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Screech, Ben ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8644-9607 (2024) “Xanadu Hidden in the Heart of Bootle”: Place and Foreignness in The Unforgotten Coat. In: Children’s Literature in Place. Routledge, New York, pp. 13-20. ISBN 9781003355502

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"Xanadu Hidden in the Heart of Bootle": Place and Foreignness in *The Unforgotten Coat*

As Rebecca Saunders argues in *The Concept of the Foreign*, the "consequential nuances" of foreignness are "rarely analyzed" (10). One of the aims of this chapter is to remedy this. In so doing, we will consider how literary representations of place perhaps inevitably impinge on authorial constructions of foreignness, in a case study text aimed at young readers— Frank Cottrell Boyce's *The Unforgotten Coat* (20112).

Foreignness as a theme appears routinely in a contemporary corpus of fiction for young people. It may, for example, be examined through the lens of race and racism, as in the Carnegie Medal-winning *The Other Side of Truth* (2000) by Beverley Naidoo, through culture and ethnicity, as in Trish Cooke's *So Much!* (1994), or refugee and asylum narratives, of which Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001) is a prime example. The foreign protagonist is frequently viewed in these texts as a liberatory figure, whose presence is shown to have a positive impact on the lives of the novels' secondary characters and, as we will see, this is the case in this chapter's primary text. This chapter draws on aspects of Postcolonial theory, engaging with Edward Said's seminal writings in *Orientalism* (1978) which traces the emergence of the figure of the foreigner to Western attitudes to the "exotic" Orient. We will see how the foreigner becomes a character trope utilized in part by authors to comment on, critique, and suggest new ways of perceiving a specific place—in the case of this novel, suburban England.

Prior to beginning this chapter's textual analyses, it is necessary to further define "foreign" in terms of its use in this context as well as to introduce certain synonyms for the term that arise in the texts. The original derivation of the term can be located in the Latin "*foras*" meaning "outside." This etymology is pertinent given the contemporary interpretation of the foreign as continually existing "relative to the *inside*, the domestic, the familiar, a boundary" [my italics] (Saunders 3). Such a "relative" consideration of the foreign draws inevitably on negative definitions, for example, the manner in which foreignness involves *not* being part of an in-group, *not* sharing a common language and *not* adhering to the host country's customs. Foreignness is, as Saunders contends, "to be *un*familiar, *un*canny, *un*natural, *un*authorized, *in*comprehensible, *in*appropriate, *im*proper" (3).

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, notions of power and hierarchy also appear in terms of definitions of foreignness. The psychologist Coco Owen describes how evocations of the foreign appear in discourse as the "not us we say it is" (180). This highlights the presence of an unchallenged voice ("we") evidently in possession of the ability to decide what constitutes foreignness. Who, we might ask, is this "we"? On what authority does it delineate foreignness, and from where does this power (the right to speak, to make distinctions and to impose "boundaries") arise? For Foucault, this is the privilege of a ruling elite, or "politically dominant class" (222), the "nationally" stable (306) individuals benefiting from "capital accumulation" and "legal status of property" (86). In Lacanian terms, Owen's all-powerful "we" indicates those included in the "symbolic order" representative of the language, rules and dictates of a society.

Conversely, the foreigner exists outside of such an order and, as we see in *The Unforgotten Coat,* has the power to disrupt it.

The Unforgotten Coat is the story of Chingis and Nergui, two Mongolian brothers who arrive unannounced in a primary school classroom in Bootle, a suburb of Liverpool, having, they declare, "walked" from Mongolia "along the railway track" (Boyce 31). This claim is never challenged or refuted in the text and the question of whether they were accompanied on this epic journey by their parents also remains ominously unsolved. Indeed, the various "weird" (Boyce 25) tales Chingis and Nergui regale their new classmates contribute to the sense of exoticism that surrounds the brothers. Chingis and Nergui explain that they are fugitives from a figure they menacingly term "the demon" (30). This is ultimately revealed to be a metaphor for the immigration authorities who, throughout the novel, hound the two boys. As a result, their family is forced to live like "nomads" (30) to evade deportation.

As the author explains in the afterword, *The Unforgotten Coat* was written to explore a newcomer's perspective on a small, "culturally deprived" (104) English town (Bootle—a suburb of Liverpool). The novel is concerned with how the "presence" (Boyce 103) of these two foreign visitors has the potential to "enrich" (103) the lives of Bootle's young inhabitants. Notably in the afterword, Boyce describes the real-life inspiration for the characters of Chingis and Nergui—a girl called Misheel he met at a primary school during an author visit:

> She was a refugee from Mongolia and she just lit up the room. The other children were touchingly proud of her and told me about the time Misheel turned up at the school disco in full Mongolian costume with *"Xanadu Hidden in the Heart of Bootle"* 15 her elaborate headdress and fabulous robes … Her presence massively enriched their lives … There's a line in the book about Xanadu being hidden in the heart of Bootle, and that's what she seemed to be—a wonder of the world living among them. (103–104)

Mongolia, the native home of the real-life Misheel and the fictitious characters Chingis and Nergui that she evidently inspired, acts as a place of Otherness in the text. It is juxtaposed throughout the novel by Julie, the narrator, with the humdrum surroundings of Bootle. The line regarding "Xanadu" to which Boyce refers in the passage above refers to Julie's belief that there is a crucial missing part of her town that was "buried like treasure" (27), but due to the arrival of the brothers, is in the process of being revealed.

Xanadu (also known as Shangdu) was the capital of the Kublai Khan's Yuan dynasty in China. In the Western mind, Xanadu has become representative of foreignness, and of the stereotypical image of the Eastern/"Oriental" world. In 1797, Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem "Kubla Khan" which was inspired by historical accounts of the city. Some of the adjectives Coleridge employs in his evocation of Xanadu as a site of inherent foreignness include "holy," "enchanted," "incense-bearing" and "ancient" (254). Christopher Kaplonski describes how, in the Western mind, Mongolia, the site of the mysterious "Xanadu" referred to in the novel, has long been "associated with a degree of Otherness through [its] association with "traditional ethnic costumes [and] dances" (177). Kaplonski also references Roland Barth's interpretation of ethnicity as a "boundary marker" (177). This relates to our previous

discussion of the manner in which the concept of the foreign is inexorably associated with the human need to impose "boundaries" (Saunders 3) in order to delineate "in" and "outgroups." Indeed, such notions of boundaries and their existence between, for example, east and west, foreign and native and power and powerlessness, are also central components of Edward Said's thesis in *Orientalism.* One of Said's primary arguments in this work is that, throughout history, the West has consistently perceived the Eastern ("Oriental") world as being inherently Other in the manner he describes in the following passage:

> The Orient and Orientals [are] stamped with an Otherness—as all that is different, whether it be "subject" or "object"—but of a constitutive Otherness, of an essentialist character. This "object" of study will be, as is customary, passive, nonparticipating, endowed with a "historical" subjectivity, above all, non-active, nonautonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself. (97)

Western (or "Occidental" [252] to refer to the term used throughout *Orientalism*) attitudes to the "Oriental" Other inevitably involve, Said argues, the denial of agency. Once again, note the use of negative prefixes ("non") in this regard. He describes how the West has historically maintained and exploited this powerlessness, with reference to the colonial policies of Britain during the heyday of its Empire. He continues to argue that the "Orient" is constructed "with Britain always in the master's place" (215), through the eyes therefore, of the Western colonist. Citing both Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *The Order of Things,* Said associates this dynamic with the Poststructuralist contention that Otherness is inevitably a construction of the powerful elite. To maintain control, Said argues, they engage continually in processes of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and the withholding of agency from those whose presence threatens to disrupt or curtail the power of the dominant order. Through the example of British rule in India (244), Said demonstrates how colonialism was dependent on such exclusive "boundary" mentalities, i.e., the Western need to "separate an [Occidental] 'us' from an Orient destined to bear its foreignness as a mark of its permanent estrangement from the West" (244). He also argues that the Otherness of the Orient from a Western perspective is due, in part, to its status as "something unknown and distant" (93).

Developing this idea with reference to children's literature, the critic Perry Nodelman establishes a link between the "mysterious unknowability of the alien Other" found in "constructions of the Orient," and "the constructions of childhood found in children's literature" (165). This is pertinent in relation to *The Unforgotten Coat,* in which Chingis and Nergui's foreignness appears due, in part, to their fundamental "unknowability." Indeed, from the moment they arrive in their new school, the brothers become objects of "exotic" intrigue to their classmates. In the following passage, Nergui impersonates a Mongolian eagle, fascinating his peers:

> "Where do you get eagles from? Eagles R
> Us?"
> "Everyone has eagles where I come from."
> "Where's that then?"
> "Mongolia."…

> They kept telling him to make eagle noises. His sleeves were flapping loose and he did fully look like a bird. (15)

For Said, the Otherness of the Orient stems from its "parading" of the "exotic and strange" (188–189). Foreignness and "theatricality" (188), he argues, go hand-in-hand, and this is certainly the case in terms of Boyce's representation of Chingis and Nergui. The brothers, from their initial spectacular entrance at the beginning of the novel, clad in the "mad coats" Julie describes as "long, like dressing-gowns, with fur inside" (Boyce 9), "perform" their foreignness on the "theatrical stage" (63) of the classroom. In their discussion of *Performing National Identity* (2008), Manfred

Pfister and Ralf Hertel consider the "transactional" nature of "performing intercultural identit[ies]" (329) in which the performance of Otherness can be interpreted as a gift to the host(s), who in turn duly "perform their own national identity" (24) in an act of reciprocity. The "transactional" nature of foreignness is explored in the novel with Chingis employing Julie as a "guide" to his "new country," "we need to find a good guide. You will be our good guide in this place" (Boyce 16). The brothers reciprocate by "enriching the lives" (53) of their classmates, who become increasingly enamored by Chingis and Nergui's stories, personalities as well as what they learn of their home culture as the novel progresses. Such a "transactional" relationship is also explored in terms of the power dynamic that exists between foreign guest and host in the novel. Chingis and Nergui's foreignness and therefore inherent lack of understanding of the various codes of conduct inherent to the institution in which they have found themselves (i.e., a primary school in the suburban north of England) means that they fail to comply with the fundamental rules around which this place is organized. This contrasts with their peers who have been conditioned by this environment into functioning within its governing "discourse"—the kinds of regulatory rules, bells and timetables that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The power of the Other, Foucault suggests, is one in part, of social resistance. Moreover, however, their subjectivity presents a perspective from which certain actions contained within certain power relations may be interpreted as transformative and/or emancipatory. For example, discussing a situation in which the oppression of the Other appears inevitable, Foucault asserts that "we are not trapped [because] we are always in this kind of situation. It means we always have possibilities of changing the situation" (*Sex/ Power* 167). With this in mind, Chingis and Nergui's status as outsiders in the place in which they find themselves is, at times in the text, presented as liberatory because of the power they have to "change their situation," a power their classmates do not share. For example, at the beginning of the novel, Chingis engages in a "struggle for power" (Boyce 11) with the class teacher Mrs Spendlove. He challenges her authority by insisting Nergui is allowed to be enrolled in the same year-group, despite the obvious age-gap between the two boys:

> "[He] needs to go to a different class"
> Chingis looked up and said "No."
> It was the second time he'd said no to her.
> Once might be a mistake. Twice was game on …
> We were witnessing a struggle for power. (Boyce 11)

By uttering the word "no" (11), Chingis asserts his decision not to comply

with the "discourse of truth" (*Discipline* 197) that Mrs Spendlove has constructed and therefore becomes the "powerful" party in this exchange. Following this, and subsequent other acts of passive resistance from Chingis, the long-suffering Mrs Spendlove relents and, with "normal" (Boyce 25) protocols long-since abandoned, Chingis "end[s] up with everything he wanted" (12).

The "magic" (62) that Chingis and Nergui bring to this otherwise unremarkable part of England appears then to be inexorably associated with the boys' status as what Starc terms "alien bodies" (141). Their foreignness *is* shown to be "enriching" (Boyce 104), a "gift" in this otherwise "culturally deprived" (104) area—particularly because, as Julie questions, "what other wonders of the world were in Bootle?" (62). This is not to say, however, that the boys' classmates, including their "good guide" (17), Julie, are not engaged in the process of "absorbing" them into the "dominant culture" of this place. The brothers encounter notable challenges in navigating this process of integration, something for which the only "cure," Foucault asserts, is for the individual to be "wrested from his pure subjectivity in order to be initiated into the world" (*Discipline* 175–176). Such "initiation" can be observed playing out in *The Unforgotten Coat* in, for example, the passage in which Julie describes how, as the brothers' "guide" she "told them to lose their weird-looking coats and wear something normal" (Boyce 25). David Palumbo-Liu considers this part of a process of regulating Otherness, of ascertaining "how much Otherness is necessary to gain the benefits of being 'exposed' to the lives of others without creating too much distance from our selves" (35). Similarly, in her essay exploring the key question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983), Gayatri Spivak argues that gaining agency in "mainstream" discourse is reliant on "submission" to a "ruling ideology" (68). As Julie realizes part-way through the novel, "The boys were … burying themselves in footie and insults, swearing and buzzwords. They were *learning* themselves ordinary … Soon they didn't need a Good Guide anymore" (45). However, Chingis and Nergui's foreignness continues to remain a pervasive factor in their relationship with their classmates. As the enigmatic brothers become more established in the school, their new friends become increasingly intrigued by them. In particular, their curiosity focuses on their home life, the details of which the brothers have hitherto taken great pains to avoid revealing. It becomes an object of considerable speculation as the children imagine the gloriously exotic contents that this "Xanadu" (52) inevitably contains.

Julie decides to sate her own curiosity by paying Chingis and Nergui a visit. However, far from the "silks, samovars and horse-head fiddles" (53), she is expecting to encounter at their flat, it is a rather more mundane experience. The brothers live, not in the traditional Mongolian Yurt Julie imagines, but instead "on the tenth floor of Roberts Tower—the tower *"Xanadu Hidden in the Heart of Bootle"* 19 block nearest the flyover" (52). The interior of Chingis and Nergui's apartment disappoints Julie further, the exotic trappings she expected replaced by "a long-empty corridor, bare light bulb and a line of bags and suitcases, bulging and fastened, as if the family were about to leave" (55). Julie is faced then with the reality of what this family's foreignness *actually* represents. It may be less associated, she realizes, with the spectacular and theatrical facets of cultural exoticism that the brothers initially appeared to symbolize, and more with the transitory nature of living in fear of pursuit and persecution by the immigration authorities that their status as "illegal aliens" has evidently imposed on them.

Refugees, Glenn Burger argues, are inexorably associated with their status as "nomads" (15), a term Chingis and Nergui use to refer to themselves on various occasions in the text (16, 30, 58). "Nomads," he explains, are characterized by their "intrinsic mobility, secrecy and hiddenness" (15), traits that are obviously shared by Chingis and Nergui. Even Nergui's name, he explains, means "no one" (31) in Mongolian, and his omnipresent hat is evidently a disguise designed to dupe the "demon[ic]" (30) representatives of the immigration bureau. In addition to Nergui's hat, Chingis's eponymous coat plays a pivotal role in the narrative. In the second chapter, Julie describes visiting her old school as an adult, to have a last look, as she had "heard they were going to knock the school down" (19). While searching through a box of lost property, she comes across "[T]he unforgettable coat of Chingis Tuul … I wish I could say it looked like a bird, but it was more like a big hairy bat, just hanging there. I went through the pockets. And that's how I found the pictures" (19).

The symbolism of the coat itself, described by Julie as being like a "bird" and subsequently a "bat," cannot be overlooked, these creatures re-iterating the theme of "flight" from place-to-place that is clearly so pertinent in this text. However, in contrast to a "bird," and comparably to the coat's owner, a "bat" is a dark, mysterious creature indicative of hiddenness and unknowability. The coat's contents, however, shed a particularly interesting light on how foreignness functions in relation to place in this novel.

The pictures that Julie finds are revealed to be Polaroid photographs, initially appearing to feature scenes from Mongolia (e.g., a cornfield, an oil lantern, a bird of prey and a samovar), but actually, as she eventually realizes, "cobbled together from bits of Bootle" (92). An interplay, therefore, exists between the notion of the foreign and the "local." What constitutes "exotic" foreignness is purely, Boyce suggests, a matter of perspective. Even an unremittingly "ordinary" (Boyce 44) environment such as suburban Liverpool can be perceived as exotic and beautiful when viewed through what Michael Zimmerman terms "an alien gaze, or the 'look of the Other'" (164), such as that represented by Chingis and Nergui in the novel. Zimmerman posits that the question that the native should consistently ask themselves in respect to the foreigner is "what can we learn [from them]; personally, culturally, experientially and spiritually?" [my inclusion] (173–174). Similarly, for Foucault, an "encounter with the Orient" (*Order of Things* 592) may encourage the "dissolution of constraining subjectivity" (592). Arguably, such "dissolution" of singular, limiting perspectives could be interpreted as Boyce's overriding project in *The Unforgotten Coat.*

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