes and networks. Whilst both writers, along with Lawrence Norfolk in more conjectural ways, have given narrative shape to the changed perceptions and plural subjectivities that may be attributed to a new consciousness of global relations, Kunzru and Mitchell's recent work has also engaged more explicitly with the post-9/11 context. In a short story entitled 'Dénouement', David Mitchell takes us into the mind of a retired schoolmaster named Graham Nixon, reprised from *Black Swan Green*, who awakens alongside his wife on board an aeroplane just as it is about to take off.⁶ During the flight, his attention is drawn to two passengers whose appearance and behaviour – one is described as a 'bearded fundamentalist-looking-type' whilst the other arouses suspicion because he is reading a religious text – lead

⁶ Graham Nixon also figures in a story entitled 'Acknowledgements' alongside another character that will later appear in *Black Swan Green*, Clive Pike. See *Prospect*, 115 (2005), 60-66.

him to make the hasty assumption that they are terrorists plotting to hijack the aircraft.⁷ Although Nixon's misgivings are ultimately revealed to be unfounded, Mitchell's story implies how easily repeated assertions about the need for vigilance evolve into a febrile atmosphere of paranoia and outright racism. In addition, the narrative's constant slide between dreams and reality, dislocated memories and present experience, creates a sense of ontological confusion and disorientation that seems intended to reflect the post-millennial experience of the Western subject, which has awoken into a disturbing reality no longer shaped by its own solipsistic visions of the future.

Hari Kunzru's third novel, entitled *My Revolutions*, was only recently published in September 2007, and consequently appeared too late to be included in the detailed discussions of Kunzru's fiction in Chapter Three. The text's more circumscribed focus on the political climate of Britain in the 1960s and '70's marks a departure from the large-scale satirical portraits of colonialism and globalisation in *The Impressionist* and *Transmission*, yet Kunzru returns to the past in order to offer an alternative perspective on contemporary issues and concerns. Narrated by the aptly-named Mike Frame, who conceals another identity and a shady past life as a member of a communist revolutionary group known as Workshop Thirteen – loosely modelled on the Angry Brigade, who were responsible for a string of bombings in the early 1970s – *My Revolutions* depicts the process of Mike's radicalisation and explores the group's transition from idealism to ideology and resistance to terrorism. From the standpoint of the most contemporary strand of the text, which is set in 1998, the political turbulence of this period of history seems almost geologically distant, replaced by a complacent belief that 'there's no real conflict any more'.⁸ As the same character goes on to say:

In a couple of years it'll be a new millennium and, with luck, nothing will bloody happen anywhere, nothing at all. That's what a good society looks like, Chris. Not perfect. Not filled with radiant angelic figures loving each other. Just mildly bored people, getting by.

⁷ David Mitchell, 'Denouement', *Guardian*, 26 May 2007, Review section, pp. 20-22 (p.20).

⁸ Hari Kunzru, *My Revolutions* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007), p.259.

Of course, the reader, post September 11, knows that this 'end of history' utopia is itself a neoliberal daydream, and the novel suggests that reasons for extremism and radicalisation are just as pertinent now as they were in 1970. But if *My Revolutions* critiques the venality and self-righteousness of its young revolutionaries, it also sounds a plangent note about the current acquiescence to the status quo that is bound up with the West's privileged relationship with the global market. Kunzru does not justify the violent actions of his characters, yet his novel is drawn to the intellectual courage of trying to think outside of the terms provided by established frameworks; and its attempt to understand these struggles with genuine ideals and feelings of disenfranchisement stakes out a literary position that seems particularly well equipped to address contemporary challenges.

This thesis has argued that an emerging strand of British fiction demonstrates an aesthetic awareness of the new modes of perception and understanding opened up by the material conditions of globalisation, of which the work of Lawrence Norfolk, David Mitchell and Hari Kunzru has been presented as signal examples. As we have seen, whilst Norfolk's historical fictions articulate the web of connections and interdependencies linking diverse times and places in a manner markedly different from the narrative strategies of his contemporaries, the writings of Kunzru and Mitchell are informed by a more radical notion of the Western, and indeed human, self as inescapably multiple and open-ended, offering imaginative renderings both of a new sense of existential homelessness and an intimation of incipient forms of diasporic citizenship and coexistence. Whether or not the turbulence created by the mobility of people, texts and technologies across global space will continue to generate ever more destructive cycles of conflict and hostility or will inaugurate a more convivial age of human cohabitation, recent novels, such as those analysed in this thesis, may turn out to be only the first draft of a rich literature concerned with a global sense of our collective 'best destiny'.

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