

WITHOUT BORDERS:  
THE POSTNATIONAL IMAGINATION IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE  
LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes as its argumentative center what Benedict Anderson names the “anomaly of nationalism.” More specifically, it aims to challenge this hegemonic force and its influence on individual creativity through examination of works in which the global and communal supplant the national. To confront and in many ways perpetuate nationality’s loss of prominence, authors and artists from diverse backgrounds that share a place in the global culture of arts have adopted unique ways to interface with the fading hegemon while also positing concepts of what may supplant it. This creative mode is named the “postnational imagination” in a nod to the work of critical posthumanist thinkers who identify a new subjectivity informed by the drastic changes in the world that have inextricably altered the classical construction of humanism and reliance on the nation state as a means of making political power legible. This creative mode represents a way of being in the world that appears emergent but is in fact already at work in the forms of mass migration, global culture, and transnational economics.

Multiple novels are used to formulate the postnational imagination and illustrate ways in which it functions: *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid, *The Last Warner Woman* by Kei Miller, and *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi. In addition to these texts, this dissertation also interrogates the music and video imagery of the artists Swet Shop Boys and M.I.A. The importance of the postnational imagination lies in its use as a tool of both critique and world rebuilding. Perhaps most vitally, it contains a necessary optimism that is acknowledged in the focus works and is tied to a mode of thinking often attributed to Antonio Gramsci: “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” The included artists are

not concerned with the completion of the globalization process—an unreachable horizon—  
but with the realization of ways of being without nation while thriving within a worldly  
community.

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## INTRODUCTION

A vital undercurrent of contemporary literature on a worldwide scale is what Benedict Anderson refers to as the “‘anomaly’ of nationalism.” A diverse group of contemporary Anglophone writers approach the concept with a transnational eye that often goes beyond identification with a specific country to questions of travel, migration, dual-citizenship, hybridity, and the usefulness of citizenship as a marker of identity. Pushing the borders of both the nation and popular conceptions of it, these authors and other cultural producers present forms of subverting or “unwriting” the nation that look toward a future when reliance on the validation granted by the nation-state loses its political and personal primacy.

The changing nature of how the “global” is imagined has taken shape as the commitment to identification with a nation as a means of legitimization has lost its utility within the educated class, including but not limited to the creative class. However, this does not mean that nations or nationalism do not still hold sway for the billions under their administration, either as citizens or as unwelcome immigrants or refugees. This class knows all too well the power held by the nation-state and the difficulties involved in penetrating its borders. Additionally, there are multiple groups for which the fight for national sovereignty and recognition remains a central aspect of their cultural identity, including but certainly not limited to Kurds in the Middle East, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Tibetans in China, Catalans in Spain, and numerous indigenous tribes around the globe. For these groups, nationhood means the culmination of a collective struggle, realization of a collective dream, and legitimization on the world stage. These experiences cannot be ignored or downplayed, but they are also symptomatic of the myriad ways in which

nationalism is deployed in oppressing and/or expelling minority populations, denying rights to both citizens and those considered outsiders, wreaking massive and irreversible havoc on the planet, and any number of other travesties. While acknowledging the ways that nation carries meaning for various groups, this dissertation focuses on the attitudes and works of the creative class for two central reasons. Firstly, they express their attitudes through creative work, which is then available and ready to be experienced and examined. In the case of the writers and musicians included here, they have the added benefit of being formally educated and popular within their field, making their work even more visible. Secondly, the creative role afforded them by their success, often coupled with economic stability, allows them to imagine a world beyond the one in which we currently live. This is a simple idea, but an important one. The work of imagining alternative futures requires the freedom and capability to do so, as well as access to the systems that would allow one to be heard. Until the day when the oppressed and exploited have that voice, this dissertation will have to settle for these artists.

Returning to the educated creative class, the reduction in the hegemonic pull of the nation upon it has occurred for several reasons. First, the nation has lost its power as a mimetic target for certain artists because they wish to reflect the reality of the world as it actually exists and is lived in. Representation of the transnational must exist because it is the shape reality has taken with the emergence of advanced telecommunications and increased physical travel across borders. Secondly, the nature of economic production has shifted from an industrial model to a model of information exchange that can exist in a largely free-floating state. Because this new form of production creates an economy of knowledge that is open access and widely available, it has become possible for increasing

masses of people to build up comparable levels of literacy within a global culture that allows for easier intercommunication and transfer of ideas, sometimes to the detriment of regional cultures that often form the backbone of nationalism. Thirdly, the sovereignty of national borders is facing consistent and effective challenges from several actors. Non-Governmental Organizations wield authority that often ignores or overrides that of individual nations and can span large geographic areas. On a more individualized level, migrants and refugees fleeing from unfortunate circumstances—war, poverty, climate change, threats to their livelihood, general lack of opportunity—have proven that national borders can be made porous and enforcement of them must tread lightly to avoid outright cruelty, either in appearance, practice, or, oftentimes, both.

To confront and in many ways perpetuate the national construction's loss of prominence, authors and artists from diverse backgrounds that share a place in the global culture of arts have adopted unique ways to interface with the fading hegemon while also positing concepts of what may supplant it. This dissertation names this creative mode the "postnational imagination" in a nod to the work of critical posthumanist thinkers who attempt to name a new subjectivity informed by the drastic changes in the world that have inextricably altered the classical construction of humanism with its roots in the Enlightenment.

The postnational imagination concedes a common history of reliance upon connection to a sovereign nation, either experienced within its own physical borders or modeled from afar by a colonial power or otherwise transnational power. This concession is necessary on two fronts. The first is that it is founded in the long-standing reality of the international order. Secondly, the prevailing order must be recognized so that it may be

deconstructed and subverted. What is put in its place is a way of being in the world that is thought of as being emergent but is in fact already at work in the form of mass migration, global culture, and transnational economics. In acknowledging what it is attempting to transcend, the postnational imagination holds that while notions of identity, including the ways in which humanity itself is constructed, come under scrutiny, the nation as a frame of social identification and organization cannot escape questioning.

This dissertation presents multiple cultural productions by authors, artists, and musicians as examples of the mode of inquiry and subversion that is the postnational imagination. Writers from several Anglophone contexts are referenced to show how the educated classes of the global culture are working to imagine beyond the boundaries of nation and present speculative formations closer to the lived reality of multitudes of people who are loyal to connections beyond the merely national. These writers are chosen because they offer a cohesive, albeit limited, view of the perceived phenomenon of the postnational imagination, hailing from areas of former British colonization and often sharing themes of travel and migration to global metropolitan centers such as England and the United States, which are identified as centers of conspicuous world cultural production. In this way, the writers are not merely examples of the contentious category of world literature, but present a form of engagement with the world through literature that in many ways works to break down boundaries in the minds of consumers. The novel of world literature has been conceived as a genre of compromise between a receiving culture and the dominant cultures—British, French, American, etc.—that are credited as its keepers. What the writers of the postnational imagination suggest is a new compromise in which those in intellectually hegemonic positions are forced to reckon

with a new kind of interaction with the novel as a form that has been commandeered from tradition and repurposed toward new critical ends. Works within the classification of Anglophone literature are especially fertile ground given their historical and political proximity to the British and American literary tradition, as well as their use of English as it pushes toward “world language” status. Rather than carving out niches for individual national literatures such as Nigerian or Pakistani, the writers examined here suggest a more global form outside of the strictures of national identity. Additionally, musicians are chosen from a similarly limited sample that includes mainly hybrid hip hop artists who mix traditional sounds and imagery with contemporary examples of “cool” in the sense of the global culture to create a new form of musical expression that here is named “postnational cool.” These works, taken together, form a unique corpus that presents the postnational imagination at work in leading culture toward an ultimately unreachable horizon of acceptance of a new prevailing identification beyond national loyalty.

In the contemporary age of ever-increasing globalization and interconnectedness, one of the multitude of questions that must be considered across the spectrum of the humanities and beyond is the role and utility of the nation. However, to address this question it is first necessary to develop a genealogy of the nation as it will be examined in this dissertation, which is as an imagined cultural formulation that serves as a referent for writers and artists. This formulation is illustrated in Anthony D. Smith’s discussion in his *Nationalism and Modernism* of Benjamin West’s painting *The Death of General Wolfe*. Smith contends that West’s decision to portray the battle and its aftermath as a modern phenomenon rather than dress it in the finery of antiquity reflected that “Nationalism, in West’s understanding, is not the exclusive property of the ancients, nor is heroic self-

sacrifice for one's country" (x). The clash between these two positionalities—looking back to the past vs into the current day for nationalist ties—is representative of the central debate within modernist studies of the nation and nationalism. The origins and development of nationalism remain contentious among differing schools of thought with the most relevant models for this dissertation being Ernest Gellner's theory of a reproducible national culture, Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community, and postcolonial takes on nation and nationality, including those by Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, and Arjun Appadurai.

This dissertation's interrogation of the nation has its roots in the work of Gellner on the character of nationalism as it developed during the rise of industrialization in the West, eventually becoming a force disseminated outward from the dominant high culture. Gellner defined nationalism early in his *Nations and Nationalism* as “a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state . . . should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (1). The political legitimacy offered by nationalism makes it a powerful force in organizing those within a territory, securing their homogeneity and, therefore, their stability and safety. The importance of nationalist sentiment, then, is paramount, and Gellner defines it as “the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle [of a given nationalism], or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment” (1). In keeping with the importance of maintaining this sentiment, Gellner emphasizes the role of education in satisfying nationalist aims: “The high (literate) culture in which they have been educated is, for most men, their most precious investment, the core of their identity, their insurance, and their security. Thus a world has emerged which in the main,

minor exceptions apart, satisfies the nationalist imperative, the congruence of culture and polity” (111). With a high culture entrenched and the educational system set to systematically reproduce “mutually substitutable atomized individuals” dedicated to nationalist sentiment, the national culture is secured (Gellner, 57). This culture is, in Gellner’s summation, the most powerful force in modern politics: “Modern man is not loyal to a monarch or a land or a faith, whatever he may say, but to a culture” (36). The positioning of nationalism as a closely guarded cultural formation is the theoretical threshold between older modernist takes on the concept like Gellner’s and later developments.

While Gellner’s focus on the development of a reproducible national culture is helpful in moving toward my ultimate aim, it is not without limitations. For instance, his analysis relies upon an impersonal and temporally horizontal frame that paints the nation-state and nationalism as a modern phenomenon that can only be discussed in relation to other modern phenomena. Homi Bhabha, in opening the question of nationalism up to postcolonial critique in *The Location of Culture*, steers the discourse instead toward the narration of the nation. A shift in view from the perceived historicism of horizontal views to a more liminal formulation, in Bhabha’s thinking, requires “acknowledgment of the nation’s interrupted address articulated in the tension between signifying the people as an a priori historical presence, a pedagogical object; and the people constructed in the performance of narrative, its enunciatory ‘present’ marked in the repetition and pulsation of the national sign” (211). The tension he describes illustrates the infusion of postcolonial theory into the discussion of nationalist studies once dominated by modernist thinkers like Gellner. Gellner identifies the material stuff of a national culture

as “cultural shreds and patches” that are “often arbitrary historical inventions” (58). However, despite the arbitrary nature of these signifiers, belief in and adherence to nationalism itself is a historical necessity. Bhabha elaborates on this ambivalence:

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (209)

The endeavor of national culture formation is then, in Bhabha’s terms, not solely the establishment of firm ties to an imagined, collective, primordial past, and neither is it a push toward a progressive, collective future under a national flag. Where this formation, or *writing*, takes place is within the cracks in national identity, the fissures between these dueling modes that allow for imaginative creation.

In opening the nation to more hybrid possibilities, Bhabha and others create space to not only better understand the realities of the nation as a cultural formation, but also to deconstruct and reconstruct it. However, as is seen in Gellner’s assertion of the historical necessity of the nation, these perspectives do not dispense with the idea of the nation as the hub of culture creation. An example of the reification of the nation as a necessary foundation for culture comes from Frantz Fanon’s earlier *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he declares, “The nation is not only a precondition for culture, its ebullition, its

perpetual renewal and maturation. It is a necessity” (177). For Fanon, the struggle to establish nationhood is the catalyst that sparks development of a national culture, and the nation itself that later supplies to its people the “conditions and framework for expression” (177). However, Fanon does recognize the liminality of national culture, what Bhabha calls Fanon’s “critique of the fixed and stable forms of the nationalist narrative” (219). This critique is largely focused on European colonial powers that historically exercised their national will upon the lands they controlled by effacing native cultures and replacing them with forms and content from the hegemonic center. Fanon likens the revolutionary sea change in artistic production to the force of spontaneity that fuels multiple aspects of anti-colonial struggle. While Fanon cites the lumpenproletariat as the most spontaneously revolutionary force, spontaneity permeates the entirety of the conflict: “As long as colonialism remains in a state of anxiety, the national cause advances and becomes the cause of each and every one. The struggle for liberation takes shape and already involves the entire country. During this period, spontaneity rules” (83).

The spontaneity that Fanon explains extends to literature and leads to substantial change away from parroting of colonial modes and even oppositional forms that can be absorbed into a prevailing power structure. Writing that speaks against the colonizer directly can, in Fanon’s summation, “reassure the occupier” by serving as a form of catharsis for the colonized, leading the colonizer to encourage such works to “avoid dramatization and clear the atmosphere” (173). The birth of national consciousness gives rise to a reinvigoration of literature by the colonized. Fanon characterizes this new writing as “combat literature” that “calls upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of a nation” (173). He continues: “Combat literature, because it informs the

national consciousness, gives it shape and contours, and opens up new, unlimited horizons. Combat literature, because it takes charge, because it is resolve situated in historical time” (173-74). Combat literature, in combination with other similarly conscious forms of art, helps to imagine a postcolonial future and make manifest the goals of anti-colonial struggle to an audience of fellow countrymen as well as outsiders. In fact, Fanon holds that a budding national culture is required to facilitate the emergence of a new nation: “A nation born of the concerted action of the people, which embodies the actual aspirations of the people and transforms the state, depends on exceptionally inventive cultural manifestations for its very existence” (179). Without art and artists to codify the aims of a revolutionary struggle and imagine a post-conflict existence, a new nation cannot come into being, at least not in a unified, sustainable form. Bhabha identifies Fanon as one such artist, commenting, “It is through image and fantasy—those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious—that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition” (61). While Fanon addresses very real aspects of the psychological trauma of the colonized subject, he does so through a lens of psychoanalysis and with stylistic flourishes that assert an anticolonial political view while pointing toward a postcolonial future. Such creative confrontation of the issue of nation is emblematic of postcolonial thought.

Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* takes up the tenuous nature of national culture in Fanon’s work. He distinguishes Fanon as “the first major theorist of anti-imperialism to realize that orthodox nationalism followed along the same track hewn out by imperialism, which while it appeared to be conceding authority to the nationalist bourgeoisie was really extending its hegemony” (273). This passage identifies Fanon’s

hesitance to learn too heavily toward national formation in a post-revolutionary world because of its tendency toward power structures similar to those found in imperialism. Narrative is central in this formation since a unified story of national culture creates a cohesive population that can be rallied or exploited. By this thinking, the only separation between a new nationalist formation and the old imperial order is that in the former the hierarchies and divisions are reinstated by the native population. This corruption of the nationalist ideal has been seen repeatedly throughout modern history, from the military dictators throughout Latin America to the rise of the Baath Party in Iraq and Syria and beyond. The means through which an emergent national culture could avoid such corruption are not made immediately clear in Fanon. Said recognizes in *Wretched of the Earth* a dual call to rely on new, more general collectivities that are not so reliant on narrative and to deconstruct and demystify the hegemonic center in favor of more mobile relationships of power. While the exact nature of this two-pronged strategy is not made explicit, Said notes, “in the obscurity and difficulty of Fanon’s prose, there are enough poetic and visionary suggestions to make the case for liberation as a *process* and not as a goal contained automatically by the newly independent nations” (274). The means for establishing a successful national project without succumbing to the pitfalls of oppressive nationalism do not automatically materialize once independence is won. Instead, they manifest slowly through negotiation and adaptation to the needs of the multitude. The imagination, both cultural and individual, plays a vital role in this process.

The focus on culture in the formation of nations found in Gellner and then expounded upon by postcolonial thinkers provides a starting point to break out into a postnational mode of thinking, but first the nation as a central foundation must be

undermined. The work of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* is perhaps the best-known example of a scholar deconstructing the nation as a historically determined, traceable formation. For Anderson, the nation is not a logical expression of a unified and coherent, perhaps even primordial culture, but instead “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). In this way, it is not the ancient foundations of a nation that grant it authority, but the style in which it is imagined by its people. This strand of thought keeps with the general idea of nations as cultural formations that are constructed in the imagination, or as Anderson states in reference to the changing shapes of nationalism in the modern period, “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives” (204). These narratives hold great power to subvert accepted concepts, such as in Bhabha’s formulation, or to create new cultural formations that are retroactively used to support claims of historical linkage, such as Eric Hobsbawm discusses in *The Invention of Tradition*.

While conceiving of the nation and its modalities as imagined communities is helpful in pushing toward a postnational strain of thought, it is also necessary to stretch Anderson’s concept beyond the bounds it creates for itself. For example, Partha Chatterjee in *The Nation and Its Fragments* poses the question, “If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine” (5). Instead of allowing for access to preconfigured forms of nationalism ready to be taken up, Chatterjee sees the established modalities offered by Anderson as

imaginatively limiting, transforming those in the postcolonial world from creators of new national projects with agency into “perpetual consumers of modernity” (5). Complicating matters further, Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* comments on the predicament of attempting to establish locality, let alone a national culture, in the contemporary age of globalization and displacements: “The many displaced, deterritorialized, and transient populations that constitute today’s ethnoscares are engaged in the construction of locality, as a structure of feeling, often in the face of the erosion, dispersal, and implosion of neighborhoods as coherent social formations” (199). Appadurai refers here to the work of Raymond Williams on how culture is articulated. In *Marxism and Literature* Williams defines a structure of feeling as “a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence” (132-33). As a “cultural hypothesis,” the structure of feeling of locality suggests ongoing development that may lead to the emergence of a new cultural form, in this case of a new type of locality that is not necessarily tied to a reliance on nationality as a centralizing force.

These theoretical developments suggest new formulations of imaginative relation between nations and the people inhabiting or passing through them. These new formulations are grounded in the bodies of those who make up the nation as well as those who it sees as a threat to its coherence and, thereby, its authority. In being so closely tied to the life of the people, a postnational mode of thought must by necessity be biopolitical. As a focus of study, biopolitics and biopower usually trace their beginnings to Michel Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality*, in which he theorizes the place of life in the network of modern societies. Not only had nations in the twentieth century proved

themselves adept at the taking of life, but “this formidable power of death” began to present itself as “the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (Foucault 137). This relationship between the power of the state and the individual body is a shift from the pre-modern form of sovereignty, which instead held power to *take life* or *let live*. A biopolitical frame instead sees a central power that holds the power to foster life or disallow it—an alternative phrasing would be to *make live* or *let die*. The contemporary nation-state exercises this power over life in a variety of ways, from the legislation of reproductive rights—almost always against the interests of its women—to incarceration to the regulation of movement within and across borders by both citizens and aliens. In this way, biopolitics encompasses nearly every aspect of one’s relationship with the numerous systems that hold sway over the ways one may be in the world.

Following the foundation of biopolitics as a branch of study, the conception of nations as forces that exert biopower over a population was taken up by numerous scholars, notably Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their trilogy beginning with *Empire* and continuing with *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*. In *Empire*, they define biopower as “a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it” (23-24). No longer responsible for the reproduction of the cultural consciousness of its population, the nation now takes on the task of regulating life itself, creating new modes of being with dire consequences for individuals as well as groups. Biopower flows down from the hegemonic heights to the lowliest containers of precarious life. This flow takes the form of a continuous network of

connections, actions, and outcomes codified by governmental policy and social norms. It is made tangible through the appearance of preventable or untreated illness, preventable death, homelessness, displacement, wrongful and/or mass imprisonment, brutalization at the hands of authorities, and numerous accompanying examples of the regulation and/or termination of life that are made acceptable according to largely unspoken but established machinations of national and transnational power. Hardt and Negri elaborate on the ways in which these instances become part of the status quo:

We should understand the society of control, in contrast [to the disciplinary society], as that society (which develops at the far edge of modernity and opens toward the postmodern) in which mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic,' ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens. The behaviors of social integration and exclusion proper to rule are thus increasingly interiorized within the subjects themselves. Power is now exercised through machines that directly organize the brains (in communication systems, information networks, etc.) and bodies (in welfare systems, monitored activities, etc.) toward a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life and the desire for creativity. (*Empire* 23)

Within a society of control, then, these supple networks are perpetually rearticulated within the subjects that they act upon so that control is maintained and subversion of them becomes unacceptable as it stands in opposition to what is apprehended as a cohesive, progressive, beneficial system. What is at stake within this process is the state of life as it is created, lived, and ended.

One such condition that illustrates the flow of biopower is elaborated by Giorgio Agamben in his *Homo Sacer*. He distinguishes between the ancient Greek concepts of *zoe*, the simple fact of living, and *bios*, the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (1). Agamben suggests that modern regimes of power are no longer concerned with the quality of the life lived—*bios*—but only with providing the fact of life—*zoe*. In making sure to provide the fact of life without concern for its quality, these regimes create “bare life.” Bare life is life stripped down to its biological facts, with no consideration given to more cultural aspects. Judith Butler’s concept of “precarious life” is similar to Agamben’s “bare life” in that it designates those who are vulnerable to exercises of state power through violence or other means:

Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection. (*Frames of War*, 25-26)

While perhaps not as exposed as Agamben’s bare life, precarious life stands at a threshold between protection and destruction, between being made to live and allowed to die. This power relationship can be exercised through direct violence or other means that hold harmful potential for the individual or group, including lack of access to healthcare or clean drinking water. Unlike bare life, precarious life maintains the ability to appeal to the hegemonic center for aid, although those appeals can be easily ignored or partially met. Butler comments on this paradoxical state, “To be protected from violence by the

nation-state is to be exposed to the violence wielded by the nation-state, so to rely on the nation-state for protection *from* violence is precisely to exchange one potential violence for another” (*Frames of War*, 26). The liminality of precarious life and the exposure of bare life both emphasize the role of the state in the construction of its subjects, which it may encourage or abandon according to the needs and desires of the multitudinous systems that form its body. While only two subcategories of biopolitical scholarship, Agamben’s work along with Butler’s allow this dissertation to move from theoretical claims of nationalism studies to analysis of individual forms of being-in-the-world and how they are decided in large part by national and transnational relationships. This shift is vital in moving toward what will be labeled the “postnational imagination,” which imagines into a future where the multitude, working toward a common goal, may counteract the overarching power of the nation.

To develop the postnational imagination as critical mode rooted in posthumanist critique, we must first reckon with the major statements on the theoretical figure of the posthuman. The reason this becomes necessary is because while biopolitics is often concerned with the overcoming of oppressive hegemonic forces, such as through Hardt and Negri’s multitude, posthumanism, more than any current frame of thought, pushes for interrogation and reinvention of relations between humanity and nature, animals, and itself along with all of the systems of thought that predominate in constructions of mankind. Major statements in the field include N. Katherine Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*, and Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?*. There is a great deal of harmony between the works of these scholars, and all three are sure to avoid fully disposing of humanism as passé, instead choosing to attempt to work

through its tangles on their way to new ideas. Neil Badmington illustrates this point in *Alien Chic*:

The ‘post-’ of posthumanism does not—and, moreover, cannot—mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. ‘Post-’s speak (to) ghosts, and cultural criticism must not forget that it cannot simply forget the past. . . . it must, rather, take the form of critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, and should consist not of the wake but the working-through of anthropocentric discourse. (121)

This approach and its thoroughness is similar to what I hope to accomplish with nationalism and its possible imaginative successors in this dissertation. Since its emergence, nationalism has functioned hand in hand with humanism in the construction of the individual. National identifications are connected to a multitude of signifiers that are highly mutable, fitting easily into whatever is required from them by nationalisms, global systems of capital, or other hegemonic systems. This mutability is seen in how quickly the people of a specific nation can be quickly and effectively reimagined as an imminent threat to another nation, such as the fear of Salvadoran illegal immigrants in the United States because of possible connections to the violent street gang MS-13. Even those fleeing El Salvador to escape the violence of the gang are thought of as possible agents, and so their human identity is supplanted by their national identity. Meanwhile, these fears are driven by material insecurities within American society that are left largely unaddressed. Instead, the population’s paranoia is reinforced by a fervent nationalism that claims, at least in its more essentialist and violent forms, that the U.S. is

a country for the white, the Christian, and the English speaking, all of which describe an increasingly smaller portion of the total population.

What a postnational frame inspired by critical posthumanism offers, then, is a way to strip away not only the identity markers on which so much of contemporary politics is based—it must be stated that these markers *are* important and they must be factored into whatever new ways of thinking may emerge—but also the very foundational conceptions of the human and its primacy as the center of all world building and speculative imagining. The days of the rugged individual and the solitary genius have, in my reckoning, passed. What is needed in our time is a collective reimagining of what possibilities emerge and are made viable if only the strictures of the past can be confronted, evaluated, and remade into new forms that make it possible for the species colloquially called human to live and make together. So not only does posthumanism's dedication to interrogating humanism and its essentialisms provide a strong methodological model for this project, but it leads to a wholesale questioning of all such identity markers in order to tease out their inherent contradictions and the ways in which they are turned against the individual in order to suppress the collective might of those who might otherwise rise up against centers of power. Additionally, but by no means less importantly, it is vital to displace the classically constructed concept of "the human" and its centrality to how we imagine if we are to collectively address dangers to the planet on which we live, dangers that are far more threatening than the action of any person or group of people crossing a border.

To define posthumanism in a way similar to but expanded from that suggested by Badmington, Wolfe engages the entrenched questions within humanism:

[A] historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon. (xvi)

This definition is in keeping with Hayles' earlier conception of the posthuman as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-information entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). However, it also points to the immediate, practical, historically specific concerns of the field of critical posthumanism as it continues to develop in the current intellectual and academic milieu. In this way, Wolfe's definition is not only an explanation of the budding field, but a call to action to incorporate the newness and strangeness of the contemporary world into intellectual pursuits. Braidotti adds to this idea the key role of communality: "Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building" (49). The introduction of community helps illustrate the posthuman as a creature of systems, whether they are of information, power, or individual bodies. This interconnectedness helps in the formation of a postnational imagination outside of the alluring pull of national ties. No longer beholden to the nation as grounding for cultural production, the postnational imagination can instead turn toward new formations of community reliant not on national sovereignty, but interwoven systems of culture and

interpersonal responsibility. This new world of interconnected possibilities is similar to Hardt and Negri's concept of "the common" in *Commonwealth*, which includes both the material world of nature as well as social production, removing the human from a hierarchical role and focusing on "the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common" (viii). It is from this new cultural and social orientation that the constitutive hopeful confidence of the postnational imagination is able to work its way to speculative visions of the future.

If the postnational imagination, couched within the critical mode of posthumanism, works to rethink senses of political community into new ways of being in the world together, then what fields of creative production could most readily be adapted to its cause? While certainly many forms can present the postnational imagination at work, the bulk of this dissertation focuses on the novel for reasons perhaps best elaborated by Rebecca L. Walkowitz, who identifies the novel as "the most international genre, measured by worldwide translation, and because the novel today solicits as well as incorporates translation, in substantial ways" (2). As a world form, the novel is a key genre from which the postnational imagination emerges, and with this in the mind, world literature becomes a fruitful arena in which it finds its fullest expression, because of translations both in the sense of the work of converting from one language to another and as the process of transmuting the world into new, more collective forms. After all, if the postnational imagination offers new worlds born of reconfigurations of the contemporary world, then world literature offers a scope and distribution network sufficient in size to create the desired, wide-reaching impact, at least within the audiences that come into

contact with it. The following chapters situate the rethinking of world literature through the frame of the postnational imagination within the wider fields of world literature and comparative literature. Several critics' takes on world literature are elaborated upon in chapter one in order to contextualize the novels that are examined. These writers have entered into the eternal debate over just what world literature is and what exactly is meant by "world." This dissertation claims that the writers being examined no longer hold building national influence as the prime goal for their work. In the context of debates on world literature, Pheng Cheah's work on the intersection between postcolonial and world literatures in *What Is a World?: Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* is included for its innovative reexamination of the meaning of "world" and the potential this redefinition has for understanding how world literature is created and received. Receptivity is a significant idea for this dissertation since the work of the postnational imagination necessarily includes a consideration of reception and perception, otherwise its work could pass unnoticed. These considerations of world literature support the theoretical work of the dissertation by helping to adapt it to the real world realm of world literature and Anglophone studies from which its effects initially spring.

This dissertation begins its exploration of relevant literature with a pair of writers who have taken up the shortcomings of nationalist identification as a central theme. These writers are Vietnamese-American author Viet Thanh Nguyen and Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Their writing examines the way in which dedication to national identity creates dire consequences and what speculative alternatives are available to those left standing in the wake of national collapse or reformation. Nguyen's literature of postwar trauma and memory presents a complex interplay of national destinies—South

Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, and American—in which people live, thrive, or perish deep within the context of which identity they claim allegiance to. His debut novel *The Sympathizer* is analyzed for these themes through the lens of Cheah's conception of worlding. Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is included owing to its description of national affiliation failing (Nigeria and its sectarian government) and being replaced with a new form (the breakaway nation of Biafra). This relationship is complicated further when the new model fails to gain legitimization from the dominant world system and the young nation is destroyed and reabsorbed, showing one way in which nationalisms are born and then pass from legitimation into history. The theme of nations and nationalism ultimately failing their adherents continues through the entire project and serves as a catalyst for the emergence of the postnational imagination. Furthermore, this chapter introduces and elaborates upon the idea of the author-scholar to describe the educated and academically connected writer, a category into which Nguyen, Adichie, and others writers covered fit.

Next, the focus expands to include persistent nation-states and their intertwining with dominant world systems. Central to the discussion will be two novels by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid: *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*. *How to* offers several examples of sub and transnational networks in the form of black market economies, connections between the rural and urban, telecommunication across borders and oceans, and the trope of migration for education and/or work. Also unique to this novel is the use of a second-person style of narration that addresses the reader as “you,” placing them in the position of protagonist. While meant to mimic the structure of a self-help book, this has the added effect of disconnecting the narration from the bounds of the narrative and expanding it out into the world of the audience to create an aesthetic

network meant to draw them into the postnational imagination. *Exit West* is included to emphasize the biopolitical effects of both a breakdown in national sovereignty and the emergence of a new subjectivity beyond national identity. By adopting an almost supernatural plot device to allow for transitional travel instantaneously and in large number, Hamid speeds up migration and makes it an immediate concern for the developed world, forcing them to either adapt or exercise their power in order to maintain their preexisting sense of cultural unity. The novel's ending is analyzed for its take on the possibility of a true postnational future. Hamid's speculative optimism is also emphasized in order to offer a productive alternative to the political brand of fatalism that can often infect imaginings of the future.

Examination of the ending of Hamid's *Exit West* is then used as a transition into a look at a postnational undercurrent in several other works of fiction and music. Ghanaian-American author Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* is referenced as illustrative of a transnational narrative that closes with an illustration of a postnational network of cultural identification beyond national boundaries, especially the hybrid nature of identity within the United States. Jamaican author Kei Miller's *The Last Warner Woman* is placed in conversation with Gyasi's novel to examine how the postnational imagination extends a timeline in both directions to include both history and speculative futures in its examination of the present. In the subsequent chapter, I then extrapolate the themes explored in the novels and stories to work by contemporary musicians Swet Shop Boys, Riz MC, and MIA. With these examples of popular music in mind, "postnational cool" is posited as an emergent theme that is meant to achieve similar goals to the novels discussed; namely, to complete the dual tasks of critiquing the prevailing national order

while calling for speculative yet tangible change. The deployment of “postnational cool” also illustrates the intermingling of the postnational imagination with world culture and how that culture may be used to advocate for greater awareness of the limitations of national identification. Overall, this chapter is meant to bring the previously discussed themes into concert with each other and leave a strong impression of the postnational imagination and its cultural production.

Finally, the themes that have been discussed throughout the project are brought full circle while allowing for updates to the current state of culture created by the postnational imagination depending on major changes in the form of political turmoil or nationalist backlash to a globalized and globalizing world. The importance of the postnational imagination as a tool of both critique and world rebuilding are emphasized with calls back to relevant examples from previous chapters. An important assertion of this conclusion will be the necessary optimism of the postnational imagination, illustrative in the focus works and tied to Stuart Hall’s adoption of Antonio Gramsci’s intellectual framework, “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” The project closes on the claim that the artists mentioned are concerned not with the completion of the globalization process—an unreachable horizon—but with the realization of ways of being without nation while being within a worldly community.

## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN NATIONS FAILS:  
WAR AND MEMORY  
IN THE SYMPATHIZER AND HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

It may seem that a productive starting point for understanding the range of ways that contemporary writers interrogate the idea of nation would be those that focus upon the founding of a nation. However, as previously seen in the works of Smith, Hobsbawm, Anderson, and others, the myths from which a nation often draws its legitimacy are frequently invented to be focused rallying points to foster national unity. With this in mind, it becomes more productive to turn our attention to narratives of large-scale national failures. It is within these narratives that the effects of nationalist thinking is laid bare and its effects on the citizenry are most clearly seen. Two works that depict the rapturous ascent and subsequent violent descent of emergent nationalisms are Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). *The Sympathizer* opens on the fall of Saigon to communist forces at the climax of the Vietnam War and follows the aftermath of the war among the postwar diaspora community in the United States through the eyes of the titular double agent. *Half of a Yellow Sun* uses a narrative split between several focal characters to chronicle the everyday effects of the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) and the humanitarian disaster it created within the newly established Republic of Biafra. Each novel provides valuable insight into how the wars they explore irrevocably changed the lives of each country's citizens and how each war was and continues to be constructed within the imagination of those involved.

In order to construct the theoretical framework that is needed to contextualize these novels in the overarching notion of the postnational imagination, this chapter employs a three-pronged approach. First, writers such as Nguyen and Adichie are contextualized in the greater realm of world literature and publishing to lay a foundation for understanding their place within it. Second, Nguyen’s scholarly work on “the memory industry” is unpacked and connected to both posthumanism and the concept of worlding. Third, the postnational thinking identified in Nguyen’s theoretical writing is put into practice in examining *The Sympathizer* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* as novels of national failure and postnational aspiration.

### **World Writers and the Complications of Success**

*The Sympathizer* is Viet Thanh Nguyen’s debut novel and was met with near universal acclaim, including being awarded a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The success of Nguyen and Adichie, including their roles as both award-winning novelists and public intellectuals—more so in the realm of academia in Nguyen’s case while Adichie has crossed into a more mainstream form of recognition—is indicative of the trajectories of many of the writers examined in this dissertation. Success on the world literature market is at any time only granted to a handful of writers who are able to survive the multiple gatekeepers installed within that system of promotion and distribution. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen touch on one of the underlying theoretical notions that can help in explaining the limited accessibility of world literature for authors: “We need to keep in mind that globalisation is not something that happens to literature. On the contrary, literature itself is one of the driving forces behind globalisation, interacting as it does with other cultural expressions, policies, technologies and

communication networks across national borders and oceans” (10). It is a short leap in thinking to apply a basic framework of globalization to the publishing industry and assume that a shrinking world will force more writers to the surface and make them easily accessible to multiple new audiences. However, the relationship between literature and globalization is inverted, with literature serving as a globalizing force. If we think of the relationship between literature and globalization in this way, it allows us to illuminate the darker corners of literature as a system of approval and distribution, a system with its own desired outcomes tied to market viability and audience demand.

In keeping with this view of literature as a mode of global production rather than a static force that is merely affected by globalization, we must think of the market and creative concerns that restrict a work’s mobility. One such aspect of world literature that extends in both directions is the ability of the work to transcend a national context and prove that it possesses some type of outside appeal, as David Damrosch observes: “The crucial stage in a work’s movement from a national context to the sphere of world literature is its reception within a different cultural and linguistic realm” (“Toward a History of World Literature,” 484). Here, the “linguistic realm” refers to translation from the original language, which reflects the desire to have the work in areas outside of its initial territory, such as occurred with Damrosch’s ancient examples of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics. In contrast, he concedes that “a book’s movement into the sphere of world literature can occur with dramatic speed today” (“Toward a History of World Literature,” 484), with only a few weeks or months between the decision to take a work more broadly and its appearance on shelves around the globe. Furthermore, not only can writers hope to have their works translated into multiple languages in only a few

years, but crossing into new markets may provide writers an audience when they may not be widely read in their home country or may be censored by their government (Damrosch, “World Literature, National Contexts” 523). Depending on the demand for the work, it may even be released in multiple translations either on the initial publications date or within weeks of it. Walkowitz recognizes this phenomenon and notes, “anglophone writers are the followers, not the leaders,” owing to the prevalence of English as the dominant language of technology and commerce (10-11). Unlike writers in other languages that may construct their novels in such a way that they are easily translatable or relatable for a worldwide audience, writers in English have more assurance that their work will be read in its original language, whether in its original national edition or subsequent editions for other English-speaking countries. However, even with such a large native or second-level speaker readership, more novels are translated out of English than any other language, so, as Walkowitz observes, “To write in English for global audiences, therefore, is to write for a heterogeneous group of readers” that includes billions (20). She continues:

Once literary works begin in several languages and several places, they no longer conform to the logic of national representation. Many born-translated novels signal this departure by blocking original languages, invoking multiple scales of geography, and decoupling birthplace from collectivity. (30)

The novel, then, is a truly transnational artifact, but it is also postnational in that it eschews national representation and instead offers a new collectivity that is written into its pages from its moment of creation. Globalization and interconnectedness may have

exerted a great effect upon the novel, but in return the novel is now exerting an equal and opposite force that alters the shape of world literature, making it more collective and inclusive rather than exemplary of a specific location. Writers working today, if they are successful enough, have almost no barriers between their work and their readers; theirs is a truly nationless audience.

Nguyen and Adichie show the wide reach writers can have within the realm of worldwide publishing and distribution. According to an update from *Publishing Perspectives*, a website that follows developments in the publishing industry, *The Sympathizer* created the type of international buzz authors dream of. North American sales at the time of publication in July 2017 had passed 450,000 while total English language sales outside of the United States were around 110,000, with the top-selling countries being the U.K., Australia, Ireland, and, surprisingly, Singapore. The website's update was prompted by the novel being released in its first German edition, which brought the number of total territories outside of the U.S. in which the novel sold to twenty-four. A quote from Nguyen in the update reinforces this wide impact and makes his authorial scope clear:

I see this novel not as a Vietnamese or Vietnamese American story, or even a Vietnam War novel. It is a post-Vietnam War novel. Set in the years after the war, it's my fictional response to, and revenge on, all those movies and books that did such a fine job with the American point of view and a rather miserable one with the Vietnamese. (Anderson)

Adichie has experienced similar widespread acclaim and publishing. A notable example is a 2015 program by the Swedish Women's Lobby, supported by the U.N. Association

of Sweden and other organizations, to gift every 16-year-old in the country with a copy of Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* in Swedish (Abrams). In an interview with *Publishing Perspectives*, Adichie claimed, "I'm not interested in being a spokesperson or in being anything more than a writer" (Nawotka). She added, "The most important thing is that I have a readership" (Nawotka). This quote, along with Nguyen's earlier comments on his novel, illustrates that both of these successful contemporary writers who easily fall under the umbrella of world literature if it is defined in the sense of literature disseminated and read on a world level are more concerned with what they can accomplish with their readership than whether their work is easily accessible or translated. This dedication to not only earning a readership, but then mobilizing into such undertakings as rethinking the narratives of the Vietnam War or reconsidering gender roles within our given societies, encapsulates the roles a postnational imagination must play if it is to create any change in how we see the world.

As the success of writers like Nguyen and Adichie illustrates, if a writer's work connects with its audience and creates the industry buzz necessary to draw the attention of international publishers, there is no limit to the reach it can have and how quickly that reach develops. A novel like *The Sympathizer*, with its worldwide distribution and list of accompanying awards, is just as likely to find its way into the hands of an interested Chinese or Indian or Portuguese reader as an English or American one. So the question then shifts from how do such books find their ways outside of their home country to how they are received in other countries. If questions of translation, book rights, and distribution affect the positive reception of widely read world literature, then the style of the works in question is another such force. A concern about the normalization of

standards for “good world literature” is that in attempting to meet them, writers neutralize their creativity and create a mass of writing that is homogeneous, formulaic, and, perhaps worst of all, boring. Tariq Ali names this force “market realism,” appropriating and remixing the term socialist realism. A key element of market realism is the worldwide norming of experience: “if they [writers] are to reach their readers, they must ingratiate themselves with a whole series of professional intermediaries . . . who will judge their work, usually without having read it, by the canons of market realism” (145). These worldwide tentacles of the culture industry flatten global experience to the point that, “From New York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television and, increasingly, read the same junk novels” (140). Ali contends that in attempting to produce works for this bland worldwide market, writers compromise their art and betray their role as interrogators of an infinitely complex system of meanings, although writers such as Adichie and Nguyen have shown that writers can sometimes have it both ways and accomplish their complex goals of interrogating society while also enjoying success and scholarly recognition (142).

Worse than the perceived obligation on the part of the author to meet the requirements of the market system is the effort on the part of the publishing and academic establishment, intentional or not, to maintain that system and continue to, according to Ali, dilute the quality of world literature. The commercial obligations of the publishing market are easy enough to comprehend: find what sells, produce it until the audience grows tired and stops purchasing it. The role of academia is more difficult to understand since the Romantic notion of a literary scholar would suggest that they would elevate a variety of literatures rather than enforce a status quo—although it must be said that there

is no shortage of literary scholars who rigidly cling to notions of whatever canon of accepted classics they have spent their career working with, canons that are often centered on Western, male, straight writers. Pheng Cheah offers an informative glimpse into this normative attitude in the form of some student comments from a graduate seminar on postcolonial literature he taught in 2010 at the University of California, Berkley. He notes, “Although they all found the theoretical part of the class stimulating, they complained about the literature” (*What Is A World*, 15). Beyond the usual unfamiliarity with a culture or that culture’s style of storytelling, the students offered more seemingly coded criticisms that hint at the perceived supremacy of the Western canon. The more balanced criticisms range from a lack of aesthetic quality to claims that “[the novels] mostly thematized issues,” to the suggestion that there are numerous other texts that could better accomplish the goal of the class. The most brash commentary echoes these sentiments but without the decorum of the other students:

The harshest criticism was ‘the literature chosen for the course was quite frequently terrible and insufficiently motivated under the rubric of the course to warrant overlooking that poor quality. There are many novels that would be applicable to the concept that are not pieces of worthless garbage from a strictly aesthetic viewpoint (this is not a subjective judgment but rather an objective evaluation that claims universality).’  
(*What Is A World*, 15)

Cheah is right to tie this student’s denigration of the course’s literature with Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “sanctioned ignorance” (Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*). He notes that in the thinking of the student and those like them, “‘Theme’ is implicitly

associated with the crudeness and simplicity of postcolonial politics and ‘form’ with universal aesthetic value” (*What Is A World*, 15), so that a work that is judged as lacking in formal elements must be of a lesser value than one that is thought to only thematize issues. What these critics miss, whether they be students or professionals, is their role in perpetuating an endless literary relativism that judges works based on how closely they hold to established models provided by western, often white writers. Ali claims that these critics struggle because they have “no comforting models to allow them [original works of world literature] to exist as such,” and goes on to ask, “Does it not occur to these critics that there might be new problems to address? And that writers should be encouraged to tackle these problems rather than settle for pastiche?” (145). The answer to these questions is simple: “But, of course, to do so would be to unsettle the market with its carefully allotted and predictable niches, its conformist messages and comfortable stereotypes.” (Ali, 145). Either the student who levied the harsh criticism is unwittingly a victim of the sanctioned ignorance of the market realist system that is designed to keep out works that may challenge the status quo, or they see the value in becoming its agent.

It is such internal antagonism that is the biggest challenge to works by writers like Nguyen and Adichie. Unless those in the position to do so move in a similar direction by advocating for societal changes and ways of thinking that they believe in, be they postnational or merely empathetic, then the works may have little to no chance to effect any change. However, perhaps those works are themselves part of the normalized system of world literature and therefore do not present any ideas that are truly oppositional to world hegemonic systems. After all, both authors are highly successful and have produced bestselling novels. However, something that sets the authors examined in this

dissertation apart from the pack of those producing the type of work that Ali and others decry is their dual roles as author-scholars. In this role they not only produce novels that often succeed in a global context, but they also theorize both within the frame of their writing and more broadly. Rather than being controlled by market forces, both authors seem aware of them and they use them to their advantage, such as when Nguyen claims to want to reevaluate accepted histories of the Vietnam War and rewrite it from a Vietnamese perspective. That is a project that, if it is to leave any sort of noticeable trace, requires a wide readership that can only be gained through successfully navigating the world of publishing. Perhaps the role of author-scholar softens this interaction by helping such writers to build the necessary connections to not only receive such lucrative publishing deals, but to be able to do so without compromising their craft. After all, maybe it is too much to ask of a struggling author on their third unacclaimed novel to stand up for their principles and be uncompromising in the face of editors calling for major changes to their manuscript that would defang its approach to a given topic. What is important is that writers like Nguyen and Adichie use their platform to explore the world through a postnational imaginative lens that aims to transfer to its readership a critical eye toward essentialist identifications and a sense of possibility for a world that at its best is overwhelming and at worst antagonistically oppressive. It is this transmission that is the most vital work of the postnational imagination as it moves authority from the speculative work of the writer to the on-the-ground change making of others in a collectivity that aims to reformulate and take back power rather than reinforce established hierarchies. It is important to consider the role of publishing because it is the network through which such work is disseminated, but it is, in the case of writers with the proper

clout, a means to an end. Rather than being passively shaped into arbiters of preexisting culture, the postnational imagination takes an active role and incites others to join.

The success of the writers explored here in realms beyond the printed page is indicative of how influential their work has the potential to be, and they do not shy away from the role. Nguyen, Adichie, and Hamid, who is discussed in more detail in the next chapter, are all sought after public speakers and presenters and have all written on wide-ranging topics. Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* has been well received as an important work in Feminist Studies and audio of her reading a portion of it was famously sampled in Beyonce's track "\*\*\*Flawless." Additionally, her TED talk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story" has become commonplace in many classrooms. Among Hamid's books is the fantastic *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*, which collects essays published elsewhere that cover a wide range of topics from the reception of his fiction to the political situation in his native Pakistan. In addition to being a Pulitzer-winning novelist and frequent public presenter, Nguyen is also a professor at the University of Southern California and publishes frequently on topics in Asian-American literature and experience. In fact, if his academic stardom is included alongside his literary stardom, he has been a fixture within the field of Asian American studies since the early 2000s. To emphasize this point, Min Hyoung Son notes, "For those who labored alongside him in the same field, the story looks different. When many of us were finishing graduate school and looking for our first teaching jobs, there was a joke going around that all the applicants on the market that year were waiting to find out what Nguyen would do" (406). This unique position, that of the author-scholar, allows for an analysis of Nguyen's work that takes into account the

interplay between his theoretical ideas and his fiction. In fact, his 2016 book *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and The Memory of War* helps form a more complete understanding of *The Sympathizer*, as well as a fuller picture of what the postnational imagination looks like in practice.

### **The Memory Industry and Worlding During Wartime**

Nguyen is an especially potent example of the author-scholar in that he produced, nearly simultaneously, a book of theoretical writing on war memory and a novel that puts that theoretical frame into practice. *The Sympathizer* and *Nothing Ever Dies* work hand-in-hand to interrogate the way war is remembered and the practical consequences that remembrance creates. In *Nothing Ever Dies* Nguyen lays out what is required to form a “just memory” that takes into account the intricacies of war including the impossibility of ever truly ending a war. A just memory is necessary because, as Nguyen observes, “Total memory is neither possible nor practical, for something is always forgotten” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 10). As is always the case with human memory, it is impossible to comprehend and remember the totality of an event, especially one as complicated and traumatic as a war. On an individual level, memories of a war would be limited to individual experience or, more important for Nguyen’s concept of the memory industry, what has been handed down through the larger culture. As important as what is remembered, however, is what is lost or forgotten in the process of writing the event into history. What is forgotten, in the case of so many wars, is the suffering of the enemy, which is disregarded in favor of what Nguyen names “an ethics of remembering one’s own” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 9). It is vital that this selective remembering limits the definition of who does or does not belong within a given nation or proto-national group:

“So it is that a call for war is usually accompanied by a demand that the citizenry remembers a limited sense of identity and a narrow sense of the collective that extends only to family, tribe, and nation” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 10). A recent example of this necessary exclusionary fervor is the build up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. After the attacks of 9/11 and leading up to the invasion, reports of attacks against Americans of middle eastern descent, as well as those who the perpetrators thought were of middle eastern descent, rose dramatically. Such was the wave of violence that it was not uncommon to see affected minority populations purchasing and displaying American flags to avoid persecution, a phenomenon that was depicted in the film adaptation of Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and is recounted in rapper Heems’ song “Flag Shopping,” which I will return to later in this dissertation.

After the initial collective remembering of an imagined shared past, post-war memory is controlled by a similar group think that is molded and in many cases supported by a given side. The process of what Nguyen refers to as “the industrialization of memory” plays on nationalism, ethnocentrism, and other emotionally driven ideologies, and in effect “turns wars and experiences into sacred objects and soldiers into untouchable mascots of memory” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 13). Such was the case with the “Greatest Generation” of American soldiers in World War II who fought the “Good War” against an enemy who was objectively evil and had to be stopped (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 13). This same ethics of remembering one’s own as heroic was also at play in the aftermath of 9/11 and continues to today, with the refrain of “support our troops” and its countless iterations present on bumper stickers, in advertisements, and perpetually on the lips of the very politicians who may have authorized the wars in the first place. When a

war is made hallowed intellectual ground it becomes impossible to view it with anything other than a hazy aura of pride and somber remembrance; all critique becomes antithetical to citizenship. Nguyen traces the integration of war with the very existence of the nation:

The problem of how to remember war is central to the identity of the nation, itself almost always founded on the violent conquest of territory and the subjugation of people. For citizens, garlands of euphemism and a fog of glorious myth shroud this bloody past. The battles that sharpened the nation are most often remembered by the citizenry as defending the country, usually in the service of peace, justice, freedom, or other noble ideas. Dressed in this way, the wars of the past justify the wars of the present for which the citizen is willing to fight or at least pay taxes, wave flags, cast votes, and carry forth all the duties and rituals that affirm her or his identity as being one with the nation's. (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 5)

In performing the work of making one's identity "one with the nation's," it is crucial to have an Other, an enemy of and threat to national coherence and safety that can become one's personal enemy. This enemy can be a "clear and present danger" such as the Nazi Wehrmacht in World War II or a more nebulous entity, such as the threat of global Islamic terrorism. Whatever the case, the hatred for the other constructed before the conflict is only as effective as the support provided by the memory industry in its aftermath. Without the two working in tandem the entire project of building national support through military conflict may come under scrutiny from the general populace,

who not only pay the tax dollars that purchase the weaponry, but also maintain the status quo at home.

The construction of the memory industry that Nguyen outlines in *Nothing Ever Dies* is significant in a discussion of a postnational imagination as a constituent element of the process of worlding, which necessarily includes and elevates some while ignoring or actively working against others. A useful framework for thinking about worlding through world literature comes from Cheah's work. His conception of worlding is an outgrowth of cosmopolitanism in that it allows for the imagination of a world beyond strict adherence to any one specified community, instead opting for a more universal view. Cheah clearly delineates his conception of cosmopolitan as it relates to the overall scope of world literature as a war of worlding:

Cosmopolitanism is primarily about viewing oneself as part of a world, a circle of political belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of deterritorialized humanity. However, since one cannot *see* the universe, the world, or humanity, the cosmopolitan optic is not one of perceptual experience. It should be evident that we should not take the presentation of the world for granted because, at the very least, it is given to us by the imagination. (*What is a World*, 3)

The use of cosmopolitanism as a shorthand for identifying a more transcendent form of being-in-the-world and forming connections with others resonates with Kwame Anthony Appiah's formulation of the idea that consists of the combination of "the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related

by the ties of kith and kind, or ever the more formal ties of a shared citizenship” with the call that we “take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (XV). World literature’s role in the project of cosmopolitanism is to serve as “a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world” (Cheah, “What is a World?,” 26).

Literature allows for the creation of new worlds because of its inherent sociability, the way in which it “enhances our sense of (being a part of) humanity” by arousing within us “pleasure through universal communication” (Cheah, “What is a World?,” 27). Cheah identifies three ways in which this cosmopolitan goal is accomplished:

First, one must sunder the identification of oneself with the world and breach and transcend the limits of this particularistic perspective. Second, one must imagine a universal community that includes all existing human beings. Third, one must place oneself within this imagined world as a mere member of it, subordinating one’s egoistic interests to that of the whole. (“What is a World?,” 27)

World literature allows one to escape a particular positionality into a “universal community” in which one can merely participate, becoming one among many in a collectivity of inhabitants with more unified interests and goals. These openings into new worlds can extend in infinite directions, allowing members of the collective to create a more effective way of being-in-the-world, or as Cheah states, we must be awake to the

notion that “we can belong in many ways, and that quivering beneath the surface of the existing world are other worlds to come” (“What is a World?,” 38).

However, it should be noted that this notion of a cosmopolitan worldview arriving to save all of humanity from itself is not without complication. Appiah notes, “There’s a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (Appiah, XV). One such challenge posed by a cosmopolitan worldview is the way in which one defines “humanity” and decides who may or may not have access to it. As we will see in the forthcoming discussion of Nguyen’s and Adichie’s novels, there is perhaps no better tool of dehumanization than war. Nguyen notes as much in reminding his reader that even the most tolerant and cosmopolitan of societies “have never found a shortage of inhuman others to justify war and violence” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 72). He even goes so far as to label this impulse toward tribalistic violence “the ultimate kind of identity politics” owing to the manner in which it “circulates through nationalism, capitalism, and racism, as well as through the humanities” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 72).

We must be willing to accept the humanity of our own in-groups as well as that of outsiders, but it is not enough to stop there because “it is so easy to forget our inhumanity or to displace it onto other humans” (*Nothing Ever Dies*, 72). Just as a posthuman ethic must deal with humanity, with all of its taken for granted definitions, characteristics, and relationalities, before it can truly say to be transcending it, an ethical, just memory must acknowledge the entire variety of causes, effects, justifications, and remembrances surrounding a war if it is to alter the way it is preserved in history, both in the academic sense and within the minds of those who experienced it. Literature is uniquely suited to this pursuit as it offers the possibility of infinite worlds within and branching out from

our own, a blank space for interrogating essentialist notions and ingrained ideas in order to revise or do away with them.

### **The Potential of Nothing: *The Sympathizer***

Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* is a multilayered critique of the accepted histories of the Vietnam War disguised as a noir thriller. This form, which is one of the most successful from a market standpoint, allows Nguyen to subvert aspects of the genre in weaving a plot that jumps continents and deftly manages multiple hard shifts in tone. While the noir outer shell no doubt makes the novel at first more palatable to a general audience, there is no mistake that something more is bubbling below the surface before it erupts in the final third of the novel. The novel chronicles the experience of an unnamed narrator who is a double agent serving as both the personal assistant of a South Vietnamese general firmly in the pocket of the U.S. and an undercover spy for North Vietnamese communist forces. The first portion of the novel depicts the narrator's experience of fleeing the country, and then the tone shifts drastically to an exploration of the refugee experience in southern California in the war's aftermath. He struggles to maintain his spy work, which requires that he stay connected to the South Vietnamese government in exile, represented by the general. Complicating matters is his desire to form a new life amongst capitalist enterprises of the U.S., which chafes against both of his prior commitments. The plot is related through flashbacks as part of the narrator's confession to a commissar given while he is being held in a North Vietnamese prison camp, lending his narrative an enhanced level of self-reflection.

Beyond being a deeply entertaining and intelligent novel, *The Sympathizer* is the manifestation of Nguyen's views on memory and representation, the rare example of a

writer forming a coherent theory and then putting it into practice. It is a hybrid of spy novel, war novel, cultural critique, and a story of coming to know one's self in light of the recognition of one's place within and under multiple systems of coercion. This heterogeneity of form is significant in putting Nguyen's theoretical ideas into practice and is echoed in the multiplicity of the titular narrator's outlook. He astutely observes the intricacies of both Vietnamese and American cultures with a critical eye that is keenly aware of the duality of his position. This twoness is accentuated throughout the novel, beginning with its opening lines: "I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds" (*Sympathizer*, 1).

One context in which to understand this aspect of the novel is the narrator's personal hybridity as the illegitimate child of a Vietnamese peasant woman and a French Catholic priest. This hybridity places him in a liminal position that excludes him from full access to either culture. The aged French of Saigon, themselves holdovers from the era of French Indochina, boss around Vietnamese café workers "with nouveau riche arrogance" and regard the narrator "with the suspicious eyes of border guards checking passports" (*Sympathizer*, 20). The passport metaphor is adroit in identifying the cultural gatekeeping powers of even these defeated, decrepit relics of Vietnam's colonial past. Even more offensive to the narrator, however, is the reaction of the Vietnamese, whose culture he was raised and lives within. With the revolutionary army of the North rapidly advancing upon Saigon, he and his friends and self-stylized "blood brothers" Man and Bon meet at a bar to participate in some pre-fall debauchery. Upon leaving the bar they encounter a group of South Vietnamese soldiers and violence nearly breaks out when one soldier asks "What *are* you?" (*Sympathizer*, 18). Upon repeatedly being called a bastard,

the narrator produces a revolver and brandishes it in one of the soldier's faces. The situation is defused when a distant explosion draws the attention of both parties and the soldiers race to investigate its source.

In the aftermath the narrator admits, "As for the name they had called me, it upset me less than my reaction to it" (*Sympathizer*, 19). The embarrassment he feels over the encounter is indicative of his carefully crafted analytical persona, which is his strongest weapon in maintaining his dual position as personal aid to a South Vietnamese general and North Vietnamese spy. Not only does he strive to maintain this persona, but he revels in his scholar-like dedication to it. A prime example of this attitude is his explication of his English language fluency:

Some of my countrymen spoke English as well as I, although most had a tinge of an accent. But almost none could discuss, like I, baseball standings, the awfulness of Jane Fonda, of the merits of the Rolling Stones versus the Beatles. If an American closed his eyes to hear me speak, he would think I was one of his kind. Indeed, on the phone, I was easily mistaken for an American. On meeting in person, my interlocutor was invariably astonished at my appearance and would almost always inquire as to how I had learned to speak English so well. In this jackfruit republic that served as a franchise to the United States, Americans expected me to be like those millions who spoke no English, pidgin English, or accented English. I resented their expectation. That was why I was always eager to demonstrate, in both spoken and written word, my mastery of their language. My vocabulary was broader, my grammar more precise than the

average educated American. I could hit the high notes as well as the low, and thus had no difficulty in understanding Claude's characterization of the ambassador as a 'putz' or 'jerkoff' with 'his head up his ass' who was in denial about the city's imminent fall. (*Sympathizer*, 7)

His fluency in spoken English is his greatest tool in gaining the hesitant acceptance of the general's American handlers, allowing him to gather vital information that he can then pass along to Man, his link to the revolutionary cause. However, what he seems to miss is that in attempting to overcome the stereotype of the ineloquent Vietnamese stumbling through broken English he endorses the view that the colonized must not only adhere to the cultural norms of the hegemonic culture, but they must strive to excel within them.

This double-edged view of his dedication to his English skill is based in his admiration for the United States, which is largely based on his time studying at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Of course, it is worth noting that, like nearly every action of the narrator, this experience had a dual nature. He was tasked by his South Vietnamese patrons to gain an American education because of its perceived superiority and by his revolutionary comrades to better understand the enemy. His recounting of his time in America shows a combination of both demands with personal enjoyment: "My war was psychological. To that end, I read American history and literature, perfected my grammar and absorbed the slang, smoked pot and lost my virginity. In short, I earned not only my bachelor's but my master's degree, becoming expert in all manner of American studies." (*Sympathizer*, 12) He not only gains academic and institutional knowledge of life in the U.S., but also participates in the culture and takes it into his psyche. Most importantly, he enjoys it, as evidenced by his disappointment at not being able to take all

of his possessions with him when fleeing Saigon with the General and his retinue. These include books of American literature, popular music records, and his guitar (*Sympathizer*, 13-14). This cultural hybridity is again exhibited when while at the bar the narrator, Bon, and Man join the other patrons in reacting emotionally to a rousing rendition of The Beatles' "Yesterday" performed by a local musician. As this scene illustrates, the narrator is constantly walking the line between communist praxis and immersion in all things western.

The narrator, owing in large part to the hybridity that allows him a multi-directional vantage point from which to view the interconnectedness of the nations involved in the war, practices an ethical approach to thinking about the war in the way in which he sympathizes with the South Vietnamese people. This is one of his character traits that lends the novel's title a multiplicity similar to his personality and is also related at its core to the just memory of *Nothing Ever Dies*. This connection is strengthened by the nature of the novel's narration, which as previously mentioned occurs as a collection of flashbacks. In a way, the reader is given the narrator's active creation of just memories about the war, such as when he recounts his feelings upon seeing South Vietnamese citizens anxious just before the fall of Saigon:

I knew none of these young soldiers around me except for my blood brothers and yet I confess that I felt for them all, lost in their sense that within days they would be dead, or wounded, or imprisoned, of humiliated, or abandoned, or forgotten. They were my enemies, and yet they were also brothers-in-arms. Their beloved city was about to fall, but

mine was soon to be liberated. It was the end of their world, but only a shifting of worlds for me. (*Sympathizer*, 17)

In making these observations, the narrator moves beyond an ethics of remembering one's own and includes the plight of the southerners in his formulation of the war's destruction. His Saigon is being liberated while the Saigon known by the southerners is being invaded and overtaken, and as he states, many will suffer immensely in the aftermath of the fall. Despite the impending failure of their state and triumph of their enemy, "no matter how divided, all saw themselves as patriots fighting for a country to which they belonged" (29-30). The narrator appreciates this attitude not necessarily because it asserts South Vietnamese national identity as a force to hold the people together, but because the mass of the populace can fully claim an identity that is denied the narrator due to his physical and cultural hybridity.

The narrator's critique of the multiple national identities that he inhabits is directly connected to Nguyen's scholarly project. Yogita Goyal notes, "Nguyen states the difference clearly when he contrasts the refugee, rendered stateless and vulnerable by persecution or catastrophe, to the immigrant, whose mobility reaffirms existing narratives of bounded territories" (378) Here she refers to Nguyen's essay "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique" in which he writes about the distinction between immigrant studies and refugee studies, "Immigrant studies affirms the nation-states the immigrant comes from and settles into; refugee studies brings into question the viability of the nation-state" (930). *The Sympathizer* certainly questions the viability of the nation-state with its three-headed criticism of the two Vietnams and the United States, which also stands in for all global superpowers. South Vietnam is depicted as a feeble puppet of the

United States. This relationship is shown when the narrator notes that the U.S. had stopped sending money to fund the South Vietnamese war effort: "And what would we have done with that money? Buy the ammunition, gas, and spare parts for the weapons, planes, and tanks the same Americans had bestowed on us for free. Having given us the needles, they now perversely no longer supplied the dope. (Nothing, the General muttered, is ever so expensive as what is offered for free") (4). The narcotic metaphor is apt in showing the exploitative environment created by the American desire to continue the war in order to contain what they saw one dimensionally as the spread of communism. The almost obscene power of the U.S. is made all the more explicit by the narrator's characterization of America's constant exercise of hard power around the globe: "Although every country thought itself superior in its own way, was there ever a country that coined so many 'super' terms from the federal bank of its narcissism, was not only superconfident but also truly superpowerful, that would not be satisfied until it locked every nation of the world into a full nelson and made it cry Uncle Sam?" (29). Beyond the political shortcomings of each nation, these passages also present critique of the mnemonic world of the two sides in relation to the war. South Vietnamese memory of the war will be irrevocably altered by the loss of the North, and flight to America will create a new generation of refugees that see themselves as the true Vietnamese in exile, which is ultimately the case for the general and other men he recruits to form a tactical military unit with plans to infiltrate the new communist Vietnam and turn the tide of the war that, for them, never ended. The United States, super powerful, can fall back upon an ethic of remembering their own and attempt to move beyond the international embarrassment of failing to defeat the Viet Cong forces.

The narrator, being a refugee in addition to his multiple other identities, is in a unique subject-position to critique the validity of these nation-states having seen all of the cracks through which they allow individuals to fall. This viewpoint re-centers the world. Rather than endorsing a purely American or Vietnamese oriented view of the war and its aftermath, the novel presents a floating interrogation of both positions. The novel's close presents the narrator coming to embody this viewpoint in an unconventional manner. After reentering Vietnam with the paramilitary group assembled by the general, he is captured and imprisoned at a camp run by a severely disfigured commissar. He is interviewed frequently, creating the structure of the novel's plot. Eventually, the commissar orders that the narrator be tortured until he realizes the ultimate meaning of his experiences as a double-agent, repeatedly asking him to answer the question "what is more precious than independence and freedom?" (*Sympathizer*, 260). This is a reference to a well-known quote from Vietnamese communist leader Ho Chi Minh: "Nothing is more important than independence and freedom." Eventually, after days of being deprived of sleep the narrator realizes the answer being sought by the commissar: "*Someone was screaming and I knew who it was. It was me, screaming the one word that had dangled before me since the question was first asked—nothing—the answer that I could neither see nor hear until now--nothing! —the answer I screamed again and again and again—nothing! —because I was, at last, enlightened*" (368). Not only does he realize how hollow such propagandistic maxims ultimately are, but also the generative nature of beginning from nothing.

Rather than reducing him to nihilism, his "nothing" revelation represents a collectivization of his personality symbolized by his self-referential pronoun shifting

from “I” to “we.” As the commandant of the camp and the commissar are speaking to him after his breakthrough they have differing opinions on what has occurred. The commissar, who is ultimately revealed to be the narrator’s friend and communist contact Man, understands that the narrator’s eyes have finally been opened to truth. The commandant sees the narrator’s new obsession with nothing as a sign of some sort of madness. The narrator notes that he only sees the negative connotation of nothing as a complete lack, “The *positive* meaning eluded him, the paradoxical fact that nothing is, indeed, something” (*Sympathizer*, 371). He notes that people like the commandant are dangerous because they lack the ability to see the other viewpoint: “They are the ones who say nothing with great piousness, who ask everyone else to die for nothing, who revere nothing. Such a man could not tolerate someone who laughed at nothing” (*Sympathizer*, 371). By laughing at nothing the narrator expands his outlook at the war’s aftermath to include the shortcomings of the new Vietnamese regime, linking them in spirit to the corrupt and incompetent government arms of South Vietnam and the United States. Rather than idealizing the communist government’s accomplishment in gaining control of the country, both he and the commissar, Man, see the disappointment in government corruption, reeducation camps, and the refugee crisis created by southerners fleeing the country. Furthermore, Anjali Prabhu adds that this aspect of nothing “picks up from the narrator’s inaction and suggests that revolutionaries lapse into ennui and could, sooner or later, put baser things above those same ideals, thus making the elevation of baser things ‘worth less than nothing’” (376), whereby even “‘nothing’ then could take on a value greater than what a complete lapse in ethics reduces those ideals to” (393). Once the shine wears off of the revolutionary zeal and the realities of missteps made in ruling and

reconstructing Vietnam begin to sink in, it takes someone with a multivalent position to appreciate the value of shedding such thinking and arriving at nothing. The narrator is a perfect model for this move beyond the competing nationalist ideologies, as exemplified in his earlier statement about his hybridity, "In the end, my father had it right. He called me nothing at all" (*Sympathizer*, 21). Rather than identifying as Vietnamese or French-Vietnamese, or later as Vietnamese-American, he chooses another path: that of identifying with nothing, a generative space from which he can move in any direction.

At the novel's close the narrator boards a ship in Vietnam that is bound for the United States. In describing the journey he is about to embark upon he offers a final illustration of the multiplicity of view that defines his character:

Among us will be infants and children, as well as adults and parents, but no elderly, for none dare the voyage. Among us will be men and women, as well as the thin and lean, but not one among us will be fat, the entire nation having undergone a forced diet. Among us will be the light skinned, dark skinned, and every shade in between, some speaking in refined accents and some in rough ones. Many will be Chinese, persecuted for being Chinese, with many others the recipients of degrees in reeducation. Collectively we will be called the boat people, a name we heard once more earlier this night, when we surreptitiously listened to the Voice of America on the navigator's radio. (382)

Here the "we" that the narrator has become expands outward to include the entire population of boat people, representing a shift from one refugee viewpoint—in the narrator's case a political, cultural, and spiritual refugee—to that of millions who fled

Vietnam. The closing lines present the resilience of both these people and the memory of the war as the narrator, speaking for his multiple selves as well as the boat people, declares, “we swear to keep, on penalty of death, this one promise: *We will live!*” (382). In closing the novel in this way, Nguyen emphasizes the diversity of viewpoints from which one may view the war. In doing so, this ending suggests the ongoing effects of a war that for many never ended, as well as the near infinite ways in which it is and could be remembered. This is the process of worlding from a point of nothingness, a point from which an infinite number of futures open. Surely the memory of the past must be addressed and lived with, and its memory must be negotiated and renegotiated, but all of this work will be carried out moving forward into a new world. The cosmopolitan optic described by Cheah and Appiah is overruled by the narrower image of this boat full of refugees because the material, lived reality of worlding takes place through a multitude of such occurrences with such people across time. This is what Appiah refers to when he calls for recognition of “the value not just of human life but of particular human lives,” such as those of the narrator and his fellow boat people, an identifier that in both name and reality suggests a floating identification outside of the national. They will live, and in living create new worlds.

### **Justice through Just Memory: *Half of a Yellow Sun***

Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* chronicles the lives of several focus characters fighting to survive in the ethnically Igbo breakaway Republic of Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970. These include Ugwu, a village boy who is sent to be the live-in servant to Odenigbo, a politically active mathematics professor at nearby Nsukka University. Olanna, also a professor at the university, is Odenigbo’s wife and the

twin sister of Kainene. Olanna and Kainene come from a wealthy family who made their fortune through transnational business deals. Richard Churchill, a white Englishman, originally comes to Nigeria in order to study Igbo-Ukwu art but meets and falls in love with Kainene, bringing him into the social orbit of the other characters.

The narration is unique in that it is given from the points-of-view of three of the five central characters: Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard. This three-pronged narration allows for the exploration of the conflict and its effects from three very different points of view, each located on its own social stratum. Ugwu, hailing from a small Igbo village, is representative of the underclass of Nigeria and much of his experience reflects his lower social position, such as his dedication to his servant role despite the increasingly dire circumstances of the war and his eventual impressment into the Biafran army.

Alternatively, Olanna presents the view from the Nigerian upper class. She is wealthy, was educated at a university in the United Kingdom, and possesses a confidence afforded by those facts. She is in every way her husband's equal and they form a bourgeoisie family with Ugwu taking on a role similar to an adopted child, rescued from his lowly means. Richard offers an outsider's view of the war and the combination of his Britishness and his whiteness grants him a level of safety and mobility denied to the other central characters. These three perspectives of the war combine to create a fuller picture than would be allowed by a singular point-of-view, explaining Adichie's use of the semi-complex narrative structure. While Nguyen's narrator embodies multiple viewpoints, eventually going so far as to have his being split in a plurality, Adichie's trio of narrators offer a more straightforward form of narration that nevertheless possesses a variety of viewpoints akin to *The Sympathizer*.

The multiple narration of the novel places emphasis of the participation of each character in the process of worlding and physically building the nation of Biafra. Maya Ganapathy identifies these aspects of the novel and asserts that it opens a space for dialogue between “citizens and non-citizens, cultural insiders and outsiders” and allowing such peripheral viewpoints into the conversation around the formation of the nation-state “signals the possibility of creating a democratic realm of participation and, therefore, the potential rehabilitation of the state along more inclusive lines” (89). While the narrator of *The Sympathizer* is able to embody several political subject positions because of his hybrid refugee experience, Adichie’s novel instead puts multiple viewpoints and relations to power in conversation in order to achieve a similar effect. So while both *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Sympathizer* place much focus on divisions amongst populations and persecution based upon competing national ideologies, they do so in order to construct new frameworks against said divisions. This view is echoed and expanded upon by Madhu Krishnan who posits, “*Half of a Yellow Sun* functions as a text whose primary focus is on the past and how, only through a direct confrontation with it, may the present become articulated beyond the strictures of a false binary consciousness” (198). Here, Krishnan adds the element of history to the equation, calling to mind both *The Sympathizer*’s ethical remembrance of a shared past of the Vietnam war, as well as the posthuman call to confront preexisting ideologies and ways of thought in order to move past them.

The ideological obstacles confronted in the novel are posed not just by outside Western powers; many come from Nigerians themselves. For example, Odenigbo is not merely a proud Nigerian fighting for more inclusion of the Igbo in national politics. He

goes so far as to be hawkish in his calls for Igbo sovereignty, ignoring the very real toll that an open conflict with the central Nigerian government could and did exact. That this kind of hawkish attitude could not just find a foothold but become widely accepted has to do at least in part with its ties to education and being one of the educated. Odenigbo emphasizes as much when reacting to Ugwu telling him that he has no formal education because his family was too poor to pay for schooling: "Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?"(13).

Odenigbo is right to see education as a tool in understanding and overcoming exploitation and his observation about Nigeria's initial formation by western powers is astute, but his reliance on the tribe and region as central to Igbo identity turns his liberational ideology into one that must necessary be put into practice through military conflict:

‘Of course, of course, but my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe,’ Master said. ‘I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white men came.’

Professor Ezeka snorted and shook his head, thin legs crossed. ‘But you became aware that you were Igbo because of the white man. The pan-Igbo idea itself came only in the face of white domination. You must see that tribe as it is today is as colonial a product as nation and race.’

Professor Ezeka recrossed his legs.

‘The pan-Igbo idea existed long before the white man!’ Master shouted. ‘Go and ask the elders in your village about your history.’ (25)

In this exchange and others that take place among Odenigbo's frequent dinner guests the competing opinions on Igbo independence are displayed for both the reader and a listening Ugwu, who gains his understanding of the situation from his master and his colleagues. But as is illustrated in this passage, Odenigbo takes a militant pro-Igbo stance that is undermined somewhat by Professor Ezeka's retort. Odenigbo is willing to concede that the white man has imposed upon him several identities including black and Nigerian, but Professor Ezeka is willing to go further and identify Igbo nationalism as a reaction to white domination. These competing constructions of the Nigerian political situation at the time of the novel show not only that it was among the educated that such debates were happening and the future of the nation was being plotted, but that in many ways the lower classes were excluded. Ugwu is left to construct his opinion on the matter from his master's intellectual table scraps and in many cases he takes Odenigbo's side out of fealty.

Ugwu offers a unique look at not only the effects of the war, but also the relationship to the fledgling nation of Biafra and its nationalist pull, so an examination of his experiences is fruitful to observing how Adichie handles the effects of fervent nationalism on the populace of Biafra. While Odenigbo and Olanna especially are swept up in the nationalist zeal of the Biafran movement, Ugwu is mostly uninterested, limiting his focus to his domestic concerns caring for the household. Upon attending a rally for the Biafran cause, "Olanna watched them and realized with a sweet surge that they [the demonstrators] all felt what she felt, what Odenigbo felt, as though it were liquid steel instead of blood that flowed through their veins, as though they could stand barefoot over red-hot embers" (205). The desire to avenge the massacre of Igbo in the northern part of

the country, itself an act borne of tribal sectarianism, is the driving force behind these demonstrations and the calls for Biafra to break away, and they are powerful. As the war develops and turns against the Biafran forces, it is the embers of this fervor that keeps the struggling citizens supporting the war effort. This is illustrated in the lessons Olanna teaches her young students in her role as schoolteacher:

She taught them about the Biafran flag. . . . Red was the blood of the siblings massacred in the North, black was for mourning them, green was for the prosperity Biafra would have, and, finally, the half of a yellow sun stood for the glorious future. She taught them to raise their hand in the flying salute like His Excellency and she asked them to copy her drawings of the two leaders: His Excellency was burly, sketched with double lines, while Gowon's effete body was outlined in single lines. (352)

Her lesson illustrates several nationalistic tropes. The imagery of the flag follows similar trends in other nations, emphasizing the symbolism of the color choice and its connection to those lost in a battle that is painted as both necessary and glorious. The contrast between how the children draw the leaders of the two sides of the conflict shows the association of strength, often depicted as masculine in nature, with national determination. Gowon, the leader of the Nigerian forces, is depicted as feeble, reflecting the usual characterization of the Other as one lacking power and masculine fortitude. This attitude even carries over when Olanna and her family survive a bombing of their small refugee settlement. She is left feeling unimportant in the face of her near death, and it is “the very sense of being inconsequential that pushed her from extreme fear to extreme fury” (351). To die cowering in a bunker would be a betrayal of the grandiose

exaltations of Biafra's might she has allowed herself to become consumed with, and that Nigerian forces keep killing Biafrans only serves to push her further into those beliefs. In this light, she adopts a new attitude of resistance to her fear of their attacks: "She would no longer exist limply, waiting to die. Until Biafra won, the vandals would no longer dictate the terms of her life" (351). Not only is she assured in believing Biafra will still win the war, but she allows that idea to buoy her and give her strength in no longer fearing death, instead living her life proactively. In each instance, she is fully devoted to the Biafran cause and unflinchingly dedicates herself to it.

In contrast, Ugwu is impressed into the cause of Biafran independence. Possessing a type of organic intelligence that allows him to adapt to his shifting roles within Odenigbo's household, Ugwu endears himself to the family, becoming a treasured member as well as a servant. However, that does not save him from being forcefully conscripted into the war effort by the struggling Biafran army. He is kidnapped and forced to undergo strenuous exercise paired with psychological abuse: "The skinny soldiers—with no boots, no uniforms, no half of a yellow sun on their sleeves—kicked and slapped and mocked Ugwu during physical training" (450). The derelict nature of the soldiers, who do not even have official uniforms, shows not only the dire situation the Biafran military finds itself in, but also serves to detach them from the nationalistic cause of the war, making their brutality all the more dehumanizing to Ugwu: "And the casual cruelty of this new world in which he had no say grew a hard clot of fear inside him" (450). Once a precocious, loyal house boy, he is forced into a new reality that highlights the inherent violence of all armed nationalist struggles. This cruelty reaches a crescendo when, after some slight jeering from his fellow soldiers, he participates in the gang rape

of a bar girl. Afterwards he continues to take part in operations against Nigerian forces and even comes to desire to impress his commanding officer, which bears a striking similarity to his desire to impress Odenigbo earlier in the novel. In being conscripted, his ambition shifts from dedication to his adopted home to the cause of his unit, with catastrophic results. This shift shows what can occur when one's identity is no longer given meaning by concrete connections to loved ones and community, but to a vague ideal—at least vague in Ugwu's limited understanding—that is to be defended at all cost.

Ugwu is finally able to take a step back from his experience and examine it after he is wounded in battle. He returns to the refugee camp that Odenigbo and Olanna have made their home and slowly reacclimates to life within the war but outside of battle. What aids him in this change is that he takes up writing after seeing Richard constantly making notes about his planned book of the war, which serves as a metafictional text within the novel: *The World Was Silent When We Died*. However, the shortcomings of this new pursuit are made immediately apparent to him when a young boy from the camp offers him some of the lizard he has captured and cooked:

Ugwu thanked him and shook his head and realized that he would never be able to capture that child on paper, never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky. He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed. (498)

Once haunted by nightmares of his experiences as a soldier, writing provides him with an outlet for those traumas, as well as a way in which to document his experiences and those

of others. It is through this writing that he is able to construct a just memory of the war for others and himself, as well as write his way into a new world. In this worlding he has reconstructed the conception of the war into one in which Biafra was all but abandoned by the wider world in their desire to maintain a united Nigeria with plentiful and available oil reserves. Ugwu, and by extension Adiche, creates in order to force reconciliation with the millions of civilian casualties of the blockade on Biafra, which denied them food and medical supplies.

The cry for a just memory in the name of the dead is reflected in the poem “Were You Silent When We Died?” which is included in the metatextual book within the novel. It makes stark references to “children with their hair becoming rust,” “arms like toothpicks,” “footballs for bellies and skin stretched thin” (470). These grotesque images refer to kwashiorkor, the malnutrition illness often associated with the Biafran war, and which the poem refers to as “a difficult word,” but one “that was not quite ugly enough, a sin” (470). The speaker directly addresses those who were silent on the brutality of the war and the blockade and holds them accountable for their silence, stating, “You needn’t imagine. There were photos / Displayed in gloss-filled pages of your *Life*. Did you see? Did you feel sorry briefly. Then turn round to hold your lover or wife” (470)? These lines are given even more power when we learn definitively at the novel’s close that it is not Richard who has been writing *The World Was Silent When We Died*, but instead was Ugwu: “Ugwu writes his dedication last: *For Master, my good man*” (541). Ugwu takes up this project from Richard, who upon reading Ugwu’s first writings comments, “The war isn’t my story to tell, really” (530). In response, “Ugwu nodded. He had never thought that it was” (531). With this act of creation as a peasant turned people’s historian,

Ugwu has come from blissful ignorance to agonizing knowledge, from domesticity and care to war and cruelty, and ending with the construction of a just memory of the war. His arc mirrors that of the nation of Biafra, from the blind nationalism that united the region and led it to break away, to the war that devastated its population, to its embarrassed reconciliation and its lasting legacy. The story of Biafra becomes a national trauma (Biafra and its fall) within a national trauma (the civil war within Nigeria).

Born of deep seeded tribal divisions encouraged by colonial domination and exacerbated by international interference and participation, the war was a truly transnational affair, and how to rebuild afterward is made a postnational project that begins with the type of creative, emotional labor carried out by Ugwu in writing *The World Was Silent When We Died*. While Nigeria was reunited, it follows that it would be, in many ways, a new country. Rather than rely on old Biafran allegiances or recommit to new Nigerian ones, Ugwu's work recounts and highlights the brutality of the entire conflict from a point of view that is both personal and historical in scope. His work of creating a people's history reflects Adichie's project of writing *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is itself meant to offer a multifaceted view of the war and its aftermath to a new generation of readers who may have forgotten or never even been aware in the first place. Putting her position as a known writer within the world literature system to work, she is able to perform the same task Ugwu is seeking to accomplish: to reimagine the Biafran war in order to form both a just memory of the conflict and to show the ultimate futility of a nationalist project that is not sanctioned by the hegemonic centers of the global national order. Rather than mourn the lost glory of Biafra or call for its rebirth, both Adichie and Ugwu suggest moving in a new direction in which nation of origin is not *the*

defining factor within one's identity. Like the end of Nguyen's novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* suggests a multiplicity of openings into new possible worlds, but it is more focused on the intellectual labor of doing so at the initial level of postnational imagination. This sentiment is then transferred to the readership, who can take up the project of imaging new possible futures. This is how the postnational imagination comprehends failing national projects: by renegotiating their histories in order to justly remember them while also suggesting new avenues that may avoid the same mistakes in the future.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### MOHSIN HAMID'S POSTNATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Nation building is at its core a type of imaginative labor. This work never truly ends and so the strategies that maintain cohesive national ideologies must remain supple and adapt to change. Two major parts of this adaptation are forgetting, as discussed in relation to the memory of war in the previous chapter, and establishing new memories that replenish the well of national identity with fresh possibilities. Commenting on this two-pronged approach to ideological maintenance, Benedict Anderson writes about the conditions necessary for the emergence of a new, national origin story, “[a]ll profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives” (204). While referring to nationalistic narratives meant to create a homogenous identity among citizens, Anderson’s claim can be extended to a continuing act of narration that surpasses national identity while also addressing the shortcomings of such identification. If nations are imagined, then surely they can be reimagined. This reimagining works against forgetting that which would be detrimental to national identity or establishing new common memories in order to support it by constructing the nation anew in the minds of its people. This third way imaginative labor strategy must contend not only with the forms that nations take in the minds of their citizens, but also their place in the tangled webs of world information systems. To unravel these connections and reveal their significance, it is helpful to read both the nation and nationalism as co-evolutionary information technologies that have grown alongside humanity, and then examine the ways in which this connection is translated into biopower that flows from the hegemonic

center of the nation and its apparatuses down to its inhabitants, be they citizen or Other. This approach removes the primacy of the nation as an imaginative frame by refusing the preconceived notion that a people are defined by their birth within the borders of a nation. Instead, the postnational imagination examines how the nation and its people construct each other and can, therefore, deconstruct each other, biopolitically on the part of the nation and imaginatively on the part of the people.

This chapter examines how author Mohsin Hamid works toward “unwriting” the nation in his novels *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*. The novels’ use of alternative forms of narration, descriptions of technology and telecommunications, emerging commonwealths, and attention to urban development, both contemporary and speculative, offers insight into what a future with a reconfigured social formation beyond the nation may look like. In imagining this future, Hamid’s novels suggest a thread of inquiry within contemporary Anglophone literature that not only explores issues of life outside of the hegemonic center, but also the efficacy of that center and how it may be displaced.

### **The Overlapping World Systems of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia***

*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) takes the form of a loosely constructed self-help book meant to aid an individual born into poverty in “rising Asia” in ascending the global-capitalist ladder to success. The unnamed protagonist begins life in a benighted village in an unnamed south Asian country, moves to a perpetually sprawling city, learns the ways of the city’s commercial scene, and eventually builds substantial wealth on the back of exploiting a precious and dwindling resource: water. He becomes increasingly tangled in webs of political corruption and ultimately loses his

family to neglect and his fortune to theft by his brother-in-law. The narration is addressed to an unnamed “you,” which both mimics the typical form of the self-help genre while also firmly emplacing the reader within the narrative. The borders between audience and character are blurred. Hamid explains his use of the second person in an essay from *Discontent and Its Civilizations*: “My growing sense was that a kind of self-expression (and self-transcendence, and even self-help) is central to what fiction does, both for writers and readers. And so *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* was born, a novel that is a self-help book that is a second-person life story that is an invitation to create. Together” (104). In this way, the narration is a tool through which the reader is taken in as co-creator of the events of the narrative alongside Hamid as writer and the protagonist as actor. Expounding upon this strategy, Angelina Poon suggests, “the reader is button-holed and corralled, implicated in everything that happens in the novel given the coercive, interpellative power of that rhetorical act” (144). Here, Poon refers to Louis Althusser’s formulation of interpellation in which he claims, “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*” (190). She suggests that *How to* calls the reader into complicity or even unity with the protagonist as he exercises questionable ethics in joining the expanding ranks of his nation’s middle class. The chapter titles echo this moral ambiguity as they move from standard self-help advice—“move to the city,” “get an education”—to more nefarious suggestions—“be prepared to use violence,” “patronize the artists of war.” These chapter titles and the events that accompany them take the reader along a trajectory influenced by global-capitalist forces that eventually lands at the death of the reader/protagonist, poor and in ill health, but reunited with the recurring love interest of his youth, “the pretty girl.”

A side effect of *How to*'s complicit narration is an emphasis on the unseen collectivity that lies beneath the surface of the mass of exploited and exploiting atomized individuals that compose transnational economic systems. Much of the work of this revelation is done using the protagonist's action as a case study in how to work the prevailing system to your advantage as an entrepreneur. The chapter entitled "patronize the artists of war" opens with a meditation on the role of "information" in the global system:

We're all information, all of us, whether readers or writers, you or I. The DNA in our cells, the bioelectric currents in our nerves, the chemical emotions in our brains, the configurations of atoms within us and of subatomic particles within them, the galaxies and whirling constellations we perceived not only when looking outward but also looking in, it's all, every last bit and byte of it, information. 159

This seemingly infinite accumulation of information that we both make up and consist of plays a vital role not just in the daily workings of technology and industry, but also in the formation of the self, with "all of us learning to combine this information, to find patterns in it, inevitably to look for ourselves in it, to reassemble out of the present-time stories of numerous others the lifelong story of a plausible unitary self" (160). In this way, the individual may be able to construct the appearance of a "plausible unitary self" if they are able to decipher the world of information, recreating it as a coherent whole. Given the novel's focus on self-creation in an entrepreneurial sense, the reader is called to identify the single-minded, morally flexible protagonist as one of their plausible selves. This is reflected in the novel's reliance on tropes of the self-help genre and the use of second

person pronouns to address the reader. *How to* not only presents a narrative in which the protagonist is interpellated into the prevailing world system, but also beckons the reader to be as well. They are made to identify with the protagonist and ultimately admire his determination in building his wealth, regardless of the methods. That the protagonist is unnamed and works as a stand in for countless grasping entrepreneurs of the global south expands this identification to a widespread feeling of connection with a global underclass striving for a better quality of life. Morality is a luxury that is not afforded to the narrator or countless millions attempting to pull themselves out of poverty. In fact, his often morally ambiguous or outright immoral methods are depicted as commonplace and necessary, yet another step in getting filthy rich.

However, the novel also suggests that even the most driven and entrepreneurial individual is often at the mercy of larger forces. Even though the protagonist is able to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world of business as he bribes government officials and strikes deals with military officers, the imaginative autopoiesis that is suggested is always-already influenced by the pull of hegemonic systems, harkening back to Althusser's interpellation as the ideology of the global free market hails its constituents into being as collections of information at its disposal. Does this mean that self-creation is not truly creation at all, that it is always predetermined by the multitude of effects—societal, cultural, economic, etc.—acting upon it? To answer this question it is helpful to refer back to the brand of critical posthumanism put forth by Cary Wolfe, which is a “new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies . . . of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon” (xvi). The new theoretical paradigms that are thrust upon us not only suggest change in the way we view

the systems that hail us and shape the way we may create a cumulative identity from the boundless sea of information in which we exist, but also proposes a thorough recalculation of the current systems in which we find ourselves entangled. If the idea of the human shifts in this manner—toward being seen by the state as an accumulation of mobile data—then it alters the shapes that interpellation and autopoiesis take. Hegemonic forces such as nations are more thoroughly integrated into the very fiber of each citizen as they are registered and documented thoroughly and often willingly. However, because one's self is in many ways disseminated across multiple networks of information and connection, more possibilities for self-creation are available.

Two overarching systems that are dueling influences in *How to* are the global system and the nation-state. The global system is present in the novel's use of surveillance as a narrative tool, such as when the protagonist and the pretty girl, the two having grown apart over the years and now living in different cities hundreds of miles apart, are depicted simultaneously to underscore their loneliness despite success in their respective fields. The protagonist seems to be having a nondescript night of web browsing, "Online, however, you can be tracked, and indeed you are tracked, as we all are" (168). As he looks over the webpage for the pretty girl's boutique she is seen through her open laptop's webcam as she has a quiet dinner and goes to bed. The point of view continues shifting through different pieces of technology, including closed-circuit television as the pretty girl's boutique is robbed and her business partner is killed. Finally, it enters a surveillance drone circling the city, viewing the protagonist's brother's funeral, which the protagonist is attending. The chapter ends on the image of the drone, "its high-powered eye unblinking" as it "flies observantly on," showing the ever-presence

of such hyper-connected technologies, many of them militarized, that ensnare a globalized world.

In this extended scene, Hamid uses a loose focus that can do the work of presenting granular events across time and space by viewing them as information being taken in by the technologies that are incorporated into everyday life. Telling the story in this way highlights the role of these nonhuman devices in the construction of the society in which the protagonist and the pretty girl live. On one hand, the devices seem akin to a Foucaultian *dispositif* or *apparatus*. The loneliness of the characters is contrasted with the supreme interconnectedness of a world reduced to information. Foucault explained an apparatus as the system of relations that may be established between heterogeneous elements such as “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions,” and several other branches of thought (*Power/Knowledge*, 194). Giorgio Agamben took this definition farther to include “literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings” (*What Is an Apparatus?*, 14). He elaborates on what this category may include at length:

Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth . . . but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured,

probably without realizing the consequences he was about to face. (*What Is an Apparatus?*, 14)

What becomes clear from Foucault's initial definition and Agamben's expansion is that an apparatus is more than an individual object, but instead includes the way in which it functions and through that functioning interacts with other objects, institutions, or technologies in order to exert some kind of effect on human understanding.

In the ways defined by Foucault and Agamben, apparatuses begin to resemble a posthuman prosthesis. Wolfe posits that these prosthetics emphasize the specificity of the human "by (paradoxically, for humanism) acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is" (*What Is Posthumanism*, XXV). These prosthetics are part of a collaborative construction that brings forth a world and establishes ways for humans to exist within them. Recalling Cheah's theorization of worlding, humans, working alongside these prosthetics, whether they be technological or otherwise, build worlds that are too large to be observed and must therefore be received through limited optics of perceptual experience and ideological frames. Returning to Cheah's formulation, "It should be evident that we should not take the presentation of the world for granted because, at the very least, it is given to us by the imagination" (*What is a World*, 3). In the case of Hamid's novel, the protagonist and the pretty girl exist within a web of technological connection that marks the boundary of their world and includes multiple types of information, technology, and striated levels of access, from checking up on an old lover on a social network on a personal computer to being spotted by an unseen, unmanned

military drone. In this way, the novel reflects the way in which literature serves as the prime prosthesis for visualizing and comprehending, within the limited capability of material experience, the mass of “deterritorialized humanity” described by Cheah (*What is a World* 3). Telecommunication and surveillance technologies work as extensions of human perception, so Hamid’s making that impact and the capabilities it enables legible within the novel reenchants their mundanity. Thus imbued with greater imaginative resonance, these technologies serve as prosthetics on two levels: real world devices and facilitators of worlding within the novel.

With the concept of the apparatus and its evolution as posthuman prosthesis in mind, the nation-state emerges as a particularly powerful example. James C. Scott posits a similar concept, noting that the modern nation-state was a way for a hegemonic power to make its holdings legible, that is, make them at least somewhat tangible and observable. He identifies the shortcomings of early state formations:

The premodern state was, in many crucial respects, partially blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity. It lacked anything like a detailed “map” of its terrain and its people. It lacked, for the most part, a measure, a metric, that would allow it to ‘translate’ what it knew into a common standard necessary for a synoptic view. As a result, its interventions were often crude and self-defeating. (2)

In order to shrink its world to a manageable size, the state used a variety of measures from the establishment of national languages to the design of cities and standardization of weights and measures (Scott 2). Through these measures the nation was simplified and its

people were made a more cohesive, observable whole. This project is similar to the way in which Hamid deploys technology as a mediating force, thereby making it legible to the audience. With this in mind, it follows that he would address the prevalence of the state in a hyper-connected contemporary world. Its role in *How to* is addressed in the chapter “Befriend a Bureaucrat,” which opens by asserting, “No self-help book can be complete without taking into account our relationship with the state” (139). To this effect, the state’s influence on the individual and the systems they exist within is explained with astronomical imagery: the “massive gravitational pulls” it exerts on “a financial universe,” how “tirelessly, states seek to determine our orbits” (139). Bureaucrats harness this power for their own personal gain, and the protagonist exerts influence on them in turn, completing a metaphorical solar system in which those with the power to cause motion benefit and those that do not are merely along for the ride. Outside of the bureaucracy and those using their influence to leech from it, the state seems to be doing little for its citizens, becoming yet another of the overlapping complex systems that shape the lives of individuals, a coevolved prosthesis that has superseded its collaborative role and seized control of one’s way of being in the world.

However, the protagonist is not just another member of the powerless multitude trampled by the state. Instead, he learns how to game the various systems he exists within to his advantage. Adnan Mahmutović observes, “[T]he protagonist’s success depends on an intricate web of relationships between major and minor sources of power (near and far orders),” including the state and its many incarnations (military, government, etc.). These include black market economies which he enters into because of a failure of the state:

Your city's neglected pipes are cracking, the contents of underground water mains and sewers mingling, with the result that taps in locales rich and poor alike disgorge liquids that, while for the most part clear and often odorless, reliably contain trace levels of feces and microorganisms capable of causing diarrhea, hepatitis, dysentery, and typhoid. (*How to*, 99)

The mention of “locales rich and poor alike” stands out in this passage as class divisions are made visible by this infrastructure crisis. The poor “harden their immune systems by drinking freely” while the more affluent have switched to bottled water (*How to*, 100). Observant of this trend and business savvy, the protagonist converts the small front room of his apartment in a makeshift production facility for an upstart bottled water business. He and his employees boil tap water, put it into the used bottles of upscale brands, and then reseal the bottles. He runs this business with an eye toward the quality of his product, but not from some sense of business ethics. Instead, his eyes are always on profit. When a natural gas shortage brings production to a halt, his technician, an impoverished father of three young daughters, suggests they use a petrol stove to purify the water instead. Fearing contamination leading to a bad taste in his product, the protagonist rejects the idea: “You know quality matters, especially for fakes. Shops would stop buying if their customers fall sick” (*How to*, 101). He sees the chain of effects leading from the sick customer to his wallet and so they wait until they again have access to natural gas. He is successful in business because of his eye for detail, but it is an eye focused on wealth accumulation through the maintenance and growth of his web of black market contacts and vendors.

Like in other aspects of his life, the protagonist moves from a minor point of power to a major point as his business grows and is eventually legitimated by its success coupled with carefully placed bribes. As we watch him make this fortuitous shift, his interactions with the overlapping systems he inhabits work in unison to transcribe the intricate nature of such connections; once again, to make them legible. The astronomical metaphor cited earlier signifies the complexity of the systems, domestic, national and transnational that an individual such as the protagonist must navigate. His success within those systems shows an act of autopoiesis facilitated by his intimate knowledge of his environment, including the nation in which he lives and how it operates in material practice. Just as the hegemonic center uses the nation framework to limit its scope and make its powers legible, the protagonist focuses on the quality of his business and the connections he can foster with those who could help it succeed. In doing so, the narrative illustrates the act of becoming “filthy rich in rising Asia,” which is itself a stand-in for a highly interconnected and complicated example of becoming in the contemporary world.

The novel’s view of the nation, specifically the internal structure of the nation as it relates to the formation of its class and social structure, is further illustrated in the relationship within the nation between its urban centers and its rural areas. The urban areas are rural, cut off from major public utilities and internet access. To be outside of the urban center is to live in an antiquated world, to be seen as somehow less integrated into the world. This identity is something that the protagonist fights against early in the novel when he moves to the city and begins to establish himself as a budding businessman. To do so, he had to first overcome his geographic disadvantage of having been born in a rural area. This contrast is elaborated upon when the protagonist returns to his home

village after the death of his sister. The disparities in infrastructure and access are immediately apparent in the convoluted organization of his trip: “You travel on a series of lurching buses with your brother and his sons, themselves not nearly men, not reaching your destination until the following evening because of rain-damaged roads and bridges” (*How to*, 131). He leaves the sprawling metropolitan center with its highways and drainage for the countryside, where a severe enough rain storm grinds travel to a halt. The separation between the city and country is also observed in the health of the people, with the protagonist noting that his sister appeared to be “a woman old without having been so long on this world” (131). He also observes the premature aging of his brother and the way in which in the village death is commonplace and “is handled in a matter-of-fact manner.” (132). In light of these observations, it is clear that not all parts of the unspecified nation of the novel are part of the “Rising Asia” of the title.

His return trip to the city is marred by more delays that lead him to note once again “the yawning gap that exists between countryside and city” (132). In these scenes the protagonist is keenly aware of the higher level of privilege that he inhabits having moved to the city and embedded himself into the social and economic networks there. His family back in the village constitute a more distant and lesser magnitude of power than he and his counterparts toiling away in the nation’s hegemonic centers to build a level of prosperity and power unattainable to those who remain rural. In this way, Hamid suggests what we already know, that the countryside exists to prop up the city, to provide sustenance, raw material, and in the right scenario a voting base. However, if you want to get rich in rising Asia or anywhere else, you must take the advice offered in the title of chapter one and move to the city. This point is expounded through the protagonist’s

initial move and then later in his son's move to America to attend university, strengthening the trope of migration for work and/or education that is a hallmark of much Anglophone literature.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the unspecified setting of a country in a generalized region of rising Asia allows the novel to focus on the interplay of and movement between the national and the global. The specific trappings of national identification and regional politics are stripped away, allowing *How to* to focus on a more skeletal and therefore observable structure of overlapping networks. In this way, characters such as the protagonist practice self-creation in a world completely awash in these networks rather than relying on established cultural norms and traditional identities. Rather than ever identifying himself as a product of his unnamed nation, he instead identifies as a businessman, as someone who knows how to work the systems that surround him in his favor. Combined with the ambiguity that Hamid purposefully employs to remove the nation as an identifying factor, this alternative form of identity formation suggests that nationality, at least in the case of the protagonist, is incidental and not definitive.

These overlapping networks begin to overwhelm the protagonist as he delves deeper and deeper into them, and he spends his days working tireless hours, ignoring his wife and, to a lesser extent, his son, and daydreaming about the pretty girl. It is not until his health begins to fail and he suffers a heart attack that his entanglement in them

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<sup>1</sup> The theme of traveling for work or education can be found in Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, as well as several other well-received Anglophone novels such as Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. Earlier works also include it as a major plot point, including Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*.

becomes apparent to him: “To be a man whose life requires being plugged into machines, multiple machines, in your case interfaces electrical, gaseous, and liquid, is to experience the shock of an unseen network suddenly made physical, as a fly experiences a cobweb” (183). The revelation that his life relies on so many unseen connections, as well as the threat of death, leads him to a sea change in his approach to others. He begins treating his wife more tenderly, although she is already emotionally checked out of the marriage. He makes it a point to have dinner with his son every night, but the boy is busy with his own life and, as previously mentioned, eventually leaves for school in America.

As the novel winds toward its close, the protagonist is robbed into bankruptcy by his brother-in-law, who was also his business partner, and squeaks out a meager living on small caches of money that he had hidden away. Now impoverished and alone, he watches as the networks that he once thrived within keep expanding in size and complexity, leaving him behind. He walks to a nearby internet café to have video calls with his son, but when he gets there he has to meekly ask the attendant for help since he lacks fluency with technology. He is noticeably uncomfortable in his seat as he tries not to touch the computer tower for fear of breaking something, and during the call he is unsure what to do with his hands so he grips the armrests of his chair (190). When he speaks to his son, the young man is somewhat detached and reiterates that he cannot visit because of a pending asylum request that would be ruined if he were to return to his country of birth. Eventually it is hinted that the son is homosexual: “Your son’s friend passes behind him, shirtless, unshaven, sleepy. The friend is brushing his teeth, preparing for bed. He waves to you and you lift a palm in reply” (191). Showing ever more removal from society, the protagonist does not recognize that the “roommate” may in fact be his

son's lover, not through a clear unwillingness to consider the scenario, but through a seeming ignorance of the possibility. As an old man, he is not just able to unplug from the tangle of networks he exists within, but he is all but forced to as he is shuffled off to the margins of society.

Although the protagonist's ultimate fate may read as tragic on the surface, there is an underlying optimism. He reunites with the pretty girl and the two end their lives alone except for a couple of meagerly compensated live-in servants. Despite these dire circumstances, both the protagonist and the pretty girl die relatively pleased with their situation, and the narration at the beginning of the final chapter explains this somewhat optimistic mood as a productive imaginative force. Commenting on the power of stories as modes of creation in between moments of blankness, the narrator states, "For there was a moment when anything was possible. And there will be a moment when nothing is possible. But in between we can create" (213). This take on creation refers both to the impending death of the protagonist in the novel's closing pages as well as the nature of storytelling and imaginative creation in general. The novel's description of individuals piecing together their identities from countless fragments of information applies, in this sense, to the protagonist's journey from his humble beginnings, through his wealthy life, to his humble end, and also to the journey of writing and reading. Unlike the conclusion of *Exit West*, which is explored in the next section, *How to* offers forms of postnational identity formation on a personal level. Rather than relying on a collective forgetting of the past or a restructuring of collective memory in the present to soothe national woes, the novel presents the protagonist realizing his place within the networks that are used to define him to society, and then reworks them, exploiting them in his favor. Although he

ends up poor and living a precarious, day-to-day existence, he still manages to do so on his own terms and even in the company of his lifelong love interest. So while it is simple enough to view the novel's close as a sad tale of a fallen tycoon dying in obscurity, in reality he experiences something like freedom and fulfillment to the very last because he was able at every turn to reframe his narrative to his benefit. While this act at times required immoral and dangerous behavior, a reader of the novel would find it difficult to begrudge him since on one hand he has been so relatable as a protagonist and, on the other, so adept at getting the most from his life despite the matters of geography that otherwise worked against him, such as being born in the Global South.

Through the novel, fiction is offered as another technical/informatic system with which humans are entangled, and like the protagonist of *How to*, we must navigate it and its uses to better understand our current world and then envision what may come afterward. The reason we must do this is because the only other choice is hopelessness in the form of a defeated imagination that can do no more than navigate the day-to-day slog of life in post-capitalist ruins. Global economic systems keep squeezing the poor or crashing, threatening to destroy the established order that a vast majority of the world takes for granted as being secure. There is no better time than the present in which to begin to imagine something better, or at least different. If fiction is a reflection of the real world then it follows that writers must confront these issues that are so deeply entrenched within the contemporary world and do the work of holding a mirror up to motivate readers to evaluate their place in it. Furthermore, perhaps the reason so many find the prevailing global order so suboptimal or outright unacceptable is because we have not yet gone far enough in imagining beyond it. Fiction offers a ready and infinite sandbox in

which to speculate and create into possible futures. While this work is certainly part of *How to*, it is in *Exit West* that Hamid more directly imagines how a world that is changing drastically and rapidly can become something fresh and, ultimately, welcoming.

### **The Power of the Multitude in *Exit West***

*Exit West* offers a more developed speculative view of what the imaginative force described in *How to* can be capable of when applied to a system as engrained and hegemonic as that of national borders. *Exit West* emphasizes the biopolitical effects of both a breakdown in national sovereignty and the emergence of a new subjectivity beyond national identity. The novel's plot hinges on the sudden, unexplained appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of multiple mysterious doors that all seem to lead from underdeveloped or otherwise distressed areas of the world to more affluent areas in other countries. The novel's dual protagonists, Saeed and Nadia, are young lovers whose country devolves into war and chaos, eventually leading them to step through several of the doors in search of safety. The Syrian civil war and resulting refugee crisis echo throughout the book as Saeed and Nadia's country and its descent into crisis resembles Syria, and the couple's first destination upon stepping through one of the doors is a Greek island of Mykonos, a destination similar to that at which many refugees arrive after treacherous sea journeys. The couple live on Mykonos for a short time, but the increasing threat of violence from nativist mobs, armed guards protecting areas that hold the doors to somewhere else, and even their fellow migrants hastens their desire to travel elsewhere. Soon Nadia meets a volunteer medical worker who helps facilitate their access to a new door to an unknown destination.

By adopting an almost supernatural plot device to allow for transnational travel instantaneously and in large number, Hamid accelerates migration and makes it an immediate concern for the developed world, forcing its governments and citizens to either adapt or exercise their power in order to maintain their preexisting sense of cultural unity. In an interview with NPR's *Fresh Air*, Hamid offered a three-pronged answer for his use of the doors. On one hand, they reflect the role of telecommunications in connecting people more than at any other period in history. First, he emphasizes the emotional impact of having family and friends always within reach, saying "technology feels, to me, like the doors sort of already exist, at least emotionally" (*Fresh Air*). Secondly, the doors are also meant to manipulate the audience's attention so that it remains on the points in the migrant's journey he wished to emphasize: "I wanted to focus on the more human and lasting stories of Saeed and Nadia. What happens before you move, and what happens after? And so the doors allowed me to focus on parts of the migration narrative that often get de-emphasized" (*Fresh Air*). Thirdly, the doors facilitate the narrative by accelerating the flow of humanity from one place to another, "So the next century or two of migration that are likely to happen on planet Earth, in the novel, occurs in just a year or two" (*Fresh Air*). In these ways, the plot device of the doors serves to reflect telecommunication advances, emphasize the before and after of the migrant experience, speed along worldwide migration, and, most importantly for the purposes of this analysis, to pose an immediate and direct threat to nationalism. By this, I mean that the speed with which the migration in the novel occurs poses a threat to both national borders in that it crosses them at will, and the nationalisms within the borders. The backlash against the sudden appearance of so many migrants is powerful and much

of the conflict of the novel comes from the inability or refusal of countries in the global north to cope with the sudden change.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the threat to nationalism posed by the doors is that threat's immediacy. In order to elaborate on this point it is beneficial to look to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's comments on the state of the contemporary world in their *Commonwealth*:

War, suffering, misery, and exploitation increasingly characterize our globalizing world. There are so many reasons to seek refuge in a realm 'outside,' some place separate from the discipline and control of today's emerging Empire or even some transcendent or transcendental principles and values that can guide our lives and ground our political action. One primary effect of globalization, however, is the creation of a common world, a world that, for better or worse, we all share, a world that has no 'outside.' (vii)

While the doors initially appear to be a quick escape from the dangers threatening the countless refugees that pass through them, the displaced are still left to confront the myriad issues created when they arrive in new countries that are unprepared and unwilling to accommodate them. This imminence forces the nations of the world and their governments to scramble to solve the problem of sudden migration. As seen in the real world example of human influx into Europe, even a slower, steady stream of people is enough to cause an international crisis. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the first half of the novel is filled with nations failing in their attempts to deal with the appearance of the doors, either as portals out of or into their borders.

The inability to escape from the problems of a common world becomes evident when Saeed and Nadia find themselves sharing a large house in an affluent neighborhood in London with a mass of other refugees, with more seeming to arrive every day. Tensions in the house are kept at bay by a collection of elders, and eventually Nadia comes to accept the new community as her own. Saeed, on the other hand, prefers to spend his time at a nearby house occupied by his own former countrymen. When he asks Nadia to move there with him she is quick to ask why, to which he replies, "To be among our own kind" (*Exit West*, 153). When Nadia asks what makes the others "their kind" he replies, "They're from our country," to which Nadia retorts, "From the country we used to be from" (*Exit West*, 153). While Saeed takes comfort in the familiarity of the other house and the former nationality of its inhabitants, Nadia is already adjusting to the new world they live in, one in which old nationalities are blurred or forgotten altogether. This is shown when Nadia attends a house meeting at which migrants from several regions of the Global South are present, and communication, while somewhat impeded by linguistic differences, is able to occur by some overlap in languages spoken by the attendees. English is one major point of overlap: "Also they spoke different variations of English, different Englishes, and so when Nadia gave voice to an idea or opinion among them, she did not need to fear that her views could not be comprehended, for her English was like theirs, one among many" (*Exit West*, 148). This moment of recognition in which Nadia chooses to be a part of this new community instead of clinging to the past in the form of her former countrymen and cultural norms is indicative of the evolution of society in general over the course of the novel. Instead of attempting to move a part of their former country with her, Nadia prefers to forge something new, showing the kind of creative

autopoiesis unaligned with global hegemonic, capitalist forces that was missing in the protagonist of *How to*. Rather than being seen as a threat, the multiplicity of cultures, religions, and Englishes present in this brave new world are seen as features of the common, born of the unique situation that the migrants find themselves in. Specifying her migrant identity is important to understanding her impulse to be more accepting of this multiplicity because it is not a universal sentiment within the novel, with many of the native British unwillingly to accept the migrants' presence, which parallels the attitudes of large portions of all nations in our contemporary world. Nadia's position within the desperate mass of migrants not only gives her greater incentive to practice acceptance, but also increased exposure to other migrants and their cultures.

While Nadia and Saeed are caught up in a similar tangle of world systems as the aforementioned protagonist, the otherworldly intervention of the doors prevents hegemonic systems from being able to effectively exercise their power. With the acceleration of such a sudden influx, the destination countries are more reactionary than they may have been otherwise and their immune response to an invasion from the Other is more destructive. Here, "immunity" is used in a biopolitical sense, such as that delineated by Roberto Esposito. Immunity, in this sense, is derived from both the medical paradigm and a political-juridical definition in which it refers to "a temporary or definitive exemption on the part of the subject with regard to concrete obligations or responsibilities that under normal circumstances would bind one to others" (45). So the political *body*, with emphasis on its conception as *body*, is treated within the bounds of the immunization paradigm by "introducing within it a fragment of the same pathogen from which it wants to protect itself, by blocking and contradicting natural development"

(46). In both instances immunity is related to the biopower of a nation and its government through which it exerts control over the life of its subjects, whether in the form of *making live* or *letting die*: "Thus, either power negates life or enhances its development; or violates life and excludes it or protects and reproduces it; objectifies life or subjectifies it—without any terms that might mediate between them" (Esposito, 46). Giorgio Agamben goes so far as to claim, "It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (*Homo Sacer*, 6). Here he refers to his widely cited concept of "bare life," that in his formulation "has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men" (7). "The city of men" is founded upon the exclusion of homo sacer because of its biopolitical foundation as the docile body upon which sovereign power can act with impunity.

The mass of citizens allows this to continue because they have come to benefit from the systems they live within, much like the prosperity that the protagonist of *How to* experienced. The wellbeing of those living like he did in his youth, impoverished and subject to the machinations of power on both a national and communal level, was of little consequence to him because he was reaping the rewards of his success in navigating corrupt, exploitative capitalism. Agamben identifies this delusional mechanic in the establishment of false political consciousness: "There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion." (8) In this way, citizens can, with brutal effectiveness, identify the Other in those unlike themselves if they are able to identify with the center of power. Those within perpetually subjugated populations are automatically relegated to the margins of society alongside

those vying for entry into the center. The immunitary paradigm allows such a segmented society to survive by allowing some level of integration, but always keeps the Other, along with any oppositional ideology, at a manageable distance. So while the exercise of power may seem to be undermined by the presence of an infection—for our purposes the intrusion of a migrant/refugee/Other—acts of immunization maintain its hegemony by allowing a pressure release that prevents revolt of both the masses who buy into the preexisting status quo and those who they see as a threat to it.

With the immunization paradigm in place, globalization would appear to be an imminent threat to the nation's homeostatic balance. In fact, Esposito identifies it as a trigger for a socio-political allergy: "Just as communicative hypertrophy caused by telematics is the reverse sign of a generalized immunization, so too the calls for immunized identities of small states are nothing but the counter-effect or the crisis of an allergic rejection to global contamination" (50). While advances in telecommunication have led to an increase in the intrusion of that which is considered Other into hegemonic centers, namely the industrialized nations of the Global North, they have also ignited a negative reaction among the populations of many areas. Such a violent backlash has been seen in many European countries as their political structures have been quickly retreating to the far right of the spectrum. It seems that through these actions and reactions the nation can either immunize itself against the threat of infection or place those who represent it in quarantine, as seen in the swelling of refugee camps and the erection of border barricades. Esposito notes, "One can say that generally *immunitas*, to the degree it protects the one who bears it from risky contact with those who lack it, restores its own borders that were jeopardized by the common" (50). Ever-vigilant of the possibility of

infection, the nation is quick to react to insure that the center will hold, that the status quo will be protected. All the while they ignore the multitude of ways in which it has already been hybridized, discounting these evolutions as small concessions granted to relieve social pressure and maintain order. In this way, sections of the population can fool themselves into believing in a unified, homogenized society and culture fully insulated from contamination when in reality they live every day within a multicultural construction.

Returning to *Exit West*, an immunitary reaction is most evident during Nadia and Saeed's time in London. The doors, which as previously mentioned have greatly accelerated human migration, have left the British government and people no time to slowly acclimatize to the influx, nor to allow for some immunization against its social and cultural impact. Unrest grows as the migrant population swells and occupies more of the city. Electricity to the migrant-occupied areas is cut and they are given a deadline for leaving the city. However, the laughability of this ultimatum leads to it being ignored outright as the migrants have no where to flee to and have become comfortable in their new surroundings. When police gather in a bid to enforce the deadline, the resolve of the migrants is only strengthened by the intervention of native Londoners of foreign ancestry:

The deadline for their departure drew nearer, then nearer still, and then came and went, and they were still there, and the police had not charged, and they felt they had won some kind of a respite, and then something they could never have expected happened: other people gathered on the street, other dark- and medium- and even light-skinned people, bedraggled, like the people of the camps on Mykonos, and these people

formed a crowd. They banged cooking pots with spoons and chanted in various languages and soon the police decided to withdraw. (128)

Faced with the physical manifestation of cultural diversity, the police retreat and the migrants remain where they are. However, as previously mentioned, a society must enforce the immunity paradigm if its imagined cultural homogeneity is to be maintained. Therefore, law enforcement and military personnel, along with less restrained paramilitary and civilian nativist mobs, inevitably come into friction with the migrants. Eventually, this frustration comes to a head and rumors begin to circulate about the killing of hundreds of migrants at different locations around the city. Saeed and Nadia barricade themselves in their room with their mattress covering the window as gunfire and sirens sound in the distance (*Exit West*, 162). As they await whatever may befall them, they discuss the motivations of the nativists, with Nadia saying she can understand their confusion and anger over millions of people suddenly arriving in their city. When Saeed replies that millions arrived in their country when there were wars nearby, likely a reference to the influx of Iraqi and Palestinian war refugees into Syria and Afghani refugees into Pakistan, Nadia responds, "That was different. Our country was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose" (*Exit West*, 164). With this observation, Nadia identifies the strength of British nationality and the extent to which many are willing to go in order to protect the safety and comfort of their life in the Global North.

After a few days of waiting, something unexpected occurs. After the initial killings and terror there is a strange lull in the violence that, in keeping with Saeed and Nadia's general disconnectedness from mainstream media throughout the novel, is given

no direct explanation. In lieu of such information, the narrator speculates as to the cause of the ceasefire from the point of view of the nativists and their allied forces:

Perhaps they had decided they did not have it in them to do what would have needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants, and had determined that some other way would have to be found. Perhaps they had grasped that the doors could not be closed, and new doors would continue to open, and they had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done. Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one. (*Exit West* 166)

Although the reason for the ceasefire is unclear, it represents a change in the way that the scenario is viewed by the hegemonic powers of the developed world. Like the mass migration from rural to urban areas steadily changes the unnamed city of *How to*, leading to the need for a new way of viewing how one must live in it, the sudden mass migration of *Exit West* creates an immediate need for a new way of inhabiting the world. Unable to ignore or exterminate the issue they are faced with, the powers that be are forced to reckon with it and society begins to change.

The shift toward a more accepting view of the migrants' presence is seen after Saeed and Nadia leave London for Marin, California. In Marin, the natives seem generally more accepting of the migrants and the latter are able to create new lives in the

city and surrounding area. One given explanation for the acceptance of the migrants is that there are simply no or very few natives of Marin, “these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts--or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviors indistinguishable from anyone else” (197). This is expanded upon in the vignette—one of many throughout the novel that provide snapshots of the ways in which people around the world are affected by the appearance of the doors—near the novel’s close in which an elderly woman reflects on her life spent in her home in Marin, a house that has exploded in value thanks to the tech boom. She reflects upon the changes that she and the town have experienced, from urban development and Americans from elsewhere moving in, to the emergence of the doors and everything after. The vignette closes with the idea that we have no choice in experiencing changes, because regardless of our personal inclinations, “We are all migrants through time” (209). This simple yet powerful phrase echoes the changed tone of the migrant experience in Marin, where Saeed and Nadia find work, new friends and lovers, and amicably grow apart and go their separate ways.

As the novel winds to a close there is mention of further unrest and hardship, but the storm seems to have subsided and the migrants settle into their new lives. There are mentions of a flowering of creativity that is considered a new Jazz Age, with music and food evolving into new, eclectic modes (*Exit West*, 217). Throughout Marin it is possible to see musical ensembles of multiple types, “humans with humans, humans with electronics, dark skin with light skin with gleaming metal with matte plastic, computerized music and unamplified music and even people who wore masks or hid themselves from view” (217-218). This intermingling also extends to Saeed’s

relationship with the African-American Imam of the local mosque. This budding romance at first is met with some disapproval, “Saeed’s ancestors not having undergone the experience of slavery and its aftermath on this continent” (219). However, this difference is overcome through the combination of the Imam’s familiarity with Saeed’s culture, his deceased wife having come from Saeed’s country, as well as the commonality of religion and, most importantly, the solidarity built through Saeed’s engagement with his new community: “the effects of the preacher’s brand of religion diminished this resistance, and with time camaraderie did too, the work Saeed did alongside his fellow volunteers” (219). So Saeed and the Imam’s daughter are allowed to proceed in building their relationship and “for the pair themselves their closeness carried both a spark of the exotic and the comfort of familiarity” (219). What these examples illustrate is that in both the art and culture of the common of Marin, as well as within the personal lives of its residents, new formations of identity are emerging based in one’s relationship with their community and the work that they choose to put into building it. Another clear example of this new mentality is when Nadia is offered a room at the cooperative at which she works after first standing up to a robber and then becoming more well-acquainted with her coworkers (216). Throughout Marin, a spirit of cooperation, of building the new settlement together, permeates the people and their actions. This spirit of coming together is encapsulated in the plebiscite movement that the Imam’s daughter introduces Saeed to and “which sought a ballot on the question of the creation of a regional assembly for the Bay Area, with members elected on the principle of one person one vote, regardless of where one came from” (220). In the new common of Marin, one’s former identity or nation of origin falls

away and is replaced by what they contribute in the present. As long as they are dedicated to building a future, they are welcome.

Having gone through the initial pains of sudden integration, society seems to have accepted in the Other. Rather than rely on an immunitary paradigm of national belonging, a new common seems to have formed that includes not just geographical natives, but those from other areas willing to come together to form a new place. Rather than the known world being destroyed, “the apocalypse appeared to have arrived and yet it was not apocalyptic” (*Exit West*, 217). The once unimaginable has come to pass and so has become imaginable within the realm of what can exist within a society. The most optimistic aspect of this ending is that instead of leading to renewed nationalism and campaigns of extermination, “the result was something not unlike relief” (217). The emergence of the doors and what follows represents a loss of a homeland to both the person who decides to pass through it and those on the other side, but having come through the experience the citizens of the world, at least in a majority as hinted by the novel, have decided that it is better to reimagine the way the world can exist rather than see it destroyed or newly divided. This is the most powerful aspect of *Exit West*, and perhaps also the feature of it that leads so many to label it as magic realism: the idea that when faced with such great adversity we could embrace progress instead of fear and create new ways of being in the world.

### **Hamid’s Vital Optimism**

At the close of *Exit West* the world has been reshaped by the flow of masses of humanity from one area to another, or as the narrator states, “All over the world people were slipping away from where they had been” (213). This shift is reflected in the

gradual drifting apart of Saeed and Nadia, who eventually go fifty years in between seeing one another after years of being inseparable. In many ways their relationship mirrors that of the novel's people with their nations of birth. As they keep entering the doors and traveling to new places, and as those destinations make themselves more welcoming to newcomers, the initial chaos calms and is replaced by a general sense of common wealth. Having grappled with the pull of world systems overturned and reshaped, individuals and groups are able to not only speculate about a possible future, but also begin laying its foundation. This is the work that a postnational imagination must do to confront and remedy the failings of the prevailing world systems, be they financial, social, or otherwise.

Writing in *Discontent and Its Civilizations*, Hamid suggests that to begin to change the long-held chauvinisms that plague nations like his native Pakistan:

We could commit to a blurring and reconceiving of national boundaries, to the immediate benefit of frontier-split communities, and to the growing benefit of everyone else. We might, as a start, embrace cross-border autonomous zones, visa-free travel, an Asian highway and railway network, and a reduction of legal differences between citizens and resident noncitizens. (191)

Such changes have infinite obstacles in the governments of nations, but less so in the minds of individuals, which is where such a monumental change in the state of the world must begin. We are living during a change of consciousness, and the “characteristic amnesias” identified by Anderson can be remedied with movements toward collectivity and commonwealth just as easily as refurbished nationalisms and authoritarian rule. We,

the citizens of this brave new world, can find use in speculative writing and the multiple paths it lays out before us, especially if that writing is willing to be optimistic in the face of the torrent of horror and negativity that inundates news tickers and social media timelines daily. In the same interview with *The Nation* cited earlier, Hamid is asked about his optimism: “You’ve spoken a lot recently about the need to reimagine the world, to juxtapose a new vision with what feels like our bleak current reality. How would we actually do that on a large-enough scale?” His answer points to the human desire to imagine the future, whether in fear or hope. He closes with an observation that echoes the ending of *Exit West*:

Imagine the worst happens if you’re afraid of migration—both being forced from your home and having people come to your home. If everybody moves, even then maybe we can believe things will be ok. It will be jarring, for some things will be horrible, but, all in all, our grandchildren will also fall in love, find interesting work to do, sing songs, and tell stories.

Later, he restates this point in a more condensed form, saying, “At the most basic level, I hope for a less frightened collective future.” In these responses we see the postnational optimism deployed by Hamid in his novels. This optimism is global in scope, but not in the sense of being transnational or any of a multitude of adjectives that suggest working within the established framework of nation-state power dynamics. It is global in that it advocates for a world common that is inclusive and amorphous, allowing it to adjust to whatever potential issues that may arise.

Yes, the future holds new calamities and confrontations, but what works like *Exit West* suggest is that through coming together we can usher in a new world that works for all of us, a place for our grandchildren to fall in love and tell their own stories.

Ultimately, this is what is at stake and that is why we cannot let art be infected with a kind of political fatalism that allows itself to be defeated before it even begins to imagine change. In *Exit West* the completely black, impenetrable darkness of the mysterious doors is intimidating and terrifying, but the migrants know that through them lies a new future. In many ways we are all facing a similar leap of faith, and we must make it in good faith. We may all be migrants through time, but, as Hamid shows, once we get where we are going we can build something good.

### CHAPTER THREE:

#### AN OCEAN OF STORIES: DIASPORA AND THE RECLAMATION OF HISTORY IN THE LAST WARNER WOMAN AND HOMEGOING

The allure of nationhood is obvious. Nations and collections of nations such as the UN are the hegemonic center that administers recognition and power to other states. Without the official stamp of this center, a collective carries little to no political power and is largely excluded from the networks of global trade that are necessary to thrive. Cultural capital can fill some of this vacuum, although the power it wields is severely limited. Meanwhile, recognition on the state level grants immeasurable advantages including a boost to the confidence and cultural well-being of a people. But outside of these political and ethnically specific benefits, why should nationhood be the pinnacle of collective being in the world when other modes have proven to be such powerful and generative forces? These alternative commons are seen at the close of Hamid's *Exit West*, but those new social and, although they are never specifically described, political formations only come into existence through an unavoidable and unstoppable challenge to the dominant order: the appearance of the doors and the migration of millions through them. These new communities and the mysterious powers that facilitate them illustrate the need to form new commons outside of the nation and its maintenance of borders and draconian and sometimes paradoxical citizenship requirements.

Beyond these administrative and biopolitical concerns, nations give shape to the more nefarious aspects of imagined communities, including ethnically oriented exclusionary movements that see the presence of minorities as an affront to a fictional, ethnically pure past. Since these formations rely so heavily on alternative worlds as an

animating force, then it follows that fiction would allow for other such alternatives that can work to counter those more harmful forms. However, these works of fiction are also validating and building upon preexisting community formations from reality, such as migrant or diasporic communities that exist within a given nation, such as Mexican and Central American migrants near the U.S. border or South Asian diasporic communities in the U.K. For instance, in *Exit West* the use of mass migration as a narrative tool is all the more powerful because it reflects the flows of humanity from Africa and the Middle East that, together with European resistance, have coalesced into the contemporary refugee crisis. So while the postnational imagination wants to push readers to think about the interconnectedness of the modern world and their place within it, it always pulls from real world examples in doing so. This relevance to the reader's world means that they are never far from being able to interrogate their worldview and/or that of those around them. In addition, literature reflects the spirit of a time, a place, and a people in ways that can respond to those who would prefer a return to an imagined past, usually one that includes fewer of those included in migrant or diasporic groups. In our world, diaspora and the cultural evolutions that it spawns is an example of a positive, inclusive force that finds expression through literature. Novels written by those who exist within the hybridity of diaspora are especially useful for explaining how the postnational imagination works to create new commons through creative means.

Diaspora is by necessity a postnational phenomenon. Deprived of life in a stable homeland, a people are shut off from the cultural practices, beliefs, and traditions that bind them. In its place, they are left with aspiration, which is often expressed politically or violently, or some combination of the two. The establishment of a national homeland,

then, becomes a vital stitch in the people's ethnic and cultural identity, as has been the case with Europe's Jewish population in the first half of the twentieth century or Tamils and Kurds today and into the foreseeable future. This impulse to establish nationhood is an acknowledgement of the primacy of the nation as the central unit of world power relations, but it is not a necessity for claiming a specific cultural identity. It is taken for granted that belonging to a stateless cultural group requires subscribing to that group's struggle for statehood. What is missing in this assumption is that lack of a state is a general barrier to recognition and legitimation and is akin to an illegal immigrant in the United States being denied permission to work because they are illegal and then being told they are a drain on American society because they do not work. A group that tries to establish a state is often seen as radical and dangerous because such work often includes some brand of armed conflict, but they only become threatening because the establishment of a state would legitimize them; however, their lack of one leaves them without power. In both cases, the people exist in an ouroboros of contradiction advanced by the hegemonic center that suppresses them. In light of this frustrating cycle, the formation of something like a postnational common offers an alternative that, while not as ethnically or culturally homogenous as the nation state, allows for greater participation in the world system in more meaningful ways.

With the need for more postnational formations in mind, diaspora is a mechanism by which the postnational imagination comes into being, and one of the most powerful. Forever hybridized, the diasporic writer is always/already drawing inspiration from a variety of sources across multiple cultures. In the age of globalization, diasporic hybrids proliferate, creating new cultural combinations and outlooks. From Desi culture in the

U.K. and U.S. to the long-established Chicano culture of the American Southwest, there is no shortage of examples to draw from in exploring diaspora as a living postnational practice. However, this chapter will take as its focus the rich vein of transatlantic African diaspora and how it functions within a pair of novels that explore its historically circular formation: Kei Miller's *The Last Warner Woman* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. What these works and the diasporic formations that underpin them suggest is that it is the masses of people living in the world that are creating social and cultural formations that are not merely transnational in scope. Rather than seeing diaspora as a way of bridging multiple cultures and establishing exchange between them, examination of the novels posits that diaspora offers ways of creating new cultures that exist not within the bounds of a given nation, but that belong to the entire world. Working on the margins of the hegemonic political systems that insist on seeing individuals and groups as being of a specific national or ethnic extraction, those within the diaspora working through the postnational imagination, specifically Miller and Gyasi, think about how history and the act of storytelling intertwine and are used as weapons of exploitative systems, namely the British and American colonial apparatuses. Through their respective novels they offer ways of approaching the past and how it is told that allows for change both in the present and moving into the future. In reexamining the uses and abuses of history and its potential for liberation when the subaltern is allowed to tell its story from below, they bring the common of marginalized and/or erased individuals into the light and propose that they stay there.

In discussing diaspora, especially that of the black Atlantic, it is crucial to delineate between the concepts race, ethnicity, and nation, which are often substituted for

one another although, as Paul Gilroy points out, they are “not interchangeable terms” (154). In conflating the three, the larger picture of how they interact in forming a deeply complex cultural milieu is lost. Gilroy comments on this loss in discussions of black British culture: “for though blacks are represented in contemporary British politics and culture as external to and estranged from the imagined community that is the nation, those representations are, like the ‘racial’ essences on which they rely, precarious constructions, discursive figures which obscure and mystify deeper relationships” (153). Gilroy makes evident his disdain for the concept of race, even going so far as to repeatedly place it within quotation marks in his work to highlight its dubiousness. But to push the matter further, he points out the artificial nature of the invented primordial foundations of national cohesiveness that drive those within the U.K. to paint black citizens as outside of the imagined community. If the black British are estranged from the nation, it is not because they are themselves Other and incapable of assimilation, but because the gatekeepers of an essential “Britishness” are policing their entrance into it.

Being excluded does not, of course, prevent a group from developing a common cultural identity, and diasporic connections are readily visible in populations across the Atlantic. Gilroy points to black British culture once again:

Black Britain defines itself crucially as part of a diaspora. Its unique cultures draw inspiration from those developed by black populations elsewhere. In particular, the culture and politics of black America and the Caribbean have become raw materials for creative processes which redefine what it means to be black, adapting it to distinctively British

experiences and meanings. Black culture is actively made and re-made.

(154)

He adds to these connections, "Analysis of black politics must, therefore, if it is to be adequate, move beyond the field of inquiry designated by concepts which deny the possibility of common themes, motives and practices within diaspora history," and because of this, "national unities are not the most appropriate basis for studying this history for the African diaspora's consciousness of itself has been defined in and against constricting national boundaries" (158). In identifying the importance of diaspora and its cultural manifestations, he singles out the nation-state framework of organizing and understanding the world as a definite hindrance. As he states, diasporic communities have created hybridized forms and they come to an understanding of their unique identities in the face of multiple national boundary crossings and backlash from "natives." In the shadow of the nation and the deeply rooted extensions of its power, diaspora persists as a force for establishing and maintaining a thriving common, what Appadurai names a "transnation" that "retains a special ideological link to a putative place of origin but is otherwise a thoroughly diasporic collectivity" (172). This idea that the diasporic common or transnation is in many ways a more creative basis for identity may seem to run counter to nationalistic thinking that holds strong connection to an established country as the highest form of identity. However, the nationalist model cannot hold in our globalized era of mass migrations and ever-increasing levels of hybridity. As Appadurai asserts, "In the postnational world that we see emerging, diaspora runs with, and not against, the grain of identity, movement, and reproduction" (171). The common, which is often born of

diasporic movement of people, is a more malleable form that allows for the constant reshaping required by the urgent now in which we live.

The new diasporic commons that are formed are such a shock to the status quo because they cut through social and political hierarchies in order to form themselves. This transgressive nature is discussed by Stuart Hall as he builds upon Gilroy's formations, elaborating upon the inherent hybridity of this common:

Diasporas are composed of cultural formations which cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, ethnos, and nation. Their subjects are dispersed forever from their homelands, to which they cannot literally return. Being the product of several histories, cultures, and narratives, they belong to several homes, most of them at least in part symbolic—that is to say, imagined communities—to which there can be no return. This means that to be the subject of such diaspora is to have no one particular home to which one belongs exclusively. (172)

Rather than being limited by this seeming rootlessness, diasporas open new worlds to identity formation that are not tethered to a single national identification, instead allowing for a rhizomatic relationship between past, present, and future. The identities that are born of this relationship “are open to infinite sliding among the signifiers,” and those who inhabit them carry the awareness that “cultural identity is always something, but it is never just one thing” (Hall 174). Diasporic formations, therefore, lie inside of national formations geographically and politically, but outside of them ideologically and, in many ways, culturally. Diasporic configurations—and here Hall refers to the Caribbean, but it holds true for other regional variations as well—“require Derrida's notion of *differance*—

differences that do not work through binaries, veiled boundaries that do not finally separate but double up as *places de passage*, and meanings that are positional and relational, always on the slide along a spectrum without end or beginning” (“Thinking the Diaspora” 548). So while the nation is the container within which the diasporic common is formed, the identity of its people remains flexible and adapts to new developments. Acknowledging this adaptable identity is vital to recognizing the power of diasporic consciousness to interrogate the efficacy of the nation as a strictly enforced organizational unit. However, here one must be careful of the slippery slope between acknowledging a group’s cultural autonomy and policing them out of membership in the dominant culture. An example of the latter is found in strands of right wing American politics that second guess or outright ignore the citizenship of marginalized groups. As is the case with Gilroy’s example of British blacks being kept at a distance because they lack an essential “Britishness” that is a complete fabrication, several groups in the United States are shut off from full membership because they lack a certain “Americanness.” It is for this reason that Mexican-Americans are sometimes described as being more loyal to Mexico or American Muslims are accused of being more loyal to Islam than to their patriotic duty as Americans.

A prominent example of the phenomenon of Othered populations being kept from full membership in mainstream culture was the short-lived controversy around a speech given at the 2016 Democratic National Convention by the gold star parents of Humayun Khan, an American Army soldier killed in action in Iraq. As Pakistani immigrants and practicing Muslims, they expressed outrage at then candidate Trump’s venomous rhetoric toward both immigrants and Muslims. In response, candidate Trump bragged that he had

made equivalent sacrifices in his career as a real estate developer and posited that Khan's mother had remained silent during the speech because of Islam's authoritative attitude toward women. Like most other things in our twenty-four hour, rapid fire news cycle, this story quickly faded from the public eye and Trump went on to be elected. But what it illustrates is just how deeply entrenched distrust of the Other is, especially when couched in a narrow, nationalistic sense of identity. That the entire Khan family affair was not disqualifying for the Trump campaign is emblematic of multiple issues in American culture and politics, but at its core is this discriminatory sense of national identity and citizenship that informs the actions and political affiliation of many but does not halt immigration or prevent the formation of diasporic communities.

What discriminatory reaffirmations of a national essentialism miss is the unique, overlapping histories of the people who come to populate the nation. Jean Bernabe, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphael Confiant write that American culture is "*in many respects, a migrant culture, in splendid isolation*" (282). They delineate between this idea of Americanness and Creoleness. The historical movements of people, regardless of the reason, lead to the development of a Creolized identity, and so "Creolness is the face of belonging to an original human entity which comes out of these processes in due time" (Bernade, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 283). The writers claim that this diasporic consciousness expressed as a non-essential and shifting Creoleness "perfects Americanness" because it includes the double processes of "*adaptation of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to the New World*" and "*the cultural confrontation of these peoples within the same space, resulting in a mixed culture called Creole*" (283). So while the concept of Creolization is usually thought of in the sense of Caribbean culture, here it is

expanded to include all of the groups present in the new world who were forced to change and adapt to the collision of established cultures caused by the intrusion of European colonialism and its aftermaths.

In this way, the thinking of Bernade, Chamoiseau, and Confiant aligns with Hall's conception of a diasporic identity that slides along lines of difference in order to redefine itself. However, Hall is also aware of the foundational myths that are often used to hold a people together, and these myths are often structured in such a way that they offer an optimistic outlook. These myths are ahistorical and anachronistic, yet they point to possible futures. They are also paradoxical in that "they work by ascribing what they predict will happen to their description of what has already happened, of what it was like in the beginning" (546). These myths attempt to look both forward and backwards, but fail to do either because they present history as repetition rather than a process of becoming. Hall proclaims about these paradoxical myths, "A people cannot live without hope. But there is a problem when we take our metaphors too literally. Questions of cultural identity in diasporas cannot be thought in this way" (546). A people's foundational myths, which often take cyclical forms and nearly always promise some sort of ultimate liberation, are much like the imagined community of the nation in that they both strive to create a contained, cohesive unity that can be effectively observed and administered. In other words, although primordial identity myths are complex and often deeply entangled with how a people thinks of itself, they ultimately aid in the bureaucratic work of making the nation legible. About this fraught relationship between diasporic consciousness and the nation, Hall identifies a need for a different understanding:

The relationship between Caribbean cultures and their diasporas cannot therefore be adequately conceptualized in terms of origin to copy, primary source to pale reflection. It has to be understood as one diaspora to another. Here, the national frame is not very helpful. Nation states impose rigid frontiers within which cultures are expected to flourish. (550)

Instead of reading diasporas as having a direct and identifiable correlation to its antecedent culture, they should be read as interconnecting networks of history and identification that transcend national boundaries and the preconceived ways in which a people is imagined. In this way, a diasporic common is linked to the postnational imagination in how both work to construct a better understanding of what it is to be in our contemporary world.

While the nation persists and does not seem like it will fade from prominence for some time without a major catalyst to accelerate the process, most likely some form of mass movement akin to that seen in *Exit West*, diasporic commons are a strong representation of the kinds of forces that are working both within and counter to national forms. That such oppositional forces exist should be a source of hope and excitement for those who seek something to combat the stagnancy and hostility of the current global order. As Appadurai states, “In the longer run, free of the constraints of the nation form, we may find that cultural freedom and sustainable justice in the world do not presuppose the uniform and general existence of the nation-state,” and this possibility, while surely unsettling to some, “could be the most exciting dividend of living in the modern age” (23). Rather than attempting to shoehorn populations into an imagined homogenous whole, a future postnational order may be “a system based on relations between

heterogenous units (some social movements, some interest groups, some professional bodies, some nongovernment organizations, some armed constabularies, some judicial bodies)” (23). All of this is facilitated through the act of circulation that serves as the method by which a common asserts itself as an active subject. Hardt and Negri lay out what this process of circulation looks like and how it establishes a common:

The kinds of movement of individuals, groups, and populations that we find today in Empire, however, cannot be completely subjugated to the laws of capitalist accumulation—at every moment they overflow and shatter the bounds of measure. The movements of multitude designate new spaces, and its journeys establish new residences. Autonomous movement is what defines the place proper to the multitude. Increasingly less will passports or legal documents be able to regulate our movements across borders. A new geography is established by the multitude as the productive flows of bodies define new rivers and ports. The cities of the earth will become at once great deposits of cooperating humanity and locomotives for circulation, temporary residences and networks of the mass distribution of living humanity. (*Empire* 397)

In this passage they describe the multitude, which is best thought of as the mass of people living within a given common. The multitude can reside within the common and the existence of the common would allow the multitude to be more settled than previously. The establishment of such a common is made possible through the prosthetic technology of telecommunications and the will of the people to escape from outdated forms that no longer serve their material interests or those of the people they care for.

As explained in previous chapters, this is the work of the postnational imagination, and few phenomena are more postnational or require more imagination than the formation of diasporic identities and the commons that support them. This is a necessarily hopeful formation that, while it does take into account the current workings of world systems, is optimistically speculative in nature, which makes storytelling and the novel in particular strong forms of circulating images of what it may look like. The power of groups of people to move around the globe is already disrupting systems of power, whether it is the migration of professionals or the flow of refugees from war-torn areas. While in reality those groups are often met with force from those who would prefer there be no flow of people through borders and that their countries stay ethnically homogenous, the postnational imagination takes the opposing stance: flows of people are generative forces that form new commons that are culturally rich and possess a solidarity formed not from identification with an imagined past, but from the lived experience of being within a heterogeneous common. It can be difficult to imagine what such a common would look like and the orientations that would go into bringing it into being. This is where the postnational imagination steps in, as shown in the previous chapters. What a focus on diaspora and history brings to the postnational imagination is a way of incorporating preexisting ways of being in the world—diasporic identity—with the need to grapple with the multivalent history that creates such subjectivities. The ways in which the novels address these aspects show how current formations that are seen as static can be reimagined and become useful in working toward a postnational identity.

### Storytelling as Identity Formation and the Shock of Return in *The Last Warner Woman*

Kei Miller's *The Last Warner Woman* (2010) imparts a diasporic consciousness through its interrogation of the act of storytelling and its efficacy in identity formation. The center of the novel is Adamine Bustamante, the titular warner woman. As a warner woman, Adamine possesses the power of premonition, which she refuses to ignore, even when it brings her harm, most prominently when she migrates to England and is institutionalized after giving a warning. The story of the novel is told in flashback in the form of two dueling narratives, one by Mr. Writer Man, a mysterious figure who is eventually revealed to be Adamine's long-lost son produced through her sexual abuse at the hands of a mental asylum groundskeeper, and by Adamine herself, who subverts the Writer Man's story by recounting her truth of events. However, unlike Mr. Writer Man, Adamine does not use the medium of the novel. Instead, the portions of the narrative that she provides are prefaced with the line, "an installment of a testimony spoken to the wind" and are delivered orally.

This multiplicity of storytelling forms in the novel provides a unique take on not only narration, but also in how the past is recorded and presented. The first time Adamine's perspective is introduced she lays out the nature of her testimony:

That sound is the wind, and this is what I going to write my story on. I was made to understand this from I was just a girl—be careful what you talk ... careful or else the four winds will take it up like a kite that loss its owner, take it far, far to those whose ears you never want to hear it. But I don't care who hear me tonight. I ongly care that somebody does. (33)

This section, like the others narrated by Adamine, underscores her recreation of events born of her own desire for the truth and the interplay of that message with the wider world she inhabits. She emphasizes this rhizomatic nature in her storytelling further when she tells Mr. Writer Man that it does not take any skill to write a story, “[a]ll you have to do is put one word after the next and you continue like that until it done” (97). Instead, Adamine places emphasis on the reception of the story as a means of deciphering events and separating the truth from fiction: “it take a special skill to hear a story--to incline your ears toward what may seem like silence. For nothing in this world is silent, you just have to learn how to hear” (97). It may seem as if Adamine is wasting her breath by speaking her story onto the wind instead of documenting it on paper, but for her the creation process is constantly ongoing and dispersed across all creation. It is the simple part; the difficulty in a story is in the listening. Mr. Writer Man embraces this revelation at the novel’s close and remarks on the limited nature of the novel:

every book is a miracle--at once fully itself, but also a portion of itself. That is to say, every book runs cover to cover, but the story within breathes its own breath, inhabits a space larger than its covers can provide. In the end, every story is edited, brought down to some essence, because here is the sad truth: books end, and pages thin, and every word is pulling us toward that last, climatic full-stop.  
(272)

Adamine’s rhizomatic storytelling practices cannot fit between two covers, and Mr. Writer Man realizes that any attempt he makes to squeeze it into such a confined space will only succeed partially; the rest of the story is outside of the physical constraints of the book. Adamine emphasizes that through her form of telling she is able to tell her story

“crossways,” which she compares to Jesus preaching through parables. Once these crossways stories are gathered, “you finally see a line had been running through all of them. Sometimes you have to tell a story the way you dream a dream, and everyone know that dreams don’t walk straight” (Miller 251).

Adamine’s crossways storytelling relying on a rhizomatic form of oral composition encapsulates the novel’s relationship to history, how it is recorded and disseminated. In looking for the central, connecting thread among all of the crossways stories, Adamine is practicing a form of subaltern history meant to critique her ill treatment at the hands of exploitative forces located within the metropole of late twentieth century England. While her life in Jamaica is by no means easy, it is not until she migrates to the U.K. that she suffers her greatest injustices: being institutionalized by English authorities and being sexually assaulted by the groundskeeper of the asylum in which she is imprisoned. These two events are emblematic of the disconnect between the history and folkways of her native Jamaica and its onetime imperial master, and Adamine’s ultimate reaction to them at the novel’s close, in which she reaffirms her legacy as warner as embodied in her son and how that legacy connects them across time and in spite of repressive systems, offers an example of creativity as a force for transgressing the inertia of the past. In telling her story in her own way, free from the tethers of western storytelling conventions and in her own voice, through her own methods, Adamine sorts the mess of her complex history into a form that allows her to most effectively exist in the world in her current state. In doing so, she reclaims her identity as warner woman and reaffirms the possibility of breaking away from the hypernormalizing forces of mainstream society. Rather than fully assimilating and

forgetting her past as warner woman or suffering a full mental break that impairs her ability to express her personality, she reconstructs herself by revising her history through storytelling.

Adamine's relocation to England is marked by her relegation to the margins of society and the inability of British society to comprehend the types of knowledge that her premonitions represent. This is most clearly illustrated in the scene in which Adamine, no longer able to suppress the power of her visions, delivers a passionate warning in public. Her delivery of the warning is made strange through a shift in the point of view from Adamine to a white, British constable, Sergeant Mitchells. Mitchells represents a not wholly prejudicial attitude toward immigrants from the former colonies that at once attempts to empathize with their plight while also wishing that they would fully assimilate. However, what empathy he does feel is driven by what he sees as immigrants' fulfillment of their patriotic duty as British subjects: "Fair is fair, he might tell you, they fought for the Mother County when others just sat in their offices the whole bloody time. And after the war there was all that rubble to be picked up, and train tracks to be relaid, and the houses to be rebuilt" (181). As long as immigrants work within the framework of what is best for the nation, then they are welcome, but Mitchells is also quick to point out the faults with the influx of people. For instance, he notes that following World War II there were more jobs than people to fill them, but there were also not enough homes, leading many immigrants to turn to group living. Such a living situation made Mitchells' job more difficult when he was called to calm domestic disputes, and therefore he feels that immigrants are often more trouble than they are worth (Miller 181). This is the attitude that he brings to his interaction with Adamine when he attempts to calm her

while she is giving her warning. However, as he approaches her he has an otherworldly experience that verges on an awakening in his thinking about immigrants from the former colonies:

And then suddenly he believes he is going to drown. He believes the earth is going to swallow him. He believes blood is going to rain from the sky and the moon will turn into red. The closer he gets, the more he accepts everything she is shouting. He wants to turn back and warn everyone else too, that right here and right now, in the cold of Birmingham, there will be a natural disaster the like of which has never been seen. But Mitchells has worked in the force for too long and is only two years away from retirement, so he pushes the thoughts from his head. (183)

The inner conflict that Mitchells experiences is an interesting microcosm of the attitude of the former empire to its former subjects. Adamine's power as a warner woman is based in her knowledge and acceptance of alternative ways of knowing that exist outside of western rationalism, namely belief in the spirit world and a deeper connection to nature. Removed from those ways of knowing, Mitchells is overwhelmed when he approaches her and experiences the power of her warning, which cannot be fully explained through rational means. However, the close of the passage illustrates the final disconnect between the two worldviews as Mitchells' desire for retirement and a reasonable pension overrides his temporary slip into belief, showing an intrusion of his modern capitalistic society and the ways of thinking that it engenders.

The ignorance of alternative histories and ways of being in the world is also illustrated by the government documents regarding Adamine's arrest and

institutionalization that are procured by Mr. Writer Man. Most arresting is the “supposed cause” that is noted for Adamine’s “attack” of lunacy: “of West Indian Origin” (176). Mr. Writer Man comments that he was not aware that being of West Indian origin was a psychological condition, and how statistics of the time showed that West Indians accounted for the highest percentage of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia in British asylums, “as if only the very crazy had bothered to climb aboard ships and sail to the Mother Country” (177). He continues:

I used to think that this had everything to do with Columbus’s blindness, or something like it—that unable to recognize what was so deeply religion in the Caribbean people flooding her shores, Britain had misread them as mad or deranged. Their tambourines and their hats and their habit of speaking in tongues seemed like lunacy to Britain. (177)

Not only is the ignorance of a unique relationship to history and spirituality present in the minds of citizens such as Mitchells, but it is also documented in and reflected by government policy toward those West Indians who are viewed as mentally ill because of their diasporic relationship to their home culture and its intrusion into “true” Britishness. In this way, the Britain of the novel is tied to imperial Britain and other such entities that first silenced alternative histories and ways of being in the world and then overwrote them with the empire’s approved historical narrative.

The problem of history and its intertwining with culture and literature is central to understanding the novel’s debate on the most effective form of storytelling because controlling how the past is recounted is one way to control a person or people’s identity. Colonial empires were especially adept at this control of how the past is told, which

accounts for the necessary and long overdue explosion of subaltern history and postcolonial critique at the end of the twentieth century. For so long, history told in the Western style and with Western interests in mind was the dominant form, and so alternative or related histories were purposefully buried. This is what Edouard Glissant refers to as history with a capital H, “a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West” (75). Glissant’s conception of history is useful in this instance for two reasons. First, as a major theoretician of the Caribbean and its transatlantic connections, his writings are especially fruitful for those looking for a framework to critique relations between the former colony and the dominant metropole. Second, he emphasizes the need for a creative approach to unraveling the influence of capital H History. He emphasizes the necessity of a collective consciousness among the oppressed in order to form meaningful resistance to entrenched modes of colonial thinking. He describes the resistant relationship to history that collective consciousness must form:

The problem faced by collective consciousness makes a creative approach necessary, in that the rigid demands made by the historical approach can constitute, if they are not restrained, a paralyzing handicap. Methodologies passively assimilated, far from reinforcing a global consciousness or permitting the historical process to be established beyond the ruptures experienced, will simply contribute to worsening the problem. (61)

Rather than passively assimilating methodologies for understanding the world, the collective must form new approaches. To rely on capital H history is to dislocate a large portion of the overall narrative of a people. Glissant comments on this failure to establish a creative subaltern critique: “This dislocation of the continuum [of history], and the

inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory” (62). This nonhistory is, in effect, “the erasing of the collective memory” (62). With so much of their narrative dislocated and replaced with the dominant History of the hegemon, a people are subjugated, brought into the fold but never allowed to fully assimilate, forever Othered.

In contrast to the failure of allowing a nonhistory to take root, Glissant claims that a creative approach is necessary if a history is to be reclaimed. This creative approach bears much resemblance to the postnational imagination with its dedication to ongoing critique of prevailing systems of control. In this sense, the postnational imagination is a necessary and useful force because it allows one to break from the paralyzing orbit of History and reclaim marginalized stories while also forging new ones in the present and into the future. About the formation of history and time in a imperial context, Hardt and Negri write, “Empire exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order. In other words, Empire presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary” (11). As those permanent and eternal orders fell during the second half of the twentieth century, colonies and their people became unstuck in time and began reclaiming histories that had been buried. Miller’s novel takes up this work of reclaiming history, and so Adamine and Mr. Writer Man construct interweaving subaltern histories that eventually converge in their shared present. A major way in which the novel reconstructs historical narratives is by combining the oral storytelling of Adamine with Mr. Writer Man’s adherence to western forms of communication, namely, the novel. That *Warner Woman* is itself a novel brings to mind the form’s lineage as an inherited colonial form. However, Miller places multiple traditions in dialogue with each

other, including Mr. Writer Man's formal writing, Adamine's oral tradition, and the administrative discourse of empire in the form of official documents and interviews. These ways of knowing overlap to create a more complete, inclusive view of Adamine's and her son's history.

The use of a postnational imagination to overthrow the tyranny of History, transgress the formation of harmful nonhistories, and reclaim buried cultural connections is relevant to Adamine's previous claim that completing a story is as simple as putting down word after word until it is finished, except now it also includes the reception of those stories. Like the telling of a story, reception of a story must also involve the reclamation or at least the acknowledgment of marginalized history. Adamine describes this necessity: "it take a special skill to hear a story—to incline your ears toward what may seem like silence. For nothing in this world is silent, you just have to learn how to hear" (97). Mitchells nearly opened himself to this kind of receptive mode, but was lured away at the last moment and fell back to relying on his preconceived notions of rationality and capitalistic self-preservation. Rather than rely on his embodied experience as an individual who was willing to empathize with Adamine in the moment, he returns to the bureaucratic systems in which he is intertwined and how they determine his actions. That he thinks of his pension shows a movement of administrative power from the heights of the state government down through its mechanisms to Mitchells and, at the end of the chain, Adamine as a disturbance of the public peace. As the aftermath of her arrest reverberates meekly through the information systems of the British government, the documentation of Adamine's institutionalization translates the truth of her story into the bureaucratic language of the British nation. But the most insidious way in which this

theme of listening or ignoring a story manifests in the novel is in Adamine's abuse at the hands of Bruce Young, the mental institution's gardener.

Adamine's abuse is representative of the larger issue of her being Othered and kept from full membership in British society owing to both her West Indian origin and her refusal to give up the types of knowledge tied to her role as a warner woman. This is illustrated in part three of the novel, "*in which others bear witness to the story*," which includes short sections in the form of interviews Mr. Writer Man conducted with those involved with Adamine's time in the institution. Chief among these are a sympathetic nurse who attempted to warn the matron of the institution about the possible abuse and the matron herself. While the nurse relies on her care for Adamine as an individual and her own observations of the strange behavior of the gardener to form her theory that abuse is occurring, the matron is less convinced and expresses a general obstinance to admitting her negligence. When Mr. Writer Man directly confronts her about that negligence, which is in the present of the novel proven to have led directly to his mother's rape and his birth, the matron attempts to rationalize it away, commenting on her hiring practices that the work attracted "either those who would have been better suited as prison wardens, or those who would be better off as patients. Madness attracts madness. Simple as that" (241). When Mr. Writer Man asks her if she is able to live with her decision with the benefit of hindsight she is definitive in saying, "You're damned right I can" (242). If history can be said to be contained in the individuals that it ultimately produces, then the matron is a clear and frustrating presentation of those who are not only willfully ignorant of past wrongdoings, but also wholly unrepentant and in some cases even assured that their actions were correct in the moment. In the context of

the link between Miller's novel, history, and literature, it is this reactionary and regressive attitude that most starkly stands in opposition to the work of the postnational imagination in interrogating prevailing systems of narratives in order to create alternatives. It is the same kind of cultural inertia that animates so many of the resurgent far right nationalisms in our current time that serve as apologist for the historical subjugation of Othered populations in hopes of reinstating the capital H history of white, Western excellence. How can such a powerful force linked to the primordial sense of national identity be defeated?

One way to combat the stubborn inertia represented by the matron is through the postnational imagination, which seeks to break from the biopolitical enforcement of entrenched, harmful norms. As we have discussed in previous chapters, since the modern nation is firmly biopolitical in its enforcement of its authority, one such way to combat its more nefarious tendencies is through embodied resistance. This is reflected in the boat people at the close of *The Sympathizer* who resist through the act of living into a future in which they will create new worlds. It is also seen in *Exit West* in the mass movement of the migrants who stand against the strict enforcement of borders just by existing and refusing to be moved from their new homes. In *The Last Warner Woman* it is present in Adamine's approach to retelling her story in her own words to regain her own truth, but it is also in the very existence of Mr. Writer Man and his project to attempt to tell Adamine's truth as it applies to him. One way this is reflected in his research is in how he is never able to find a clear photo of his mother's attacker, noting that in every one he finds Bruce Young's image is blurred or obscured, "as if the world wants there to be no evidence of the man's existence" (216). This is in keeping with the disconnect between

bureaucratic British society and the truth of the marginalized, namely Adamine and, now, her son. However, he is also aware that the truth will not be denied and that he embodies it: “But then, I am here. I exist. That is evidence enough” (216).

At the novel’s close it is the generational connection between Adamine and her son and the resistance they present through merely existing that resonates as a means toward reclaiming lost histories and opening new worlds. In a flashback Adamine tells a story of the matron, in an uncharacteristic show of empathy, taking her to a nearby park to see her son after Adamine has a breakthrough in her treatment in which she remembers her son and expresses sadness at not being involved in his life. As she watches her young son play from a distance the boy begins spinning and yelling “*zooooooooom,*” and Adamine notices the resemblance that this act bears to her own acts of warning. She is filled with happiness at this realization: “And I know what was happening to you, my child. It was the spirit, The spirit did hold you” (268). As her young son spins and Adamine watches in astonishment, both are admonished by authority figures; a teacher in the boy’s case and the matron in Adamine’s. In a show of resistance to this stifling, Adamine notes, “But the two of us wasn’t paying them an earthly mind. We was Warners together” (268). In that moment she is linked with her son across chronological time and systems of knowledge, as well as through the oppressive power of the bureaucratic powers and cultural misunderstandings that have separated them.

The novel’s close provides a final statement on its multiple, overlapping connections: between mother and son, individual and nation, History and its alternatives, literature and reality. Mr. Writer Man has located Adamine and taken her into his home in an attempt to restore her memory and finally get to know his mother. He allows

Adamine her space and freedom, spending the days working on his manuscript about her life. As mother and son begin settling into a steady routine and Adamine's memory is slowly returning, the novel ends on a final note of optimism for the future. We learn through Mr. Writer Man that Adamine delivers her nightly testimonies to the wind while standing on the railing of his apartment's balcony with no additional support, facing the city as she speaks. As he watches her he notes, "I had to admit, her body seemed so relaxed, so unencumbered, as if she were no longer penned in by any man, or any country, or even my story" (269). By taking up a form of story telling that allows her to reclaim her truth and avoid the pitfalls of writing, which is a limited form confined to a page and subject to revision, archiving, and destruction, she is untethered from the systems of oppression that might otherwise suppress her narrative as they have in the past. Calling back to Adamine's earlier comments, Mr. Writer Man states about the power of storytelling, "every book runs cover to cover, but the story within breathes its own breath, inhabits a space larger than its cover can provide" (272). While at first relying on the accepted primacy of writing as a form of creation, owing to his upbringing as a white-passing British citizen, he comes to realize the shortcomings of fitting any reality into a book. The best that he can do as author is collect as many facts as he can about his mother's life and assemble them, along with his own commentary, in good faith. It is through the kind of rhizomatic creation practiced by Adamine and finally accepted by Mr. Writer Man that they are finally able to reunite as mother and son while also preserving the truth of their intertwined histories outside of the bind of hegemonic centers, with the biopolitically minded nation being the most influential and destructive.

By the novel's end, Adamine and her son are both firmly established as products of diaspora in the form of Adamine's return to the center of power in Britain. However, they are also no longer beholden to the same forces that saw them both institutionalized, her in an asylum and him in an orphanage. Instead, they have taken back the power to narrate their troubled histories and become more than administered bodies that are moved about at the will of a bureaucratic apparatus. Through their storytelling and by way of their coming together, they are able to exist as free individuals and, if the ending of the novel is to be read optimistically, reunited mother and child. Adamine is able to finally be at peace in Britain because her use of storytelling has allowed her to form a sense of identity that is not completely bound by the nation. Rather than relying solely on identification with her Jamaican heritage or assimilating fully to Britain, she relies most heavily on her lived experience, which includes the lived truth of her warnings and what they invoke within her and in others, as was shown in her interaction with Mitchells. Her knowledge of warning and the unseen world is not stripped away by her experiences, but reinforced, and she uses it in combination with those experiences to come through her abuse intact and able to form a view of her past that allows her to continue into the future. Similarly, her son is able to contend with the truth of his origin, which is distressing in its nature but hybrid and productive nevertheless. As the product of abuse of the margin by the center of power in the form of Adamine's assault by both the British government and the gardener, he has both worlds available as a touchstone for identification. However, he chooses a new path that allows him to claim both his mother's past and his British upbringing in forging his own identity in the aftermath of diaspora and the new world it has created within the old. He is the living embodiment of the traumas of the past and

their reclamation through history, and his final understanding of his mother and of the power of storytelling show that he has come to see the act of creation as something that is unending, and so can contain hybridity in whatever forms it may take, meaning there is no limit to the new worlds that can be called forth from the remains of the old, as long as those remains are sifted through thoroughly. The novel, therefore, models ways in which narratives can serve as tools for reclaiming history, such as through real world practices like oral storytelling or simply living, surviving, and even thriving within diaspora.

### **An Ocean of Connections in Gyasi's *Homegoing***

Like *The Last Warner Women*, Yaa Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* (2016) takes as its focus the intertwined nature of past, present, and future, as well as transatlantic and transcultural connections. It employs a unique split narrative in which two sides descending from a single mother are followed through multiple generations to the present day, with the starting point as sometime in the 1700s in the Asanteland region of west Africa, an area that would later become the nation of Ghana. The matriarch of every focus character is Maame, an Asante woman who gives birth to two daughters, one while enslaved in a nearby Fante village after a battle and another after her return home. Through multiple twists of fate connected to the history of the region, one daughter, Effia, remains in Asanteland, eventually marrying a white British man working within the slave trade, while the other sister, Esi, is captured, sold into slavery, and transported to the United States. As the plot unfolds we are introduced to several members of these two lines and watch as first colonization and slavery, and then emancipation and decolonization exact their collective tolls while also offering opportunities for recreation. For the purpose of this study, the most contemporary descendants' experiences offer the

best examination of how the novel implements strategies of diasporic, hybrid consciousness and subaltern history to challenge grand narratives of both family and nation. In place of those narratives, the novel suggests embracing the chaotic, rhizomatic aspects of history and one's own lineage in order to both heal historical traumas and push forward to new ways of being in the world.

Like Adamine and Mr. Writer Man's reevaluation of the form and power of storytelling in *The Last Warner Woman*, *Homegoing* has much to say about the ways in which we construct stories, especially when they involve personal histories thoroughly entwined with the erratic flows of history. The way the novel most directly introduces complications to how history is thought is through the character Yaw, the last descendent of the Ghanaian half of the family to live in Ghana before ultimately immigrating to the United States in his later life. As a child Yaw is badly burned when his mother, Akua, becomes entranced by a spiritual vision and sets fire to his family's home, killing his two siblings and scarring him for life. His mother is also badly burned but survives, and their relationship is predictably and permanently strained by the event. This event and how it links Yaw, his mother, and his daughter to one another and back to their common ancestors is illustrative of the novel's approach to history and how it can be implemented into new forms of identity and being in the world that reckon with its complicated implications while also seeing it as a generative force for moving into the future. The nature of that history within the novel—African tribalism, British colonization, American slavery and then racial segregation, etc.—means that it has much to say about the hegemonic center of the nation as a source of oppression and manufactured connections

between people that are ultimately less relevant than closer ties of kinship and like-mindedness.

To understand Yaw's place in how the novel develops its attitude toward history and storytelling, it is crucial to comprehend his mother's violent actions and their fallout. The reason his mother, Akua, committed such a heinous act is that she experiences dreams and visions of a burning woman holding two children, which is a direct reference to her great-great-great-great grandmother Maame and Maame's daughters Esi and Effia, the progenitors of each of the novel's focus characters. Akua was raised by Christian missionaries following the death of her mother, Abena, during a botched baptism by the overzealous mission priest during which he drowned her. She does not learn this until she marries a fellow tribesman and leaves the mission, eliciting much anger from the priest who believes that all black Africans must admit that they are wicked and convert to Christianity. Akua's rejection of mission life and insistence of continuing the line of non-Christian Africans is a direct offense to the priest and the brand of "civilizing" imperialism that he represents. Additionally, this background story reveals connections between colonial proselytization and fetishization of native bodies as Akua notices that the missionary "looked hungry, like if he could, he would devour her," when he is whipping her with a switch (184). The mission, in this sense, is an emblem of colonial oppression to be escaped, which Akua does after marrying. Additionally, it plays a crucial role in the generational trauma experienced by Akua's divided family line, in which members continually run into oppressive institutions, whether it is British colonialism, American slavery, or any of the other racist forms that they take. With this in mind, the burning woman of Akua's dreams is representative of this generational trauma

that has its seeds in Maame's initial capture and escape, the originary act that set the two sides of the family on their respective courses.

The aftermath of Akua's actions is carried by Yaw in his physical scarring, which complicates his life, leading him to largely withdraw from social interaction outside of his classroom. However, he is eventually able to accept his facial scarring and even use it in elaborating his view of history. While teaching, Yaw implores his young students to think about history as storytelling. To illustrate his point he asks his students to tell the story of how he got his prominent facial scar. While at first apprehensive about insulting their teacher, the boys eventually begin relating the multiple rumors they have heard about Yaw. Once the students have exhausted their tales he asks them which one was correct, leading one student to eventually reply in a sheepish tone that there is no way of knowing because none of them were there. Yaw enforces this point by telling the class, "This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others" (226). He elaborates upon this rudimentary point:

We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture. (226-227)

Yaw relates to his students the basic concept of reclaiming one's subaltern history, although he also concedes that even that picture will be imperfect. In this way, the novel

makes a direct nod to a major concept from postcolonial studies while also drawing connections between that concept and the events of the novel. The novel is itself a practice in writing a fictional subaltern history of those who were run over by the biopolitical apparatuses of imperialism, and in recovering those stories it attempts to tell a version of the truth and, in so doing, offer some form of healing and optimism for the future. As the narrative unfolds across several generations of the central family who are either directly involved in or related to the forced African diaspora to the United States, it suggests the nation's shortcomings as a means of personal identification and as a means of constructing one's past. Characters struggle to form a nation-affiliated identity, whether because of their status as slave or because of ostracization brought on by their cultural hybridity. The novel, therefore, works through the postnational imagination in drawing connections across time, history, and collective trauma rather than the imagined bonds of the nation.

Marjorie and Marcus represent the preservation of history in the memories and living flesh of descendants and the generations that follow them. Additionally, their final realizations at the novel's close are indicative of the kind of liberational postnational thinking that does not completely throw out connections to others, but does reframe them outside of national boundaries. Both characters are also representative of the move from margin toward the center that was discussed in chapter one regarding Adichie and Nguyen. Both Marjorie and Marcus are able to reclaim their complex family histories through their academic pursuits. Both attend Stanford University, where they eventually meet and form an immediate connection. In fact, how both characters come to their academic pursuits is indicative of the long journey to recognition of one's place in history

and the connections that transcend systems of power that is conveyed so powerfully in the book.

In Marjorie's case, she inherits her academic prowess from her father. As a lifelong teacher, Yaw is quick to instill the importance of learning in his daughter. However, this desire to excel in school is complicated by Marjorie's liminality within her community. She is hyperaware of her hybrid identity, especially when at home in Alabama. She is made even more insecure by the other African American girls in her school, with whom "it took only a few conversations with them for Marjorie to realize that they were not the same kind of black that she was. That indeed she was the wrong kind" (268). These girls view her as Other, an anomaly among their normalized African American identities, going so far as to chant "white girl" at Marjorie because she enjoys reading for classes (Gyasi 269). She does find a modicum of support in her teacher, Mrs. Pinkston, who asks her to write a poem for a black cultural event at the school entitled "The Waters We Wade In," an example of the novel's multiple uses of water as a symbol.

Despite Mrs. Pinkston's encouragement, her high school years are marked by ostracization and disappointment, with the breaking point marked by her short-lived relationship with Graham, a classmate who has just moved to the U.S. from a German military base on which his father was stationed. While they share interests and Graham shows genuine affection for Marjorie, he is eventually lured away by the popular, white kids of the school, even going so far as to call Marjorie to explain that he cannot attend their school's prom with her because so many people in the school and community would not find it acceptable. In response, she returns to Mrs. Pinkston's earlier advice in order to channel her experiences into her poem: "Here, in this country, it doesn't matter where

you came from first to the white people running things. You're here now, and here black is black is black" (273). When combined with the previous example of her classmates teasing her for not being "the right kind" of black, this scene shows the multiple constructions of race at play in American society and how Marjorie is unable to completely fit into any of them comfortably. Despite this, she is affected by each of the constructions she is confronted with, whether it is being ostracized from her classmates or Mrs. Pinkston placing upon her the pressure of being black and exceptional in an inherently rigged system. With the weight of these pressures, as well as her experiences and family history in mind, she produces a heartfelt poem for the "The Waters We Wade In" event, and it is met with acclaim and tears from her father. In the poem, she draws connections between the twin experiences of Africans and African Americans, pointing to a common origin and relationality across culture and nation, perhaps best encapsulated in the lines, "The waters seem different / but are same" (282). While the poem is written in Marjorie's voice and has the general air of a juvenile exploration of a complex matter, it holds the kernel of Marjorie's, and by extension Gyasi's, view of how the seemingly untraversable spans of history and geography can be collapsed through personal identity formation that takes into account one's place in the great arch of time. Rather than focus on the differences that have marked her as Other, Marjorie focuses on the similarities that should unite those within the diaspora, which echoes the relationship between the split in the central family of the novel and the divide between Africans and those within the diaspora. Stressing this sense of unity among those who are a part of the extended African diaspora is not without complication, however, as it could be seen as reinforcing essentialist ideas of who is allowed into the diasporic community and who is to be kept

outside. This attitude is similar to that which led Marjorie's classmates to consider her as not truly black because their definition of black included all of their notions of what it means to be African American and the weight of those histories. Being located in a liminal state between African American, African, and her own individual identity, Marjorie chooses to emphasize what is common among members of the diaspora. Her unique position allows her to see the benefits of this stance and benefits it could hold not just for forging transatlantic connections, but also for bringing those like her into the greater common. Additionally, she seeks to form greater connections that span the present and the past and cross the Atlantic in both directions. Rather than fully adopt identification with her home of the U.S. or her parents' home of Ghana, she chooses to instead find a home within the network of connections available within the diaspora writ large. This orientation is unlikely to win her the friendship of the girls in her class, but it does allow her to find some kind of peace with her hybrid identity and reckon with the multiple forces that made that intricate identity possible, be they imperialism and slavery or the later formation of migration for personal safety and/or gain. Unable to fully connect with those in her immediate vicinity, she forms deeper connections between past and present that allow her to feel more confident in her sense of self.

Her new diasporic orientation and penchant for education find Marjorie enrolled at Stanford, where she crosses paths with Marcus. In contrast, Marcus was less likely to find his way into academia. Raised by his grandmother and recovered drug addict father in New York City, Marcus has a different relationship to his history and his place within society. His father, Sonny, is always ranting to his son about the discrimination faced by African Americans. When Marcus eventually comes to learn that much of what his father

has told him has basis in historical fact, he observes “that his father’s mind was a brilliant mind, but it was trapped underneath something” (285). That something is the crushing weight of the daily struggle to manage his lifelong addiction through methadone treatment while providing for his soon through menial labor as a janitor. He is also influenced by his grandmother’s spirituality which manifests in her church attendance and general belief in visions. Marcus has his own light experience with such beliefs in relation to the family’s Sunday dinners, during which he often feels the presence of an extending family: “In that room, with his family, he would sometimes imagine a different room, a fuller family. He would imagine so hard that at times he thought he could see them” (290). His grandmother tells him that this may be his own vision, that he carries the same sort of gift that certain of his ancestors did, “But Marcus never could make himself believe in the god of Ma Willie, and so he’d gone about looking for family and searching for answers in a more tangible way, through his research and his writing” (290). In that research he uncovers the story of his great grandfather H, who was exploited as part of a convict leasing labor scheme in Alabama but eventually rose to a prominent position as a union leader at the coal mine at which he worked. Marcus initially finds the work fulfilling, “but the deeper into the research he got, the bigger the project got,” until it becomes overwhelming and he fears that it will only lead to his developing the same kind of bitterness and anger that led to H’s imprisonment, thereby completing what Marcus sees as a cycle of exploitation.

Upon meeting Marjorie, however, Marcus begins to view this history differently, and he is eventually able to put his difficulty into words. This change begins to occur when he reveals his fear of water to Marjorie. Marcus’ section of the novel begins by

emphasizing this fear: “Marcus didn’t care for water. He was in college the first time he saw the ocean up close, and it had made his stomach turn, all that space, that endless blue, reaching out farther than an eye could hold” (284). In response to this revelation, Marjorie relates, “My grandmother said she could hear the people who were stuck on the ocean floor talking to her. Our ancestors. She was kind of crazy” (294). Marcus responds, “Shit, everybody in my grandma’s church caught a spirit at one point or another. Just because somebody sees or hears or feels something other folks can’t, doesn’t mean they’re crazy. My grandma use to say, “A blind man don’t call us crazy for seeing” (294). In this exchange there is a clear turn away from the strict, academic approach to forming connections that Marcus has practiced to this point with a more spiritual turn toward feeling and believing in what is unseen; not necessarily in a supernatural sense, but a sense of accepting the unknown as part of the equation of history. From this realization, Marcus begins to see history as a continuous timeline that stretches in both directions, past and future, connecting every member of his extended family, as well as those who they have, do, and will interact with. The sheer scale of this network of connections is why he struggles so mightily with his project: “How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside of it” (296). Beyond inspiring his view of history and the form that his project takes, this view also affects his view of his personal identity, so that he feels that he is “an accumulation of these times. That was the point” (296). In this way, he embodies the most current

iteration of the long history we encounter in the novel, which is complex and transgresses borders between cultures and nations.

Near the novel's conclusion, Marcus reveals his fear of water to Marjorie, a truth that he has only recently realized himself: "It's because of all that space. It's because everywhere I look, I see blue, and I have no idea where it begins. When I'm out there, I stay as close as I can to the sand, because at least then I know where it ends" (296). Here, the infinite expansiveness of the water is reminiscent of the overwhelming nature of his research project in which he felt lost among the sea of stories, their overlap and their multiplicities of meanings. His comprehension of his fear and its symbolic significance is accelerated when Marjorie flippantly suggests that maybe Marcus would enjoy the beach at Cape Coast in Ghana, and he unexpectedly and spontaneously agrees to make the trip. In this truncated final scene, Marjorie and Marcus tour Cape Coast Castle, which played a vital role in their ancestry both physically and as a symbol of British colonial power and its slave trade.

As Marjorie and Marcus run out to the ocean a sly observation is offered that implies the diasporic, postnational consciousness that is coming into being within the distant cousins:

Outside, there were hundreds of fishermen tending their bright turquoise nets. There were long handcrafted rowboats as far as the eye could see. Each boat had a flag of no nationality, of every nationality. There was a purple polka-dotted one beside a British one, a blood-orange one beside a French one, a Ghanaian one next to an American one. (299)

Similarly to the close of *Warner Woman*, this scene implies a final setting free from the oppressive bonds of singular or hyphenated national identification and an embrace of the array of identifiers available to those living within a diasporic common, here represented by the ocean into which they jump together. As they swim, Marjorie takes off her necklace, which consists of a dark stone, and places it on Marcus, punctuating the act by telling him, “Welcome home” (300). This stone is one of two given by Maame to her children, the other of which was lost in the dungeon of Cape Coast Castle before its wearer was shipped to the New World. In passing it to Marcus, Marjorie completes the cycle of the narrative and reestablishes the link between the two estranged sides of the family. The cousins swimming in the Atlantic is symbolic of their acceptance of their place in an infinite network of connections, familiar or otherwise, that stretch back into history and forward into possible worlds. In the present, this realization grants both Marcus and Marjorie comfort and a feeling of finally understanding their place in a society that has marginalized them.

Both *Warner Woman* and *Homegoing* point to the importance of reassessing one’s embeddedness in history and how that process necessarily changes their identity in the contemporary world. This process is crucial to the postnational imagination because, staying with the demands of a worldview inspired by critical posthumanism, it sifts through the remnants of one’s personal past and a more general world history in order to address challenges raised therein while also moving to create a new way of being in the world and understanding that place within it. Additionally, it allows for a coming together of those who were similarly victimized by history, either in its physical manifestations within empire or its construction as a field and way of understanding the

world. This new worldview is born of diasporic consciousness chafing against the stringent boundaries of the preexisting culture, whether it be West Indian migrants in the U.K. or descendants of slaves in the U.S., which in their devotion to an outdated worldview fail to take these new forms into account in any way other than a capitalistic incorporation into the economic order and as sources for renewed discrimination against those perceived as Other. Latinx Americans are one of the nation's largest demographics and accordingly many corporations would love to earn their dollar, but that does not stop them from being the target of prejudice both on a social level from those hooting to "make America great again" or institutionally in the form of I.C.E. raids or generalized and reinforced suspicion from law enforcement. To combat these impulses within the wider culture it is necessary to deploy the same kind of creative reexamination of history, to imagine a more equitable world. Such a world would not form arbitrary connections based on one's place of birth and its romanticized history, but upon the ties that actually bind people together, including their positionality within a time and place that allows for new commons. The nation was put into place to make a people legible, but it is no longer needed for that purpose. Instead, they are able to trace their own threads of connections and identify those aspects which truly connect them to others. In this way, authority is placed back within the hands of those who are most directly affected, meaning that the formation of commons is no longer under the control of a centralized power, but is instead disseminated across the mass of individuals living in the hyperconnected world.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

## TRAPISTAN: POSTNATIONAL COOL IN CONTEMPORARY HIP-HOP

The preceding chapters focused on the postnational imagination as it has developed in contemporary works of literature. Broadening the horizon of this framework to include works outside of the normal confines of the page, this chapter theorizes a related system of cultural production and consumption that is termed “postnational cool” for its reimagining of hip-hop style and influence as cross-cultural tools, taking cues from socially conscious rappers and western academia, namely postcolonial and race theory. Precedence is established for this mode through a short timeline of socially conscious hip-hop and the inherent contradictions therein. The concept of “cool pose” is established and expanded upon using several frameworks that read music, lyrics, and images to understand how cool functions in hip-hop. The image of cool is complicated by the inclusion of Islam, which is thoroughly interwoven with hip-hop both historically and in emergent styles, namely those who aim to advocate for the Other both within their communities and on a global scale. Musicians M.I.A. and Swet Shop Boys are read through this lens, with special attention to lyrical content, visual presentation, musical style, and what Regina Bradley names “hip hop sonic cool pose,” which consists of audio markers meant to project an aura of cool with or without lyrical content. Additionally, the documentary *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* is referenced to examine the ways in which artists such as M.I.A. strive to be heard as activists and speakers against racism and neoimperialism while simultaneously attempting to maintain the braggadocious image of a successful recording artist.

This mode of examination reveals a structure of feeling within the works of these artists and others in which cultural hybridity, transnational social justice, and expanded individual subjectivity are privileged and amplified through the performance of hip-hop cool transfigured through the lens of postnational identification with a variety of cultural modalities. Chief among these are transnational solidarity movements among oppressed populations and the use of cool as a means of building sentiment against exploitative social and governmental practices. In this way, these musical artists serve as examples of the postnational imagination as they address hybridity, social and international justice, and diasporic subjectivity in a form that is more readily disseminated and directly consumed by transnational audiences. By working within an artform and industry that allows for greater production speed and greater reach with far less effort—a self-produced track can be readily spread through multiple online services—these artists are the closest that the postnational imagination comes to going viral. By moving at such rapid speed and embodying a rhetorical approach—cool—that often translates across both national and cultural borders, the postnational hip-hop artist perhaps holds more potential for influencing change than any other type of postnational imaginative creator.

### **Early Hip-Hop and Social Consciousness**

Although it is a point of historical debate, rap and hip-hop culture are most commonly traced to 1970s New York, with its worldwide emergence coming in 1979 with the release of Sugarhill Gang's seminal hit "Rapper's Delight." The track succeeded in pushing the genre to the forefront of American popular culture, with its vast, hegemonic influence, for the first time. Before the explosion of "Rapper's Delight," early hip-hop artists produced music meant for community-wide block parties and other

celebrations, and that jubilant attitude is reflected in the upbeat nature of the track and its cheerful, low-stakes lyrics, perhaps best encapsulated in the onomatopoeic chorus and verses that contain everything from repeated brags of being the best MC to a detailed story of becoming ill from eating your friend's mother's cooking. This earliest example of rap success, along with successive examples up to the present day, have led those unversed in hip-hop culture to label the entire endeavor as frivolous and lacking in content. While it is difficult to defend a manufactured track<sup>2</sup> such as "Rapper's Delight" from critical evisceration, tracks that followed it began to reveal a greater social and cultural awareness within the burgeoning artform.

The movement from the good-time rhetoric of "Rapper's Delight" to a more critical tone is exemplified by the release of two major tracks of the early 1980s. The first is Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks" from 1980. Although it bears similarities to the linguistically playful rap that preceded it—the word "break" or a homophone is repeated 84 times—it represents a beginning of deeper consideration of the social issues facing the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*, S. Craig Watkins relates the origin story of Sugarhill Gang and "Rapper's Delight." 43 year old small-time record producer Sylvia Robinson tasked her son, Joey Jr., to search out rappers so that her label could be the first to break into the unexplored market of rap music. Legend holds that Joey Jr. found group member Henry "Big Bank Hank" Jackson working at a pizza parlor and Jackson initially auditioned in the back of Sylvia's car. The rest of the group fell into place just as serendipitously and the track became a vital part of American music history, spontaneous yet fabricated.

poor, usually black communities that were the breeding ground for early hip-hop. Perhaps showing some influence from the blues tradition, Blow touches on such hardships as your partner leaving you, being hassled by the IRS, losing your job, and a final verse that details a young woman meeting the perfect man only to slowly realize that he is in fact broke and married. These events are given a playful tone and the refrain of “that’s the breaks,” meaning “that’s just the way things are,” suggests a passivity in the face of such problems, a recognition coupled with a lack of critical engagement.

This attitude was upturned by the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message” in 1982. Alternating verses from MCs Melle Mel and Duke Bootee paint a darker picture of urban life than anything heard in “The Breaks” and the song’s tone is far removed from the good time vibes of “Rapper’s Delight.” The refrain “It’s like a jungle sometimes / It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under,” encapsulates the naturalistic view of the song, which unfolds with great force in the opening verse:

Broken glass everywhere  
 People pissin’ on the stairs, you know they just don’t care  
 I can’t take the smell, can’t take the noise  
 Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice  
 Rays in the front room, roaches in the back  
 Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat  
 I tried to get away but I couldn’t get far  
 ‘Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car

These opening lines emphasize the claustrophobia of life one cannot escape while touching on issues from the prevalence of drugs and crime to the general malaise created by such a bleak existence. An addendum to the chorus, which has become the song's most iconic words, reinforces the precarious nature of living in such a world: "Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge / I'm trying not to lose my head." The push not to lose one's head, reminiscent of but more prescient than Kurtis Blow's claim of "that's the breaks," shows a budding social critique within early hip-hop, one that is given more weight by the concluding verse of "The Message" in which Melle Mel weaves a detailed story of a young black man entranced by the wealth and power of "number-book takers, thugs, pimps and pushers and the big money-makers." The verse ends with a warning to avoid such pitfalls or else sing the "sad, sad song / of how you lived so fast and died so young." In this way, "The Message" moves beyond the block parties and good times to the struggle of black urban life.

In observing the unexpected cultural explosion of early hip-hop, S. Craig Watkins notes, "As terms like innercity and underclass were reinventing America's racial vocabulary, a thriving cultural underworld began to bustle with energy and innovation. It was at once the worst and the best of times for those who pioneered and peopled the hip-hop movement" (9). While the artform was ascending to formerly unthinkable heights of cultural relevance and economic viability, many of its makers and consumers saw little change in their own neighborhoods. This contradiction between the seeming opportunity created by hip-hop and the continued decay of the inner-city would give rise to the more visceral music of the 90s, an era during which gangster rap emerged and came to dominate the hip-hop landscape. These new acts were more in-your-face about the harsh

realities of life in the hood. Soon the form exploded into the mainstream through acts like Ice-T, who detailed the realities of gang violence in songs like his groundbreaking “colors,” the first rap song to be the title track of a major motion picture, and supergroup N.W.A. whose debut album *Straight Outta Compton* created massive controversy with tracks like “Fuck tha Police” while also going platinum domestically as well as abroad. There was a more socially conscious albeit violent and profane brand of rap that took the naturalistic storytelling of “The Message” to a new level. This new breed of MC did not only want to show the audience what life on the streets was like, but to embed them in it. Soren Baker explains this new intimacy with violence that was coupled with a jump in sales:

Yes, the Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis Blow, Whodini, Run-DMC, LL Cool J, Dana Dane, and Beastie Boys had all gone either gold or platinum by 1987, but the rap landscape was changing. The first-person presentation of gangster rap made it more urgent, more sensational, and more vital than any other music in the marketplace, rap or otherwise. Gangster rap wasn’t just artists rapping about what they saw, but also what they did. They were products of the streets whose art reflected their life experiences—gangs, violence, drugs, and sex. (25)

While social activists and even the U.S. government became involved in the battle over hip-hop’s place in the cultural landscape, groups kept rapping about what was true to their experience and audiences kept buying. This clash would eventually culminate in the codification of the explicit content warnings on record packaging, a warning that did little

to slow sales and in some cases may have helped encourage the youth of America to indulge in the forbidden fruit.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a boom in “bling rap,” which was less focused on social issues and the hard knock life of the inner-city and more concerned with ostentatious displays of wealth and power on the part of the MCs. In a narrower sense, the term “bling” is used in references to the physical markers of individual wealth and status such as large, expensive jewelry worn by MCs. The chorus to “Bling Bling” by Cash Money Millionaires perfectly sums up the attitude of the form:

Bling bling, every time I come around your city

Bling bling, pinky ring worth about fifty

Bling bling, every time I buy a new ride

Bling bling, Loriners<sup>3</sup> on Yokohama tires

Each line contains an outward display, from being generally out and about in the city to pinky rings worth more than many cars. The focus of MCs shifted from reflecting the brutality of the streets to flaunting their wealth and, perhaps most importantly, being seen doing so. Eric K. Watts theorizes this trend through the lens of what he names “spectacular consumption,” “an interpretive schema for defining and clarifying the relations among hip hop culture, gangsta rap narratives, and the interposition of an expanding rap industrial complex into the American culture industry” (594). This

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<sup>2</sup> A popular brand of automotive wheels. The reference to them here is in line with bling rap’s fondness for expensive “rims,” which included the infamous “spinners” that would keep rotating after the car came to a stop.

theorization is dependent upon consumption not just by the artist, but of the artist's work: "Thus, spectacular consumption describes a process through which the lifeworld of the artist, the meaning of representation, and the operations of the culture industry get transformed based upon terms generated by public consumption of the art" (594). The message of tracks like "Bling Bling" is then the sheer spectacle of the wealth being displayed and how it reflects the desires of the listener. Critiques of this vainglorious brand of hip-hop, which are at their core reminiscent of similar complaints about the flippancy of early tracks like "Rapper's Delight," target the hollowness of the lyrical content. What they miss is that such hollowness is exactly the point. The extreme braggadocio of bling rap is meant to be representational of the economic ascendancy of its artists, a flag firmly planted on the cultural landscape.

The purpose of tracing this lineage of hip-hop from its beginnings through its late declarations of success is to arrive at its current moment, which is as filled with contradictions as its storied beginnings. A brilliant case study that touches on this unique ecosystem is Mark Anthony Neal's examination of Jay Z and Kanye West's 2011 track "Niggas in Paris." Neal's multipronged approach looks into debates around authenticity and artistry, all within the context of Jay Z and West's depiction of themselves as globetrotting, seemingly post-racial figures. He notes that the track highlights "the mobility afforded the privileged status of artistic icons such as Jay Z, West and Beyonce Knowles, but also the allure of a city, synonymous with cutting edge fashion and art" ("N\*ggas in Paris: Hip-Hop in Exile," 150). To Neal, this mobility is representative of a form of "Afropolitanism," which Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe defined in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Black South Africans were expected to "work in

the city but not live in it,” which Nuttall and Mbembe identify as a possible explanation for “the force and power of attempts to conquer the right to be urban in the present”

(282). These attempts to claim urbanity lead to new relations with place and mobility:

To occupy the center of the city, its subjective core, to produce forms of city style at such velocity. To draw on a culture of indifference and restlessness that nourishes self-stylization. To produce an original form, if not of African cosmopolitanism, then of worldliness. The Afropolitan? Afropolis? At least, the entanglement of the modern and the African. (282)

Neal expands the concept to include African-Americans, observing that they “are generally not thought of as part of a global diaspora” and that movements such as Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism “express African-American cosmopolitanism that pivots on a symbolic, if not fully relatable, connection to the African continent” (“N\*ggas in Paris: Hip-Hop in Exile,” 152). In opening up the Afropolitan to include African-Americans, Neal identifies the means through which artists like Jay Z and West are able to present themselves as supremely mobile figures, not just through their fame and wealth, but through their status as symbolic representations of what was for so long denied to black communities worldwide. More than just the wealth of the bling era, they represent greater things as well: mobility, access, and a general sense of freedom. They complete the shift from the earlier, more frivolous seeming era of hip-hop, through the more socially conscious movements within the genre in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a return to frivolity with emphasis on ostentation during the bling era.

This shift was facilitated by multiple factors, including the rise of hip-hop to a highly profitable sector of the music industry, which allowed more rappers to explore

their artistry and craft novel MC identities for themselves. But perhaps the most significant factor was the rise of internet music sharing and the new doors it opened for artists to create and share music. Beyond music, social media and the proliferation of online journalism allowed artists to craft larger than life images beyond their lyrical boasting, meaning that someone like West could go from underground rapper to international influencer, including being the subject of *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, an academic collection of essays examining his work and persona. Through the use of the prosthetic of technology to build a following and craft an accompanying persona, artists like Jay Z and West were able to reach new heights of not only fame and creative freedom, but also access in a tier of society once unavailable to hip-hop artists no matter how much wealth they flashed in their videos. In transcending the boundaries of American culture and of the United States as a nation through the kind of jet setting glorified in “Niggas in Paris,” Jay Z and West illustrate a hyperactive form of the postnational imagination that has the ability to reach a far wider audience than the most popular author, and in a fraction of the time.

What allows these artists to so readily and successfully move through the multiple networks that they must navigate in order to reach such high levels of fame and cultural influence? Jay Z and Kanye West wield an especially powerful weapon in creating their larger-than-life, hyper mobile personas: “cool.” Examinations of “cool” as a concept within hip-hop culture have largely focused on the outward performance of black male masculinity as a fulcrum about which much of the industry moves. Richard Majors and Janet Bilson introduced this formulation in their *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood*, which outlined how upon being denied access to mainstream avenues of

success African American men found creative forms of self-expression and image building:

Unique patterns of speech, walk, and demeanor express the cool pose. This strategic style allows the black male to tip society's imbalanced scales in his favor. Coolness means poise under pressure and the ability to maintain detachment, even during tense encounters. It helps the black male make sense out of his life and get what he wants from others. Cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male's everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular. (2)

By imbuing the concept of cool with cultural cache and associating it with identifiable physical and communicative markers, Majors and Bilson move it out of the shadows of colloquialism and bring it into the light of material reality. In this way it is connected to the critique present in socially conscious hip-hop, which grapples with the harsh realities of African American life while encasing it in the cool of the musical form. Through the deployment of cool the mundane is made spectacular, whether it be an interrogation of urban poverty or the presentation of a diamond encrusted watch.

While the two modes of performativity—social critique and material ostentation—may seem to be inherently divorced from one another, it is not uncommon for these two streams to interweave so that a track like Jay Z's "99 Problems" includes both braggadocio about his wealth and the newfound power it affords him as well as an indictment of police racial profiling. This is especially evident in the second verse that takes the form of a mock traffic stop during which Jay Z raps a dialogue between a

younger version of himself and the police officer. The officer is given a condescending yet clearly idiotic tone as he asks if the younger Jay knows why he's being pulled over to which the rapper responds, "'Cause I'm young and I'm black and my hat's real low." This clever retort is met with the officer revealing his prejudice and the asinine policing it engenders by responding, "Well you was doing fifty-five in the fifty-four." This one mile-per-hour infraction is expanded into an impromptu search of his car, which Jay Z slyly counters by saying that he knows his rights so the officer will need a warrant to search the locked parts of his vehicle. This is all after earlier acknowledgement that if the event was to spiral into possible incarceration and court proceedings, "I got a few dollars I could fight the case," which is both acknowledgment of a bureaucratic, discriminatory legal system and a casual brag about his accumulated wealth. Throughout the track cool pose is deployed through a combination of social consciousness and braggadocio that lends Jay Z an aura of being all things to all fans. In this persona he is both street wise and formally educated on how the social system he inhabits is meant to deny him the access he deserves and he is quick to flash the wealth and recognition that can, at least in some way, purchase that access. He can denounce racial profiling and its ramifications for those in the legal system with one line and then brag about his bank account in the next and both lines work toward the same rhetorical goal.

While the persona crafted by Jay Z in "99 Problems" through the use of cool pose is able to create new ways with which to be in a world that denies so much to the speaker, it is not without more problematic elements. Most notable is the repeated use of phrases like "bitch," "ho," and "pussy" to refer both to women, such as in a chorus borrowed from an earlier Ice-T song, and to other men who are painted as being weak, cowardly,

less successful, or otherwise lesser than the image of a man created by Jay Z. Majors and Bilson built such problematic issues, which have plagued hip-hop seemingly since its beginning and still draw ire from critics, into their formulation of cool pose. They note that cool pose includes “the presentation of self that many African American men use to establish their male identity,” “a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances” (4). These performances are meant to create an aura of “pride, strength, and control” and the “chameleon-like” men who use them can alter their performance to meet the expectations of particular audiences. However, Majors and Bilson also emphasize the illusory nature of these performances, noting that they are achieved through use of “an imposing array of masks, acts, and facades” (4). Regina Bradley elaborates, adding that cool pose “leans heavily upon stereotypical and often uncontested expectations of black masculinity” (55). Todd Boyd also emphasizes the complex and paradoxical nature of “cool,” which he names as “a pride, an arrogance even, that is at once laid back, unconcerned, perceived to be highly sexual, and potentially violent” (118). The desire to maintain this cool pose leads to the creation of rap personas that are presented as at once nonchalant and ready to inflict violence in order to prove their masculine vigor. How these personas appear within the music is the aspect of the genre usually the target of those who think of it as violent or unsuitable for certain audiences. However, this attitude is reactionary in its condemnation of lyrical content and fails to see the deft maneuvering artists use in order to carefully craft an image that will both resonate with their audience and maintain the emotional distance required of cool pose.

What the resistance of cool pose on the part of some illustrates is the incorrect belief that the inclusion of socially conscious verses in mainstream hip hop is the exception to the rule. In reality, it is the intermingling of the problematic elements of cool pose with social consciousness that has made contemporary hip-hop the successful, multi-faceted genre it is. Tracks like “99 Problems” and Kanye West’s “Diamonds from Sierra Leone,” which decried the fetishization of “blood diamonds” mined in West Africa, dot the landscape of mainstream hip-hop, and they sound from car stereos alongside less socially aware tracks more concerned about partying, romantic relationships, and/or wealth. In fact, the aforementioned tracks include those elements as well. Does this mixing of seriousness and spectacle diminish the efforts of artists that decide to be outwardly political or socially conscious in their music? Can an artist on the same track call for solidarity among the oppressed and use disparaging remarks against women and/or men who fail to conform to the masculine orientation of cool pose? Can a song express both unity and willingness to use violence without hesitation? This contradiction has remained at the core of hip-hop for decades and it is still very much present in discussing the postnational imagination as it pertains to the genre. When stereotypes are evoked in postnational cool they are almost always used in order to draw connections with previous formations of cool pose to build cultural cache, and so are meant to be taken with a grain of salt, but the question then becomes just how many times one can perform an identity before they come to inhabit it. If an artist performs a misogynist attitude on nearly every one of their songs then it comes to matter little if they do or do not hold those beliefs in their private life; they have constructed the public image of an avowed misogynist. With this in mind, artists, especially those who exhibit

postnational cool, must be mindful to remain playful and skillful in their deployment of such tropes lest they undermine the more socially conscious aspects of their music.

This observation about mainstream success reveals more about the type of music that is valorized and marketed by the recording industry than the sum total production of all artists. Furthermore, after artists have established a name for themselves, gained in popularity, and eventually been assimilated into the global hip-hop mainstream, they are more likely to experiment with their craft, both sonically and lyrically, as was the case for Kanye West and his later albums, including the sonic extravaganza of his slickly produced and critically beloved *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and the more hard-edged, industrial sound of *Yeezus*. On the latter album, West, who is no stranger to voicing his political opinions, broke new ground as an artist by including tracks such as “New Slaves” in which he posits modern capitalist consumption as a new form of enslavement for African Americans, and “Blood on the Leaves,” which includes a skillfully used sample of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” and also discusses racial issues in America. Beyond addressing current injustices against the African American community, West reaches back into history and seeks to impart not just awareness, but deeper types of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This is the impulse that postnational cool takes up, and it is

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that Kanye West’s public image has undergone multiple revisions and reassessments since the initial release of *Yeezus*. A number of unusual public interactions and social media posts led many to speculate on his mental health and whether or not his actions were part of an elaborate media stunt. Most strikingly, he

especially present in the music of post-9/11 artists such as Swet Shop Boys and M.I.A.. These acts evoke cool in ways learned and borrowed from American rap of the 80s and 90s, but with the addition of diasporic cultural influences including Punjabi, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Caribbean, and a host of others. M.I.A. especially has built a reputation for including a range of world musical styles, while Swet Shop Boys make frequent sonic reference to Indian and Pakistani music and culture. Beyond these musical references, each act's lyrics often draw transnational connections, whether within the culture of hip-hop or more broadly as a means to build social solidarity with marginalized populations, reimagining cool into a form that combines social consciousness on a world scale with both braggadocio and musical influences from culture not usually associated with hip-hop culture. This solidarity building approach is made especially potent by the ability of artists to disseminate their music to wider audiences and at greater speeds than ever before, with the global proliferation of smart phones placing their music well within the reach of billions. Their music and accompanying visual images expand hip-hop to a global scale, infusing within it a postnational essence.

### **Hip-Hop, Islam, and Identification with the Other**

Cool pose as described by Majors and Bilson is an invaluable tool for describing and understanding the ways in which hip-hop communicates with its audience, but their formulation is too narrow to be readily applicable to emerging trends in hip-hop, namely the genre's transnational appeal. A useful case study for understanding ways in which

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received much media coverage and ire from fans when he voiced his support of president Donald Trump, even meeting with the president in the White House.

cool pose is being reshaped for the needs of our contemporary age is found in the burgeoning form of Muslim and Muslim-allied<sup>5</sup> hip-hop. While hip-hop and Islam may seem like strange bedfellows, the religion's place in African American history means that it has been at the very least a peripheral presence since the music's beginnings. However, it was not mainstream Sunni or Shia Islam that informed many artists, but instead the Nation of Islam and, most directly, the Five Percent Nation. The Five Percent Nation is a syncretic offshoot of the Nation of Islam (NOI) founded by Clarence 13x after his break from the NOI. Ideologically, the Five Percenters' beliefs are similar to the NOI with the major break being that the Five Percenters believe each man to be god. With this in mind, they see God as existing in the flesh, not as an unknowable, celestial being. This demystification extends into how followers interpret the world, with numerology playing a vital role in the form of "supreme mathematics," along with the accompanying "supreme alphabet." These systems are ways of coupling letters and numerals with qualitative values that Five Percenters believe allows them to read deeper meanings in texts and numbers. Felicia Miyakawa describes this scientific approach to religion: "Five Percenters take care to distinguish between Islam as a science or 'way of life' and Islam as a religion, and maintain that they are, above all, scientists, investigating Islam in a mathematical manner" (30). Rather than submitting to orthopraxy, "Five Percenters see Islam as a flexible way of life, a mode of encountering the world in their own self-deified

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<sup>4</sup> I use this term to refer to those artists that are not themselves practicing Muslims but show solidarity with Muslims as an oppressed group, as elaborated upon later in the chapter.

orbit” (Miyakawa, 30). In this way, Five Percent belief allows for alternative moralities that may violate the rules of mainstream Islam, but do not interfere with their ability to “show and prove,” which is the way in which they prove the naturalness of their way of life (Miyakawa, 31).

The emergence of the Five Percent Nation as a cultural force in the black community of New York, the city of its founding, would mean that it would inevitably have connections to hip-hop. Michael Muhammad Knight traces this evolution in his in-depth study, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York*:

Years before hip-hop’s emergence, the Five Percenters had secured a cemented place in New York’s collective black psyche. Allah’s First Born had become grown men and fathers; the city would be home to teenaged Five Percenters that had been raised with the Mathematics from birth. In 1965, teachers suspended students who insisted on using their “Muslim names;” a decade later, elementary school children had Allah for their legal name. (n.p.)

As the Five Percenters became an established orthodoxy, the sons of believers mentioned by Knight would grow to become vital contributors to hip-hop, including but not limited to iconic artists such as Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, Nas, and multiple members of the Wu-tang Clan. By weaving supreme mathematics and other esoteric references to their belief system into their music, these artists brought and continue to bring their unique strain of Islam into the mainstream of hip-hop, albeit it at differing levels of strength. Their music is therefore a unique version of socially conscious rap through which the God MC “can

use the medium to teach the world, but while millions listen, he can also engage his Five Percenter family in a private conversation” (Knight, n.p.).

While the influence of the Five Percent Nation mostly flew under the radar for much of hip-hop’s early history, the 1990s and early 2000s would bring Islam to the forefront of international relations in unforeseen ways. The first gulf war and tensions with majority Islamic nations such as Libya brought with them an intensified interest in Islam. However, those events would pale in comparison to the proliferation of study and criticism of Islam following the attacks of 9/11. However, African American Muslims, most notably members of the NOI or Five Percent Nation, received relatively little scrutiny in comparison to immigrants from the Muslim world and Americans with heritage in those countries. The wave of prejudice and criticism toward Islam, interpreted broadly, irresponsibly, and often ignorantly, led to a necessary sea change in the ways in which Muslim Americans interact with their country and its culture. As had been the case time and again, hip-hop proved to be a valuable tool for confronting stereotyping and social inequalities, specifically the surge in anti-Islam sentiment in Western culture. The music and other cultural production that emerged include transnational and transcultural connections between not just the African American community or a Pan-African community, but also other communities of oppressed peoples, including those areas of the Muslim world suffering under foreign invasion or neocolonial practices. Chief among these groups are Muslims in the west suffering from post-9/11 prejudice, Iraqis and Afghans living with war and destruction in their home country, and Palestinians long subjected to Israeli occupation. Both independent and mainstream artists would adopt these populations as points of reference in calling for change on a world level, but as is

almost always the case in hip-hop, those calls would be wrapped up with the desire to maintain authenticity and project an aura of cool.

### **Expanding Cool Pose**

A reformulation of cool that takes the nuances of Muslim hip-hop into account is developed in Su'ad Abdu Khabeer's *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. Khabeer adds to the concept of cool pose the needed angles of femininity and religion, specifically Islam and the presence of American Muslims in hip-hop culture. Her conception of "Muslim Cool" borrows heavily from earlier formations and is founded on blackness and its performance as metonym for cool. This adoption of cool pose in a Muslim context "avoids reifying Islam/West dichotomies" because instead of casting Muslims as "peripheral or as outsiders who navigate assimilation," Muslim cool paints American Muslims as "actors whose lives and experiences are critical to the production and reproduction of the contemporary United States and the 'West' more broadly (9). Khabeer emphasizes the vital role of self-knowledge in building this agency, naming it "the first bend in the loop of Muslim cool." Springing from her reading of Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman in America*, she takes up the convergence of the elements of time, learning, and action as the birth of self-knowledge. Time calls on Muslims to learn the past in order to better interpret their place in the present; learning calls them to deliberate study, including "alternate knowledges that converge and diverge with mainstream narratives of science and history; action calls for active change that will make individuals more independent and grow agency in the face of oppressive hegemonic systems" (Khabeer 61). These three concepts working together can lead to self-knowledge regarding race and one's place in the prevailing social system one

inhabits, and they also reflect Khabeer's emphasis on what she terms "the sincerity of race," which marks it as "unsettled and unsettling," "a tie that binds" (227). In this way, race is taken as a meaningful point of identification despite its socially constructed nature: "As a 'performance,' Muslim cool reiterates the definition of race as a social construct that is formed and functions within contexts of power and inequality . . . [it] is not a primordial essence, and its performance is something that must be learned and relearned" (137-138). Thus, Muslim cool reshapes cool pose into a new form that challenges constructions of identity including religious identification, race, and gender. These categories are present, but become more fluid than in Majors and Bilson's construction of cool pose as a means through which to establish and maintain black masculinity.

To better trace the ways in which cool is performed it is necessary to also read it sonically, as it is carried through the music. Regina Bradley's idea of hip hop sonic cool pose allows for the overlapping layers of cool to be analyzed within the actual production of hip hop music. She defines it as "a sonic redressing of black masculine performance in the hypercommodified and commercial space of rap music" that "negotiates complexities of black masculinity through presenting sonic signifiers of black manhood, experiences, and coolness" (59). It functions within the music by "[f]raming black men's narratives through a combination of instrumentals, vocals, and other relevant sounds like grunts, laughter, and wails," thereby "making space for the performance of otherwise silenced, supposedly non-normative feelings and expressions" (59). A similar concept is Meghan Drury's "sonic Arabness," which also focuses on "sampling practices, sonic layering, and linguistic play" that allow Arab artists to "perform geographic and temporal flexibilities

that makes audible the nuances of ‘Arabness,’ or popular associations with Arab culture” to facilitate diasporic resistance to challenge “public fear and repressive state discourse” (2). Nitasha Sharma goes beyond focus on the sonic attributes of the music to its spirit with her examination of “post-9/11 Brown” as an identifier for what she describes as “an antiracist global political subjectivity that critiques empire” (292). She expands upon this definition to better tie the domestic to the global:

Racialization is both imposed (the denigration of “Blackness”; the racialization of “the Muslim”) and is a process with which individuals can engage (Black racial pride; post-9/11 Brown). Post-9/11 Brown is a global identification expressed by these artists but is representative of a broader constituency that links racism at home to imperialism abroad; it highlights racial and religious markers, it incorporates a critique of global capital (of oil in the Middle East, of militarization) and of dominant and false representations. It is not the case that 'Brown is the new Black'--these are distinct, simultaneous, and parallel experiences. (302)

Each of these formations expands the theoretical viability of cool beyond the bounds of African American culture to include those from other marginalized populations. This shift is necessary given the global distribution of hip-hop and the new artists that the artform has inspired around the globe. From critique of inner city poverty in the United States to critique of American Neo-Imperialism abroad, hip-hop culture has adapted to major changes brought on by globalization and the ubiquity of international telecommunications. Even if hip-hop is narrowed from its definition as a life style and way of being in the world, the act of producing the music is often a form of resistance

against oppression. The ease, speed, and cheapness of producing and disseminating music electronically has only aided those artists who want to spread a specific message. Hip-hop is such a useful tool for building solidarity that in 2011 BBC journalist Cordelia Hebblethwaite asked “Is hip hop driving the Arab Spring” in an article that covered several MCs from around the Middle East who were promoting social consciousness among their people. Even the large sound of the music has adapted, such as when acts like Swet Shop Boys include samples of music from Bollywood films or when a successful artist such as Drake uses Arabic phrases such as “masha’allah” and “wallahi” to pay homage to large Somali Muslim population active in the rap scene of his native Toronto (Kamau).

What might sonic cool pose sound like when put into practice? Like Neal in his examination of hip-hop cosmopolitanism, Bradley singles out Jay-Z and Kanye West’s collaborative 2011 album *Watch the Throne* as an arbiter of hip hop sonic cool pose. The album is an especially fruitful example of sonic cool pose given that it includes two of the most recognizable contemporary hip-hop artist combining their powers, and because of its unique audio production owing largely to West’s keen ear as a producer. Most importantly, however, is how the album presents the artists as jet setting, international phenomena whose reach exceeds the U.S. pop charts, all the way to global recognition. With this reach in mind, Jay-Z and West create an album that can serve as a roadmap of postnational cool given that it was already preordained to be an international success even before its release. Regarding the album’s sonic structure, Bradley cites the album’s prolific use of sampling of not only popular music, but also of mainstream pop culture. This soundscape creates what she calls “a map for maneuvering what 21<sup>st</sup> century black

manhood looks and sounds like in a hyper-commodified and mass-consumed cultural space” (65-66). Key to this reading of the album is the wealth and high levels of access granted to Jay-Z and Kanye given their success in mainstream hip hop. In this way, the albums is both an example of sonic cool pose and an example of artists pushing it beyond its former bounds. This shift is due to the unprecedented wealth and fame experienced by artists such as West and Jay-Z, which allows them not just to boast of the usual stacks of money and fine jewelry, but also the influence that they wield.

With this in mind, varied sampling of everything from Otis Redding’s “try a little tenderness” to the obscure 2007 comedy film *Blades of Glory* mark not a postmodern, schizophrenic mode of composition, but a worldliness and engagement that paints the two rappers as culturally omniscient; there is no space that they can’t walk into and own, whether in the middle of Paris Fashion Week or in a chat about raunchy box office flops. Additionally, addressing the space of hip hop mogul that Jay-Z occupies, Christopher Holmes Smith notes that such an image “is not intelligible without credible accounts of the lavish manner in which he leads his life,” and that such largesse simultaneously suggests not only Jay-Z’s agency, but also the lack of agency of so many others who lack his wealth and access. If conspicuous consumption is a maker of success, then not only do West and Jay-Z embody material accumulation of wealth and its trappings, but their music also reflects how they consume the culture at large, even if it something as potentially alienating as a Hollywood flop. In fact, a quote spoken by actor Will Ferrell that is inserted in “Niggas in Paris” states “No one knows what it means, but it’s provocative.” The use of this sound clip helps to illustrate that the two artists have the freedom to do whatever they want musically because their status as two of the biggest

names in hip-hop precedes them. This is reinforced by a clip of the phrase “ball so hard” from the refrain that opens the song and serves as the hook: “Ball so hard mothafuckas wanna fine me.” The focus of this phrase is the act of “balling” used in reference to the display of wealth and power on the part of the two men. The short sample of “ball so hard” is used as a stylistic flourish in each rapper’s verse, illustrating the extravagance of their wealth and success, and the stamina they bring to exercising it. Additionally, the phrase is an important sonic marker that can serve as an earworm for the listening audience as it is short, catchy, and a highly recognizable reference in mainstream culture. The extreme sonic agency at work on the track played out again with the release of West’s *The Life of Pablo*, which he repeatedly updated with reworked tracks even after it had been released online. This attention to the sonic attributes of the music matters for the maintenance of sonic cool pose and, therefore, an artist’s success, because none of the posturing or sampling holds any meaning if it does not sound good to an audience. Without a provocative sonic structure to draw the ear of the listener, any message held within the music dies on the vine. However, it is just as possible for an artist to use the boast of their sonic cool pose to form connections with the downtrodden rather than emphasize their distance from them, whether intentionally or not. So while Jay-Z and Kanye West’s deployment of hip hop sonic cool pose reiterates their status as high powered industry mainstays, there are contemporary hip hop acts that take up this method of expression to suggest new horizons not just for the musical form, but also for society at large. These acts combine threads from cool pose, Muslim cool, and a bent toward transnationalism to hint at modes of identification that move beyond nationalist

reification or self-centered insularity while maintaining many of the appeals to coolness that they borrow from earlier music.

### **The Postnational Cool of Swet Shop Boys**

One act that embodies the use of a postnational cool pose is the Swet Shop Boys. Consisting of frontmen Heems and Riz MC and producer Redinho, the group combines multilayered samples of Punjabi and Punjabi inspired music and visuals with lyrical content that walks a fine line between materialist boast and socially conscious introspection. In many ways, the group's output synthesizes the solo work of each of the MCs. Heems, real name Himanshu Suri, first came to prominence as a member of slacker-rap group Das Racist, who were known for combining the occasional highbrow insight with playful repetition, humor, and pop culture references. Heems' solo work, including his 2015 album *Eat Pray Thug*, a play on the book and film *Eat Pray Love*, maintains many of those same impulses while adding outbursts of sincerity that move beyond them. On "Flag Shopping" he revisits prejudice against Muslims and anyone thought to resemble them—He is of Punjabi Hindu ancestry—in the aftermath of 9/11. Noting the identification he felt with the United States after the attack, he says "I know why they mad/But why they call us A-rabs/We sad like they sad/But now we buy they flags." Later he comments on the upward mobility experienced by many Americans of middle-eastern or south Asian lineage, saying "On your way to the top/And now they want you to stop/Your mama pray to God/But your dad'll lose his job." This description of the rush of American Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others to purchase American flags to prove their patriotism in the wake of the tragedy renders visible a cultural trauma that is unique to those communities but had been unexplored in hip hop. Such themes are

continued in “Patriot Act,” another title chosen with prejudice and mass surveillance in mind. The song opens with the lines “Product of partition/Dripped in Prada for the stitchin’/Proud of superstitions/Got powder in the kitchen.” These lines establish a reference point for Heem’s personal identity as an American-born and raised son of Punjabi Hindu immigrants in referring to the partition of India and the cultural and religious beliefs that some in America may refer to as “superstitions.” He establishes this touch point while also maintaining cool pose through reference to high fashion labels like Prada that are a mainstay of the more wealth-oriented strands of hip-hop. “Got powder in the kitchen” can be read in two ways in this scenario, referring either to the illegal drug trade fetishized in much mainstream hip hop or to the prevalence of spices in south Asian cooking. The song closes on a long monologue delivered in his speaking voice that details his experience on and after 9/11 as a native New Yorker, including correcting his father’s English at dinner so he is not labeled as a “trouble maker.” By taking up cultural hybridity and the discriminatory nature of the post-9/11 American surveillance state as topics, tracks like “Patriot Act” show a commandeering of hip-hop culture by those outside of both mainstream American culture more broadly and African American culture more narrowly. Artists like Heems project both representation of populations usually missing from the discourse of hip-hop and cross-cultural identification with other such cultures, in this case non-Muslim American-Indians in solidarity with American Muslims from South Asia and elsewhere against prejudice in America. Rather than, like Jay-Z, rapping about growing up in housing projects and selling drugs to get by, Heems uses markers associated with his first generation American background in combination with established markers of cool, such as Prada. In doing so, he and other artists open the

genre to greater inclusion of minority populations, as well as expand the idea of what kinds of identities can be performed through hip-hop.

A similar sentiment, albeit in this case focused on English culture, is present in the music of Riz MC. The hip-hop persona of actor Riz Ahmed, Riz MC's 2016 mixtape *Englistan*, a portmanteau of his native England and ancestral Pakistan, includes tracks that are akin to those found on *Eat Pray Thug*. The title track includes a modern hip hop beat with the repetition of a musical flourish that sounds as if it is taken directly from a Bollywood film to emphasize the coming together of Riz's South Asian heritage with his British upbringing. The track's lyrics detail the multiethnic composition of the United Kingdom and the mix of optimism and intolerance that it evokes. The first verse refers to England as "A kicharee simmerin'/Women in hijabs, suringe popstars/And the promise of a Patel as a Man U star." The combination of images associated with south Asian immigrants to England with those associated with essential Englishness, best encapsulated here by the idea of a South Asian soccer star playing for Manchester United, creates a transnational flavor that establishes an especially strong form of the authenticity that is often such an important aspect of cool pose. The descriptions are true to life and unflinching in their critique of English society, such as when Riz raps "Big up the class born to rule/All in the same class since boarding school;" but the writing still upholds a sense of pride in one's home, such as in the hook:

God save the queen  
 Nah she ain't mates with me  
 But she keeps my paper green  
 Plus we're neighbors see

On this little island  
 Where we're all survivin'  
 Politeness mixed with violence.

Keeping with this hybrid view of England as both dangerous and welcoming, Riz states at the end of the second verse, “Is Britain great? Well hey don’t ask me/But it’s where I live and why my heart beats.” These lines, surely a reference to the wave of resurgent nationalist, anti-immigrant sentiment that has recently swept through Europe and the United States, reflect the self-knowledge present in Heems’ tracks, namely the idea that one may feel identification with a place but still maintain the right to thoroughly critique it from all angles.<sup>6</sup> Noticeably absent from the statement are any hollow signifiers of rote patriotism. Instead, Riz’s reasons for why Britain makes his heart beats are purposefully left out, leaving the listener to fill in the blanks and to perhaps lead them to question why they care for their home country, if indeed they do. The primacy of the imagined nation as an identifier is challenged and replaced with the lived reality of the individual forming their identity through experience.

This strand of social consciousness mixed with self-knowledge and a swagger that can either attack or disregard national affiliation altogether congealed when Heems and Riz formed Swet Shop Boys, and it is most present in the group’s 2016 debut full-length album *Cashmere*, a title that is both a reference to luxury and a play on Kashmir, the

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<sup>5</sup> Although space restrictions keep me from examining it in depth in this project, Childish Gambino’s single “This is America” and its acclaimed music video are a fine example of a similar project carried out on contemporary American culture.

well-known disputed region located between India and Pakistan, reflecting the family origins of each of the MCs. “T5,” the album’s opening track, refers to an airport terminal 5, and the song covers themes from the extra scrutiny people of Middle Eastern or south Asian descent face in post-9/11 American airports to the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. Heems’ opening lines use references to language connected with Islam and geographic locations, including Israel and Palestine, to mix awareness of world political issues with a distinct cool pose afforded him by his music industry success: “Inshallah, mashallah/Hopefully no martial law/Hai Allah, yo yallah/Let’s rock a show in Ramallah/Kick it with my homie when I’m out in Haifa/ Kick it Muhammed when I’m out in Jaffa.” In flaunting his ability to cross heavily disputed and guarded borders in order to “kick it,” Heems shows a level of access similar to that flaunted by Jay-Z and Kanye West on *Watch the Throne*, but added are the extra levels that include knowledge of Islam and its vocabulary, as well as simultaneous recognition and disregard for violent conflict in the area he is moving within. The level of mobility is very similar in both cases, but the choice of invoking Jaffa as a destination instead of Paris brings in to question why an MC would make that decision. Rather than drawing the attention of the listener to the glamour of Paris fashion week, Heems draws their attention to the Israel-Palestine conflict, showing that Swet Shop Boys are willing to identify themselves with oppressed peoples the world over while maintaining an air of cool.

Political awareness and the willingness to foreground it in the music is a vital current of postnational cool. This current continues in Riz’s verse, which begins with the exclamation “We’re militant, you’re on a Milli Vanilli vibe,” referencing the 1990’s pop act who were exposed for lip-synching their major hits and suggesting that other acts are

not as aware of or dedicated to world political and social causes as Swet Shop Boys. This idea is developed further when in the same verse he offers a hypothetical question regarding the treatment of refugees while invoking images of the treacherous crossing to Europe many of them face: “Stopping refugees is just silly blud/What’d you know about Aeneas in the *Illiad*/Fled Turkey and he just founded Rome/What if he had drowned in a boat?” In this deceptively simple line, Riz mixes high and low cultural references, opening with the common British slang term “blud” and then following it with mention of the *Illiad* in drawing comparison between its protagonist and current day refugees. This comparison does much to drive home the absurdity of refugee crossings of the Mediterranean and their danger by emphasizing the irreversible multiculturalism of Europe through the mention of Aeneas founding Rome after leaving Turkey. The lines suggest that anti-refugee policies are not just deadly, but ultimately silly given that so much of the foreign influence that is feared is already very much present in European culture and society. However, Riz’s criticism stretches farther and more generally than these lines, such as when he asks “What you mean her Majesty’s London?/Where you think all her majesty come from?” In referencing Britain’s colonial past and the wealth gained through exploitation of colonized nations, Riz shows not only the learning that is a vital part of self-knowledge, but also resistance to grand narratives that would see him and others like him placed in a subordinate position; openly questioning such a system grants him agency.

Perhaps the best illustration of hip hop sonic cool pose deployed by Swet Shop Boys is the song and video for “Batalvi,” a track from their 2014 self-titled mixtape. The song’s title is a reference to Punjabi-language poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi and samples a

live performance of his given during a TV interview. The music includes an extended sample of Batalvi singing a Punjabi language poem and the repetition of the words “slow suicide” from a clip of him referring to the life of the artist as a slow suicide. The editing of what appears to be self-shot footage of the MCs—Heems in an apartment and Riz walking around an undisclosed beach area that may or may not be Rio de Janeiro—with scenes from Bollywood films and the Batalvi interview, in concert with the lyrical content, creates a sort of postnational cool, where success and access are combined with cross-cultural knowledge and self-exploration in the face of an unfavorable world system.

Heems’ verse illustrates this confluence of cool, humor, and awareness. He opens that verse, “Heemy like the Dapper Dan that’s from Trapistan,” bragging about his physical appearance while simultaneously referencing both the illegal drug trade that is popular as a signifier of authenticity within mainstream hip hop and a heritage—Punjabi—that is not usually associated with hip hop at all. In fact, he delivers lines that could be lifted directly from any mainstream hip hop track when he muses about a vaguely defined woman he addresses earlier in the verse: “I don’t even know if she like my persona/Maybe she just want a new Gucci purse on her.” The remainder of his verse is littered with references to places in the Punjab region of India or Pakistan, which take the place of the usual hip hop references to cities that denote the jet setting life of the wealthy i.e. Paris. Flashing his connection to these places, he raps, “Got more than fam in Lahore like damn,” showing that he not only transcends national borders and unmarked borders between global north and global south, but also the dividing lines between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, these place references are entangled with symbols and talk from organized crime and the trap game, such as when he claims “My Karachi posse got

me if I need a shooter,” or that he has “shooters in Ludhiana.” He reinforces these claims with others, most notably in the form of violent warnings: “I don’t give a fuck, they just put the heater on you/They don’t give a fuck when they put the heat up on you.” Heems’ invocation of postnational cool retools the lavish private jet trips to the metropolitan centers of America and Europe and claims of living the dangers of the trap life with trips to third world urban centers where family and friends will not hesitate to lend a hand, no matter the legality of the task; he and his associates pack heat, and they won’t hesitate to use it. Of course the authenticity of these claims is dubious at best, but to point out that Heems is not in fact an unapologetic murderer or grasping criminal is to miss much of the point of cool pose. The image and how it is projected is what is bought and sold, and that image places an inclusive worldliness at the height of cool. This worldliness does not merely tout travel to underdeveloped nations as some type of politically conscious badge of honor; it emphasizes deep connection and lived experience within those places as the true sign of authenticity. It is not just that Heems claims to have traveled to Karachi or Ludhiana; it is that he seems to have close relations and associates there who are willing to lend him aid at a moment’s notice. This is the type of clout that reflects not just wealth and power, but connection to a community.

Riz’s verse expands this view even further to bring in questions of what a postnational cool mogul may look like. He drops lines that brag about his Philosophy, Politics, and Economics certificate from Oxford as well as his successful acting career, opening his verse “Who’s that Paki in the Guardian?” Elsewhere, on the track “Anthem,” he refers to himself as “the Karachi kid on the red carpet.” On the same track Heems boasts, “Same Himanshu them used to call coolie / Now my bag’s Louis,” showing the

same social ascension one would find throughout hip-hop, a genre that is often associated with rags-to-riches stories. In these images we see the emergence of a new style of hip hop artist and mogul who is on intertwining paths of self-knowledge and material wealth that gives him a voice to sound political concerns while paradoxically profiting monetarily from that image. The concerns of these artist-moguls are domestic and global, and you are just as likely to hear them reference the plight of Palestinians as the poverty in their own neighborhoods. Through their art they build solidarity with a number of oppressed groups, superseding national, racial, and cultural borders in the process. In order to best understand this postnational artist, it is helpful to turn now to the output of M.I.A., who has earned perhaps more notoriety than any other such artist and thusly is a prime example of this form of cultural engagement.

### **M.I.A. and the Limits of Postnational Cool**

M.I.A., born Mathangi Arulpragasam, is an influential and highly successful musician and artist who was born in raised in England as the daughter of Sri Lankan parents. Although she and her siblings grew up in London, their father, a founding member of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students, a Tamil militant group, remained in Sri Lanka and participated in fighting against the country's government. This revolutionary influence, along with the hybridity of being both deeply Tamil and English, comes through in her music and art, which blend multiple influences into a single braid of postnational cool. Her first album, 2005's *Arular*, was largely self-produced and distributed electronically, quickly earning her friends and critical acclaim. In the years following she has released four additional studio albums and a handful of videos that have received much attention, both positive and negative. The first such video is for

“Born Free” from 2010’s *Maya*. A fictional, extremely violent genocide against individuals with red hair is depicted as a stand-in for actual such outrages. The graphic scenes, which include young men with red hair being forced to run through a mine field, drew much media attention, with some critics welcoming the attention it brought to real oppressed groups while others thought it too explicit.<sup>7</sup> “Born Free” was followed by two lesser singles before the release of 2012’s “Bad Girls,” from her next album, *Matangi*. It was with this song and video that M.I.A. reinforced what was already a highly successful career and offered one of her strongest statements on the power of postnational cool.

“Bad Girls,” like SSB’s “Batalvi,” is a study in contradictions that creates a perfect storm of infectious beat, braggadocious lyrics, and markers of Otherness that are used to subvert the thinking that creates them. The music, composed by American producer Danja, born Floyd Nathaniel Hills, is a combination of dancehall, worldbeat, mainstream hip hop, and middle eastern instrumental music. Most prominent is a synthesizer line that immediately brings to mind the type of melody that elicits Oriental images of the Middle East. Paired with these sonic markers are M.I.A.’s lyrics, which combine the familiar cool pose signifiers of car culture and jewelry. An added element is the song’s seeming promotion of female empowerment, most clearly illustrated in the refrain of “live fast, die young, bad girls do it well.” This single line, repeated throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas Haddow’s short editorial on the video for *The Guardian* was especially lucid on this point, pointing out the ham-fisted nature of its images while praising the argument it raises about western society being desensitized to violence and the suffering of the oppressed.

much of the song, at once glamorizes both fearlessness and the evocation of “bad girl” as a status to strive for. The two lines that end the chorus tie this three-pronged image together: “my chain hits my chest when I’m bangin’ on the dashboard / my chain hits my chest when I’m bangin’ on the radio.” The image of the “chain,” a common cool pose marker of one’s wealth in the form of expensive jewelry, is enhanced by its physical motion as we see M.I.A. simultaneously speeding through the world in what is sure to be an expensive automobile—a dual signifier of both a Y.O.L.O. brand of recklessness and material wealth—but also bragging about her status as a successful musician who is likely to receive heavy radio rotation, as was the case with her biggest hit, “paper planes,” which predates this track. The combination of the traditional bling of the chain with the kaffiyeh and Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses often worn by wealthy men of the Arabian Gulf region elevates those latter accessories to a new level of cool, creating a useful metaphor for understanding M.I.A.’s entire project as an artist. Her cool pose includes not just the musical influences of American hip hop, Caribbean dancehall, her Sri Lankan heritage and her British upbringing, but also a wider identification with oppressed people worldwide. In this way, she strives to make bringing the plight of those people to light as cool as bragging about her wealth or sexual prowess.

The video for “Bad Girls” illustrates the kind of cultural synthesis practiced by M.I.A. while bringing to mind the Bollywood clips of SSB’s “Batalvi” in its remixing of well-known Eastern motifs. However, the “Bad Girls” video, directed by French director Romain Gavras, presents the viewer with a sparse, postapocalyptic desert landscape littered with gas tankers and other detritus. The central point of the video is a collection of kaffiyeh clad men and M.I.A. herself taking part in a series of dangerous looking car

stunts inspired by Saudi Tafheet street racing culture. However, although it borrows that aspect of Saudi culture, the video was shot in Morocco owing to Saudi Arabia's highly restrictive social policies. In the same way that M.I.A. adopts middle eastern culture in much of her album art in which her name and title are written in an English script stylized to resemble Arabic, the video represents a taking up of middle eastern and, by extension, Islamic culture as a point of reference for her agenda of transnational unity of oppressed peoples and postnational cool. A quick mapping of the concrete facts of the image being projected in the video makes this clear: a young Sri Lankan woman raised in Britain, in a Moroccan desert, surrounded by middle eastern men, performing stunts in mostly European luxury cars while singing about her status as a wealthy, powerful, fearless "bad girl." Cool pose is thusly revised into a new strain of postnational cool that attempts to have it all ways at once: socially conscious on a global scale, braggadocious, catchy, sexy, and above all, cool.

What makes M.I.A. truly unique among practitioners of postnational cool is the 2018 biographical documentary film *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* Although the film is directed by Steve Loveridge, it consists primarily of home movies shot by M.I.A. throughout her life and rise to prominence. By being so personal at its core, the film presents the postnational imagination at work in an intimate fashion, but this is of course complicated by fame and fortune. Far from being a glowing portrait of a socially conscious artist who is implacably cool, *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* shows her struggle and often fail to make a truly selfless impact on the world she sees exploiting people "like" her. So what makes her so different from the masses she advocates for? Wealth and fame, surely, but also access and the privilege of being able to make mistakes in representing those who cannot

effectively represent themselves. Is this interpretation of oppressed cultures—including refugees, Muslims, the urban poor of London and beyond, and the numerous other groups M.I.A. has advocated for in her career—fair, or even helpful? Are artists like M.I.A. the correct mouthpieces for these issues? Up to this point this project has focused largely on the novel as a genre through which the postnational imagination can function. What music generally and hip-hop specifically offers is a genre that resonates with a larger audience, is more easily disseminated among that audience, and offers a lower barrier of entry for those who wish to participate in the work of the postnational imagination or other pursuits. The labyrinthine international publishing industry makes it difficult for even accomplished writers to produce a novel with global reach. Alternatively, it is possible for any person to write lyrics and, with increasingly little effort, find some way to record and then share them. M.I.A. and the members of Swet Shop Boys are established and popular acts with more resources and access than an unknown MC, and this reach means that when they speak about social or political issues they are far more likely to be heard, and any communities they can form around those messages can be a net positive for building global solidarity around an issue. However, the genius of hip-hop is that at its foundation it is a fundamentally egalitarian artform with easy accessibility for those who wish to participate. It is this spirit that drove the early block parties and it is that spirit that makes it a viable political force.

No perfect mouthpiece for our current age exists, and so M.I.A., Swet Shop Boys, and those of their ilk are perhaps the right artist-activists for their moment. Momtaza Mehri, writing in a review of *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* for *Granta*, explains the inherent inconsistency of artists like M.I.A. and how it often matters little to fans:

Her brand of musical and cultural syncretism disregards both borders and sampling clearances. To the cynics, she is more *Sense8* than Spivak. More Coca-Cola than Molotov cocktail. To her admirers, she is as messy as the world/s she inhabits. This is the M.I.A. that dons niqabs on red carpets. . . . M.I.A could never be accused of being coherent. You could never call her boring either.

To illustrate this point further, we can look at her comments on the American Black Lives Matter movement: “Is Beyonce or Kendrick Lamar going to say Muslim Lives Matter? Or Syrian Lives Matter? Or this kid in Pakistan matters? That’s a more interesting question” (Qtd. in Mehri). These comments verge on the type of all-lives-matterism that has been a reactionary counter-call to Black Lives Matter, one that frequently fails to consider the core demand of BLM: that black lives be given equal value in the eyes of the law. Complicating matters further, it is important to remember M.I.A.’s connection to the hip-hop culture that she was raised within<sup>8</sup> and that she is now very much a part of, whether purists would agree or not. Mehri points to this fault in noting, “blackness is lubriciously supple in the hands of non-black people. When lived by actual black people, it is painfully restrictive.” In trying to be all things to all oppressed people, artists like M.I.A. will unavoidably fall short, but their art remains vital. It aims to draw you both to the dancefloor and to deeper examination of our deeply globalized and troubled world. Writing about M.I.A.’s unexpected life of fame, Mehri waxes, “So much of what divides

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<sup>7</sup> An early segment of *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.* focuses on her love of 90s American hip-hop, and her music shows clear influence.

us from those we have left behind is dumb luck.” This is true on some levels, but we must never forget the systems that made the global North and South, as well as all the metrics against which they are measured. If we live in imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson claims, then surely we can reimagine them. This is the project taken up by many hip-hop artists, whether they dream locally or globally. From Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five to Swet Shop Boys, hip-hop has never stop speaking against oppressive forces while also attempting to create something better, whether it is merely the desire to show off one’s wealth or to call the world to confront the refugee crisis. Like any art there are orders of magnitude for change that artists work upon. Moving forward, new artists will keep calling for change and working to create it, and in this hyperconnected world it is our job to listen.

With the international influence that hip-hop carries, coupled with its use as a forum for expressing resistance to hegemonic powers, it follows that it would find a worldwide audience that not only makes an artist like Kanye West an international celebrity, but also forms a postnational community of fans and practitioners. This community consists of overlapping webs of different nationalities and personal identities linked by their appreciation for hip-hop as both lifestyle and musical genre. This flexibility allows a range of identities to find expression and form solidarity with others, whether it is African American and Muslim or British and African or anything in between. This solidarity must be emphasized while at the same time never being substituted for a belief that one can fully understand another culture’s lived experiences. What this music provides is a mode of listening to voices from other cultures that is also entertainment, although one should avoid confusing fandom with a thorough and fair

understanding of a people. The music is a helpful start toward great representation and recognition, but it must work in combination with other factors such as understanding and interpersonal dialogue. However, this is not a shortcoming of the genre; it is emblematic of its place as a catalyst for great social awareness. For instance, hip-hop has become a cultural lingua franca that is understood on every continent and it is no coincidence that, just as Hebblethwaite observed regarding the Arab Spring, those looking for a creative outlet for revolution turn to it. The use of the genre allows not just solidarity building amongst communities of fans, but of those in the wider population who have an established understanding of how the music functions. What Bradley, Drury, and Sharma make clear is that the deft use of sonic and linguistic markers associated with difference, rather it be colonial, racial, or otherwise, creates forms of resistance that speak back to centers of power that attempt to relegate one to the margins or to mere stereotypes.

CONCLUSION:  
BECOMING TOGETHER

The postnational imagination finds expression in a number of ways, as illustrated in the preceding chapters. Writer-scholars are able to express it through fiction while also working toward better formulating it in more academic projects. The postnational imagination is meant to describe a worldview, one that is present in stronger forms in theoretical writings from multiple areas of study, with literary study being one of the most fruitful. While theoreticians and philosophers are doing important work that can contribute greatly to the formation of the postnational imagination, if it is to have a material, real world impact, it must be translated in ways that are accessible to a broad audience. Literature, music, and other creative pursuits are the most effective way of translating this worldview into a form that is not only more easily comprehensible, but also more widely available and, most importantly, entertaining. Major writers and musicians are taking it upon themselves to be more critical of hegemonic world systems and try to speculate what life outside of or after them may look like. Perhaps most importantly, many of these creators are thinking about how to transgress those systems in the present, whether through the act of creation or through identification with and advocacy for oppressed groups, as shown in the final chapter regarding hop-hop artists' use of the form to speak against oppression. However, while these forms are effective, they are but a few of the ways in which the postnational imagination finds expression. What this project aspires to present is that the postnational imagination is not a monolithic framework; it is instead a flexible critical worldview that sifts through the

confusion of the past and present in order to form the outlines of a future world in which humanity can exist in a commonwealth, not as atomized individuals alienated from society, but as a collective that has escaped the biopolitical exploitation of the current world order.

The specter hanging over this entire project, which has been lightly explored but never fully investigated, is the role that looming catastrophes of the natural world—climate change, water shortage, mass extinctions; the list, unfortunately, goes on—will have to play in the work of the postnational imagination. The real world implications of these events is horrifying enough: violent subjugation of climate refugees, military conflicts over commodities like water, and the general difficulty of life on a warming planet, to name a painful few. The nation, already strained by the workings of a pre-climate crisis world, seems to only offer worse in the future. In the age of warming, with resurgent fascism and racial nationalism seemingly ascendant, the ability to see any sort of future worth living becomes exceedingly difficult. To world beyond the restrictions of the nation is one thing, but what good can come of such work if society is in a state of chaos and the physical world is becoming uninhabitable? In light of these terrors, imagining alternatives becomes a radical act. Relevant to this point is the speculation by some not that the world is ending, but that it has already ended. As philosopher Timothy Morton states, “The end of the world has already occurred” (7). He is not referring to the cessation of the material world, but instead to the world of man reaching such an advanced technological stage, one in which all was forsaken in the name of progress, that the possibility of complete world destruction was fulfilled. To pinpoint when the end occurred he identifies two events that highlight major moments in which humanity

became a defining force on a planetary scale. The first is April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, thereby ushering in the dawn of the industrial revolution and more than two centuries of combustion of fossil fuels by humans, a turning point elaborated on in great detail by Andreas Malm in his *Fossil Capital* (7). The second is the detonation of the first atom bomb in Trinity, New Mexico in 1945 (7). These events represent mankind's emergence as a geophysical force with massive power that cannot be readily observed in its entirety, entities that Morton names as hyperobjects in his book of the same name. For the purposes of the postnational imagination this is relevant because it offers a view of the world that is not as pessimistic as it may seem. To say that the world has already ended carries a definite negative connotation, but what it offers is a reevaluation of humanity's relationship to the world on a large scale, especially when it comes to concepts such as climate change. Morton identifies this way of thinking in discussing the "world-historical" nature of the world's two endings:

I put 'world-historical' in quotation marks because it is indeed the fate of the concept *world* that is at issue. For what comes into view for humans at this moment is precisely the end of the world, brought about by the encroachment of hyperobjects, one of which is assuredly Earth itself, and its geological cycles demand a *geophilosophy* that doesn't think simply in terms of human events and human significance. (7)

To challenge the concept of *world* and the anthropocentric ways in which it is thought is an exercise very in line with the mission of the postnational imagination, owing largely to its foundation in critical posthumanism. The strength of this approach is that it does not rely on some type of messianic, world-saving approach to issues faced by humanity,

because the worst has already occurred. He argues that pollution and other hyperobjects possess viscosity, that they stick to us and prevent us from ever escaping them. The challenge then becomes existing with that knowledge, of finding ways to live ethically in the post-apocalypse. Instead of looking to a future that has long been foreclosed, Morton suggests, we should deal with the realities of the world in which we actually live, love, and die.

A simpler formulation of this concept is found in an article written for *Commune* by prolific sci-fi author Kim Stanley Robinson, which carries the byline, “The end of the world is over. Now the real work begins.” In the article, he lays out a way of thinking about the world outside of the frame of a dystopia, and using a semiotic square identifies the “anti-anti-utopia” as oppositional to the dystopia. To be anti-anti-utopia—an admittedly clumsy formulation, albeit effective—one must do away with the shortcomings of the present, a major theme of dystopic fiction, and instead focus on the work of improvement. As Robinson bluntly states, “maybe we should just give up entirely on optimism or pessimism--we have to do this work no matter how we feel about it.” This attitude is vital to the postnational imagination because it is resilient and works counter to ways of thinking that disparage the role that art can have in affecting change or the influence creators can exert over their audience. It is easy enough to sit back and claim that a book never fed the hungry or brought justice to the oppressed, but what is there to be lost by maintaining the hope that some form of good can come from imagining something better? Robinson expresses a similar sentiment about the prevalence of dystopic fiction produced in good faith and with an eye toward the future: “If dystopia helps to scare us into working harder on that project, which maybe it does, then fine:

dystopia. But always in service to the main project, which is utopia." Is utopia achievable? The long arc of human history and the latest world climate reports suggest that it is highly unlikely. But does that mean that working toward it is a useless fool's errand? What the postnational imagination holds is that perhaps it is a good thing that at this point in human history we are less assured of our primacy and future than perhaps any other time, that we are at a point when creation may be our only way toward any kind of future. Amitav Ghosh so keenly observes this truth:

And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: for if there is any one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear it is that to think about the world only as it is amounts to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be. (128-29)

This is what the postnational imagination, at least in some small way across its multiple expressions within the works of several writers, attempts to do. The time for navel-gazing has passed; now is the time to rethink the world and our place in it.

So what role can fiction, or any form of writing for that matter, play in combatting the major issues of our time, namely those related to ecological disaster? Dipesh Chakrabarty notes about other fields, "Scientists are at work diagnosing problems and prescribing solutions; economists calculate the costs of market-based transition to a 'green' economy; business, scientists, and engineers work together to invent technologies that will facilitate growth in a postcarbon world." With so many intelligent, capable people working to create real change in the physical world and within the global systems that control our everyday lives, what role is there for fiction and its study to play?

Chakrabarty answers that “an essential ingredient of the process by which humans make sense of crises in public life—or feel inspired to work towards solutions—is stories: narratives we tell ourselves in order to find our bearings in a new situation.” Beyond providing a frame for understanding our changing world, Rob Nixon offers that “in a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen and imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear” (15). The postnational imagination is, therefore, an important tool in using the creative arts, namely writing, to shape a future world. However, will it be enough to work within the framework of the nation in order to subvert it? Can one truly create the kind of change to the world system that is necessary for a more just existence while firmly embedded within that system? Can we really be posthuman if humans are responsible for the catastrophes faced by the earth and its inhabitants? Does any of this truly matter to those living after the end of the world? In order to in some way address these final lingering questions, I turn briefly to three scholars taking very different yet interrelated approaches to thinking the present and, by extension, the future.

The first such approach comes from Donna J. Haraway whose 2016 work *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, much like Morton’s work, brings to the discussion of possible futures a necessary level of weirdness. Most crucial for the purposes of this conclusion is her opinion on the utility of posthumanism. While critical posthumanism and its approach of sorting through the wreckage of what has been defined as humanity is a vital contributor to the formulation of the postnational imagination, it is not without its detractors, even among those whose work would seem to favorably line up with it. Haraway would seem to be supportive of the concept given her reputation for

unusual philosophical formations and terms. However, her response to posthumanism is to reject it, instead opting for what she terms “compostism:” “we are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman” (55). In her conception of compostism we are always/already inextricably linked to other living, as well as nonliving, entities with which we share this planet. While it is easy to shrug off this notion in favor of a world view that attempts to address the lived material concerns of human beings in the now—after all, what does a starving refugee care about the well-being of the Amazon rainforest?—Haraway suggests that the only way forward is to accept the sympoietic nature of our existence. Sympoiesis, which like the related act of autopoiesis discussed in the introduction, is a term borrowed from biology to denote “complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. Sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it” (58). While autopoiesis in the critical posthuman sense is still very much applicable to the postnational imagination since it denotes the ways in which beings form their identity in relation to the forces acting upon them, sympoiesis can be thought of as the next evolution of it which, true to posthuman fashion, takes up the complications of autopoiesis and adapts them to new concerns. These concerns are clear in the name of compostism, as it brings to mind not only death and decay, but the rebirth and nourishing of life. After the end of the world, the next is able to grow from the remains; as Haraway claims, “we are humus” (55). This dual focus is reflected in the central mission of her book: “The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (1). Like writers of the postnational imagination, Haraway recognizes the need to find new ways of being in our world, and

those ways must be collective. To put it in her words, “we become-with each other or not at all” (4).

A vital current of this becoming-with is the need to work through the complicated rubble of a past that failed to do all of the things necessary to ensure a fulfilling and sustainable existence. She most adeptly illustrates this point in “The Camille Stories” that close the book, a series of short, speculative science fiction stories about several generations of genetically engineered “Children of Compost.” These new humans turn to the past to search for information that may be useful to them, only to be let down by what they find:

Compostists eagerly found out everything they could about experimental, intentional, utopian, dystopic, and revolutionary communities and movements across times and places. One of their great disappointments in these accounts was that so many started from the premises of starting over and beginning anew, instead of learning to inherit without denial and stay with the trouble of damaged worlds. (150)

The compostists, like those who work within the postnational imagination, are aware of the need to work with the material that is available to them, although it is often deeply flawed and/or problematic. In this way, the proper metaphor is not the building of a new city on top of the rubble of a former, fallen one, but of a new organism growing from the loam of previous paradigms. What one should strive after is not solely the archaeology of knowledge as a manmade substance, but for the ecology and paleontology of knowledge as something embedded in and working through our interconnectedness with the natural world. Posthumanism still has much utility for the purpose of this study, especially

regarding the mode of critique that it encourages, but Haraway's insistence of pushing it toward something more inclusive of all life and focused on a greater commonwealth of beings is admirable and useful. It provides us with one way in which we can work from within the systems we inhabit to strive toward something better: by expanding them to include ever more fellow inhabitants of the planet in a collaborative form of being in the world.

The second thinker that illustrates how a project such as the postnational imagination may affect change from within is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, whose *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015) explores how immigrant pickers of the rare and expensive Matsutake mushroom work in a manner adjacent to capitalism to perform work that fulfills their desire for freedom while simultaneously allowing them to earn an income. In so doing she attempts to address the question, "Can we live inside this regime of the human and still exceed it?" (19). This question is tied to the numerous connections between global capitalism as a hegemonic system and the apocalyptic nature of the Anthropocene, since, as she writes, "imagining the human since the rise of capitalism entangles us with ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources" (19). Central to these connections is the concept of progress that drives both capitalist accumulation and anthropocentric thinking about humanity's connection with the natural world (25). Into this world step the Matsutake pickers, who work "simultaneously inside and outside capitalism" (63). What allows them to succeed is the capitalist adaptation of salvage accumulation, "the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced"

(63). The pickers, through their indigenous knowledge and sweat of their brow, collect the mushrooms and sell them to buyers, who then handle the storage and distribution of them to world markets for consumption as high end luxury goods, such as being given as gifts in Japanese culture. In this way, capitalist forces transform indigenous knowledge in return (Tsing 64).

However, this clever reading of the economic networks involved with Matsutake picking are not what make Tsing's book important for thinking about how the postnational imagination may function in the real world. The crucial aspect is the way in which she takes a seemingly minor, unimportant action, such as the picking of Matsutake mushrooms, and traces not only its connection to global capital, but also the ways in which it remains very much a possession of the collective of people, mainly southeast Asian immigrants to the United States, who find in it not only a source of income, but a sense of identity and pleasure. While it is not the same kind of example as say the new settlements at the end of *Exit West*, it is an example of a postnational type of thinking. The pickers, many of them having been displaced by war or being the children of those who were displaced, have formed a durable network of likeminded individuals who work within the bounds set upon them by the U.S. government while simultaneously existing within a community that is very much independent, both in attitude and the ways in which it interacts with capital. This is an imperfect example since it relies on the fetishization of the Matsutake mushroom, otherwise the pickers would have little incentive to collect and so might not have the time, but it is a unique example of a concrete way in which a collective can form, and, in this case, travel across national borders. As Tsing notes about her motivation for the project, "It takes concrete histories

to make any concept come to life. And isn't mushroom collecting a place to look, after progress?" (66). The resilience and dedication of the mushroom pickers, like the compostists of Haraway's stories, offer a glimpse of the possible forms that the postnational imagination takes. In the case of Haraway's *Camille's*, the expression of the postnational imagination is similar to the novels examined in this dissertation: fictional and speculative, yet founded in very tangible experiences with the real world. What makes Tsing's account different is that it is a material example that we can see working in the world. Her book suggests that there is hope for survival in the ruins of capitalism, that perhaps that will be the type of fertile compost suggested by Haraway.

Finally, the third position that bears inclusion is that of Andreas Malm, who in *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (2018) points to what he sees as the futility of posthumanist orientation toward the world: "It would be hard to imagine worse historical timing for a theoretical proposition, although this one is perhaps less epic than banal. There is nothing posthuman about the warming condition" (115). He elaborates that the human is central to every aspects of climate change, from its creation to those who suffer due to it, all the way to those who can potentially have a role in working to dull its ever-forward march. Humanity is so central that he writes that all of Earth's ecosystems falling prey to its actions is "rather like how every planet in this solar system bathes in the light from the sun" (115). With humanity being so central to the problem and its potential solutions, Malm is more in favor of reclaiming some form of humanism to drive change: "Barring the implantation of some ecosocialist chip in our brains, humans of the classic type are the only ones who could *possibly* rise up and shake off fossil fuels from their economies" (118). He closes on the call to action, "Less of

Latour, more of Lenin: that is what the warming condition calls for” (118). It is worth pausing at this juncture to note that this project has always been more aligned with critical posthumanism as a practical critical position and not with any type of transhumanism that would take as its focus some type of novel technological alterations to the human body. However, his larger point that posthumanism is in its own ways very anthropocentric—it is about humans, written by and presented to humans at conferences organized by humans—is worth thinking about and does point to the shortcomings of any way of thinking that becomes overly academic. It is vital that whatever worldview we adopt, that it have concrete use for those who are not deeply entrenched within the academy. In this way, Malm’s critiques are accurate but do not directly refute the formulation of posthumanist thought used in constructing the postnational imagination. While his rhetoric is both fiery and at times a bit simplistic, it comes from a place of necessary desperation in the face of catastrophe. It also addresses the concern for immediate material change in the now, which is something that the postnational imagination as observed in this project is not equipped to deal with, at least not in the forms discussed. Forms such as novels and music hold great potential, but they take time and require vast, organized distribution networks and a willing audience. Far from being a shortcoming or some type of inherent flaw, this is rather the nature of how ideas travel. What is needed from the postnational imagination, if it is to address climate change and other pressing concerns of our age, is to extend into the general consciousness of the public and, inevitably, into the very halls of power that it attempts to slip away from. As the examples of Tsing and Haraway show, and as critical posthumanism suggests, it is crucial to work with preexisting material and concepts in order to modify them into

something new, to allow them to be compost in which new ideas grow. This is the strategy that the creative arts, including fiction and music, must take up, capitalizing on their flexibility and reach. However, the change that they can and do set in motion is gradual, and so it is important to be lenient with criticisms of this delayed effect. It is unlikely that a novel or song will change the world overnight, but stamina and resolve are required to combat all forms of social and political inertia. The postnational imagination must take its victories where it can and keep working toward the future.

As this project draws to a close, the work of the postnational imagination continues, as it must, forever moving toward possible futures. This is not a project that has been or will be met with much fanfare, as illustrated by a final anecdote that illustrates the social inertia around any movement, no matter how large or small, that suggests revision of our world system. In a friendly conversation with a young professor I was asked to explain my dissertation project, to give the ubiquitous “elevator pitch” for my big idea. I explained as best I could in such a condensed form, closing with the central idea: certain writers work through the postnational imagination to think past the nation and dream of what may or may not come after. With a small shake of their head and slightly mocking laugh, they quickly replied, “nothing is going to come after it.” What they meant, judging from the comments that followed, was that I was being far too speculative and optimistic, that the systems that control our world were too sturdy, that they would always prevail and that is just the way things are and will be. It was a thoroughly defeatist attitude. In response to this I suggest to instead read their response in another way: that, indeed, *nothing* comes after, and *nothing*, as pointed out in earlier chapters, is a blank space for creation. If, as Morton and Robinson have suggested, the

world has already ended, then what is there to lose by imagining something better and, in good faith, working toward bringing it into being? Let the detritus of our times be the compost for future ones. To do anything less is, in my mind, cowardly and, even worse, lazy. A personal refrain that I have adopted and that fits into the mission of the postnational imagination is the simple assertion of “it does not have to be this way.” There are alternatives; we merely have to imagine them and, more importantly, take them seriously. If climate catastrophe or some other cataclysm is the fate of the human race then let that be what takes us, not lack of imagination and unwillingness to work together. At this crucial point in the history of humanity the only other choice is no choice, is inaction, is the whimper at the true end of our being in the world. We become-with each other or not at all.

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