UNHOMELY HOMES:
POSTCOLONIAL (RE)LOCATIONS AND SELF-FASHIONING
IN JOSEPH CONRAD, JEAN RHYS, AND CHANG-RAE LEE

By

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To my Mom
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This study discusses the paradoxically complementary relation between being out of place and writing out of a place in the work of three distinct twentieth-century migrant writers: Joseph Conrad, Jean Rhys, and Chang-rae Lee. Drawing on a diverse range of scholarship, including postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and historical approaches, I consider what it means to be dis/placed in the twentieth century that is characterized by the dissolution of old imperial powers, the emergence of the U.S. as a new empire, the birth of new nations, and mass migration. Re-conceiving “home” as multiple (re)locations instead of root, this study posits that “home” and displacement are not opposite but mutually constitutive terms in the spatial imaginings of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee. I adopt the idea of self-fashioning as a productive alternative to the dichotomy of assimilation versus resistance, or the “good” subject versus the “bad” subject, which is too simplistic to fully account for the complexity of postcoloniality. This dissertation brings into clearer focus the writers’ ambivalent relationships to dominant cultures by recognizing their complicity in dominant cultures, on the one hand, and their critical interventions in those cultures, on the other. Conrad, Rhys, and Lee fashion themselves and cope with displacement by negotiating culturally available options and their agency in varying ways.
After Chapter 1 lays out theoretical concepts and key terms, Chapter 2 reads *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* to re-evaluate the popular characterization of Conrad as “homo duplex,” split between his Polish past and English authorship. I argue that, contrary to the popular assumption, Conrad cognitively re-maps his Polish heritage and English authorship as ultimately reconcilable elements of his self by actively appropriating the umbrella term “the West,” which gained a new significance in the early twentieth century. This chapter complicates Conrad’s relationship to imperialism by emphasizing that his ambivalent attitude towards British imperialism should be examined in the context of his Polish past as well as his antagonism against Russian imperialism.

The next chapter contrasts *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys’s most acclaimed novel, and “The Imperial Road,” her rejected manuscript that describes her homecoming. This chapter contends that being a white Creole woman located in-between the Caribbean and England, Rhys tries to “home” herself by alternately and provisionally placing herself in opposition to white Englishmen and Afro-Caribbeans. I approach Rhys’s conflicting racial attitude in terms of tactics of self-fashioning and foreground her agency that has been overshadowed by the much debated passivity of her female characters.

Chapter 4 analyzes Lee’s racialized and gendered Asian American male authoring by examining his debut novel, *Native Speaker*. Not only does the novel describe the problem of Asian Americans’ inclusion in the American nation, but it also addresses the problem of writing as an Asian American male writer. I maintain that Lee equates Asian American male authoring with inventing new political and literary lineages appreciative of hybridity and heterogeneity. But he ultimately reinstates the masculine narrative of the American nation by representing Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring as manly projects.
CHAPTER 1
WRITING OUT OF (A) PLACE

Not enough imagination has gone into the different modalities of situatedness-in-displacement.

— Bruce Robbins, “Comparative Cosmopolitanisms” 250

[…] the postcolonial condition is neither uniform nor predictable in its choices and political locations. The postcolonial condition is, in short, “flexible” […].

— Viet Thanh Nguyen and Tina Chen, “Editor’s Introduction to Postcolonial Asian America” par. 5

Postcolonial (Re)locations

In his memoir, Out of Place, Edward Said identifies displacement as a constant condition of his life and a critical shaping force of his self. Born as an American citizen in Jerusalem—which was in the British Mandate of Palestine—and raised in Egypt precariously navigating the space between Western and Arabic worlds, he recalls how he always felt inadequate and uneasy.

It all began with his strangely yoked name. The all too English name “Edward” did not quite match his Arabic face, whereas “Said” appeared outlandish at British and American schools that he attended in Cairo. Said did not feel at home in the U.S. where he spent his adulthood, either. The hybrid name was not the only reason why he felt “in the deepest sense ‘home’ was something [he] was excluded from” (Place 42). Said’s sense of “home” was shaped by British colonialism in Palestine and Egypt, American imperialism that replaced British colonialism in the region in the early twentieth century, and the fall of Palestine in 1948. Out of Place powerfully illustrates that one cannot adequately discuss twentieth-century meanings of “home” without taking histories of imperialism and nationalism into account. On the other hand, some of the most interesting anecdotes in the memoir indicate that his tragic experience and the painful circumstances of displacement generated a necessity of self-fashioning and self-authoring. “For years, and depending on the exact circumstances,” the young Said “would rush past ‘Edward’ and emphasize ‘Said’; at other times [he] would do the reverse, or connect these two to each
other so quickly that neither would be clear” (Place 3). This childhood tactic of self-representation demonstrates an identity as a site of negotiation between culturally available options and an individual’s agency. In his essay, “Reflections on Exile,” Said sees in Minima Moralia, the autobiography by another exile, Theodor Adorno, “the belief that the only home truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing” (184). It should not come as a surprise, then, that “[o]ne of [Said’s] recurrent fantasies, the subject of a school essay [he] wrote when [he] was twelve, was to be a book,” to turn himself into words (Place 76). Being out of place makes one aware that a self functions as a representation, leading him/her to devise tactics of self-representation to “home” the self, even if only in provisional ways.

This paradoxically complementary relation between being out of place and writing out of a place is the central concern of this dissertation. Drawing on a diverse range of scholarship, including postcolonial studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and historical approaches, I consider what it means to be a migrant writer in the twentieth century that is characterized by the dissolution of old imperial powers, the emergence of the U.S. as a new empire, the birth of new nations, and mass migration. This study emphasizes the concept of (re)location instead of root—either rootedness or rootlessness—in order to avoid two major tendencies in the study of displacement. Scholars of displacement have either focused on the overwhelming hardship and loss resulting from displacement, or aestheticized homelessness in celebrating the liberatory possibilities of the “borderless world.” Both approaches oversimplify the effect of displacement on migrant writers and their work, treating the writers as helpless victims or otherwise trivializing the pain of homelessness. While I reject the nostalgic view of “home” as a safe, unchanging, and rooted origin, I am equally suspicious of the idea of a free-floating postmodern subject who is supposed “to be permanently on the run,” even if the editors of Writing across
Worlds: Literature and Migration describe “the migrant voice” as such (King et al. xv). My interest lies in how migrant writers negotiate multiple locations or “homes” of different scales such as the family, the nation, and the transnational that they belong to, in order to cope with displacement and anchor their identities.

The idea of “home” carries some cultural and historical baggage with it, and feminists and postcolonialists have been most vocal about the issue. They have criticized the idea of “home” largely because of its long-term relationship with the gendered idea of domesticity and the colonial formulation of “home-country.” Some critics insist that we should relinquish the idea of “home” along with its oppressive implications. Only recently have feminist and postcolonialist critics started to re-conceive “home” as a concept that should be revised and expanded rather than discarded altogether. In “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?,” for example, Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty suggest that, while “home” is often based on violent exclusion, fear, and the illusion of sameness, the pain and consequences of homelessness also need to be carefully weighed. As their nuanced reading of Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical narrative demonstrates, identity is already implicated in various kinds of “homes” the subject has been included in or excluded from. Therefore, it will be more meaningful to self-reflectively understand how we are dis/placed rather than to debate whether we should discard “home” or not—as if it were purely a matter of choice. Because “[h]ome and elsewhere collide and collapse” and they are constructed both against and along with each other, any serious study of displacement should account for “what it means to be placed, as well as displaced” (Johnson 20, original emphasis). Thus, my work is, in part, a response to Rosemary Marangoly George’s call for “varying notions of home to see what can be recycled in less oppressive, less exclusionary ways” (33).
This dissertation discusses texts written by three distinct migrant writers in the early, middle, and late twentieth century: *A Personal Record* (1912) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911) by the Polish-British writer Joseph Conrad (1857–1924); *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and “The Imperial Road” (unfinished) by the Dominican-British writer Jean Rhys (1890–1979); and *Native Speaker* (1995) by the Korean-American writer Chang-rae Lee (1965–). What do the three particular writers, among numerous migrant writers, individually and collectively tell us about twentieth-century displacement and conceptions of “home”? A close look at the historical contexts of Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s migrations exposes imperialism as a common aspect of their displacement. Conrad, Rhys, and Lee are complexly located (post)colonial subjects in their own ways, and by juxtaposing them, I intend to foreground the complexity of postcolonial situations as well as varied responses to the circumstances. Although the three writers migrated from different parts of the world, their “homelands” were all colonized by imperial powers—Poland by Russia, Dominica by England, and Korea by Japan—and achieved statehood in the middle or late twentieth century. Conrad wrote his autobiography, *A Personal Record*, and his novel, *Under Western Eyes*, which recounts Russian political conditions from the perspective of an English narrator, when Poland was still a Russian colony. Rhys’s “The Imperial Road” and *Wide Sargasso Sea* were written when Dominica was paving the way towards independent nationhood including the period when it was a part of the West Indies Federation (1958–1962). Korea achieved nationhood in 1945 when World War II ended (thus before Lee was born) but immediately became subject to U.S. imperialism. The U.S. military has been present in Korea from 1950 until today and U.S. imperialism has significantly shaped Korean political and cultural life. Albeit for different reasons, Conrad, Rhys, and Lee all migrated to the very center of global imperial power of their lifetime; Conrad and Rhys came to England while it still
enjoyed its status as a superpower and Lee to the U.S., the new imperial world power. As citizens of former colonies, they are also citizens of imperial nations. What does “home” mean to these hybrid (post)colonial subjects influenced by and participating in multiple imperialisms and nationalisms?

In an attempt to answer this question, I suggest that each of the three writers could be read as a part of the global phenomenon of imperialism, which has fractured life in Poland, England, the Caribbean, the U.S., Korea, and many other places. This approach, I hope, justifies the unusual grouping of writers of different national backgrounds who nonetheless collectively point to the significance of imperialism in twentieth-century spatial imaginings. My intention is not to argue for some grand postcolonial theory that might explain Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s texts in a single term. Rather, I conceive Conrad, Rhys, and Lee as three distinct “cases” that speak to significant aspects of imperialism and different meanings of “home.” There is no easy way of comparing Conrad’s relations to Russian and British imperialisms, Rhys’s location as a white Creole woman, and Lee’s relations to U.S. and Japanese imperialisms. But their divergences—their different relationships to imperialisms and tactical responses to the situations—attest to the complexity of postcoloniality that the colonizer / colonized or assimilation / resistance binaries do not effectively account for. Conrad and Rhys complicate the concept of the postcolonial, forming an interesting contrast. Conrad came from an anti-colonial nationalist tradition in opposition to Russian imperialism, and yet he also became complicit in British imperialism. By contrast, Rhys was born to an imperial white planter family in British-dominated Dominica, but her migration to England only made it clear that her West Indian background as well as her gender and economic status made her less than a legitimate English citizen. Lee, on the other hand, allows me to consider the continuity between a U.S. minority
identity and postcolonial subjectivity and to discuss Asian America in the context of cultural imperialism.

A postcolonial approach to a U.S. minority writer is particularly appropriate in light of the increasing attention to the convergence between postcolonial studies and U.S. racial studies since the early 1990s (Schueller 163). Not only does Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) describe Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as a model of postcolonial writing, but it also characterizes postcoloniality as unhomeliness and cultural displacement that racial minorities experience in the margin, the interstitial space, or the “third space.” Since then, studies like *Postcolonial America* (2000) and *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (2000), among others, have explored the efficacy of postcolonialism in American ethnic studies. A 2000 special issue of *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* specifically focuses on “Postcolonial Asian America.” The editors of the special issue, Viet Thanh Nguyen and Tina Chen, maintain that “[p]ostcolonial theory’s ability to be oppositional as well as affiliative, which is not inherent but rather potential, means that it can and should be a part of Asian American studies’ arsenal, if a potentially explosive one” (par. 8). Similarly, in “Postcolonial American Studies,” Malini Schueller contends that, although the dialogue between postcolonialism and American studies is a recent event, postcolonialism and U.S. racial studies have much to offer each other because imperialism has always been a critical part of American national identity from the very beginning. My inclusion of Lee in the study is inspired by these recent conversations between postcolonialism and U.S. racial studies.

Given the emphasis on the location of writing—from where do they write?—in this dissertation, it would be only logical to make clear my own location—from where do I read?—before I introduce other theoretical concepts and methodologies. My reading of Conrad, Rhys,
and Lee is inevitably enabled and limited by my being a middle-class Korean woman, a foreigner in the U.S., to whom English literature is a foreign literature and English a foreign language. It goes without saying that, let alone the overall argument presented here and my interest in migration and (dis)placement, my analysis of Lee’s treatment of Korean women is affected by my own location just as my approach to Rhys’s white Creole identity would be certainly different from an Afro-Caribbean reader’s perspective, for instance. My location has also made me notice that imperialisms other than British and American have not been really taken into account in postcolonial studies. The fact that I am “foreign” to English literature and the English language might help explain the attention to “other” colonial histories, such as Russian and Japanese, in this study.

The National and the Transnational

My approach to the three migrant writers and the organization of this study reflect the mutually constitutive and complementary relation between the national and the transnational. While the juxtaposition of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee gestures towards a literary categorization that is not nation-bound, I acknowledge the force of national boundaries that have shaped the production, circulation, and reception of their works by contextualizing them within respective national cultures and examining their investments in nationalisms. “[T]he terms ‘nation’ and/or ‘national subject’ are not ‘large enough’” to account for the politics of “home” in their full complexity (George 195, original emphasis). Situating each of the migrant writers that I examine in this study solely within a national framework—British, Polish, Dominican, American, or Korean—will lead to partial or misleading conclusions because at the core, their writing project moves beyond these very national categories. Yet the transnational aspect of their identities does not mean that the writers are “citizens of the world” who feel at home anywhere and travel freely across national borders. Neither do their texts function free from the effect of national culture.
that authorizes, legitimizes, tames, or repudiates them. On the contrary, the production and reception of their texts indicate that the migrant writers are vulnerable to, and conscious about, the politics of national inclusion and the rigidity of national borders even as they attempt to baffle the boundaries.

The relationship between the national and the transnational has been at the center of debates among scholars of cosmopolitanism in the past two decades, significantly changing the very meaning of “cosmopolitan.” The traditional idea of cosmopolitanism espoused by scholars like Martha Nussbaum, which underlines “allegiance to all humanity” and “world citizenship,” is now rejected by many as suspicious universalism or an improbable goal that only privileged travelers can afford to entertain. Instead, a constellation of paradoxically combined neologisms has emerged to articulate less ambitious and more grounded cosmopolitanisms: “rooted cosmopolitanism” (David Hollinger, Mitchell Cohen), “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha), “cosmopolitan patriotism” (Kwame Anthony Appiah), and “comparative cosmopolitanism” (Bruce Robbins). The focus thus has shifted from “cosmopolitanism as an unfulfilled task or ideal of planetary justice” to “cosmopolitanism as a description of the actually existing, ineluctably mixed-up state of modern identity” (Robbins, “Cosmopolitanism” 51). Despite differences among them, these revised conceptions of cosmopolitanism share an interest in locality, situatedness, and collectivity on a manageable scale, on the one hand, and transnational interconnectedness, on the other, claiming that the local and the global coexist. These “new”

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1 For Nussbaum’s cosmopolitanism, see Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” The Boston Review 19.5 (October/November 1994), which is available at <http://bostonreview.net/BR19.5/nussbaum.html>.

cosmopolitanisms suggest that a modern sense of belonging can be found in the fuzzy, hybrid area between the national and the transnational, and a modern identity consists of multiple allegiances that might be in conflict at times but oftentimes coexist quite unproblematically.³

Although the approach that these “new,” “worldly” cosmopolitanisms propose might appear too eclectic, they offer a workable framework for productively synthesizing two dominant approaches to migrant literature—national (i.e., domestic) and transnational (i.e., diasporic) perspectives. The “new” cosmopolitanisms help us conceive national and transnational perspectives as co-existing “modes” of constructing “home,” not more or less “advanced” stages of understanding migrant subjectivity.⁴ To illustrate this point, I take an example from Asian American literature not only because it will help clarify what I attempt to do in Chapter 4 but also because the two perspectives recently have been debated in the field. In “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,” Sau-ling C. Wong traces a significant theoretical shift in Asian American cultural criticism from a national perspective to a transnational perspective and calls for a reconsideration of the efficacy of the former. The two approaches Wong discusses not only represent two major “modes” of Asian American studies but suggest two different, if not necessarily contradictory, conceptions of “home.” A national perspective, or cultural nationalism, emphasizes the collectivity of populations of different Asian national origins and their shared immigrant experiences. On the other hand, a transnational perspective approaches Asian America in terms of a global dispersal of populations, influenced by post-theories like Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, and Paul

³ I have in mind Robbins’s explanation, in particular: “instead of an ideal of detachment, actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance” that does not presume loyalty to the entire humanity (“Actually” 3).

⁴ I am alluding to Sau-ling C. Wong’s suggestion that “[i]t would be far more useful to conceive of modes rather than phases of Asian American subjectivity: an indigenizing mode can coexist and alternate with a diasporic or a transnational mode, but the latter is not to be lauded as a culmination of the former, a stage more advanced or more capacious” (17, original emphasis).
Gilroy. If Gilroy explores trans-Atlantic movements in *The Black Atlantic*, for instance, the transnational approach to Asian American literature traverses the Pacific from the other coast of the American continent. While Wong acknowledges “noteworthy continuities between Asian and Asian American historical experiences and cultural expressions,” she is wary of “the consequences of an uncritical participation in denationalization, as if it represented a more advanced and theoretically more sophisticated [...] stage in Asian American studies” (12). Her theoretical intervention is based on the observation that “denationalization” has yet to be realized and, in the meantime, it would be more helpful to attend to local dimensions rather than global dimensions and travel.

The national approach to Asian America, or Asian American cultural nationalism, was first articulated by the editors of *Aiiiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Hsu Wong), the “founding fathers” of Asian American studies. They stressed Asian Americans’ full membership in the American nation. In their preface to the 1974 edition of *Aiiiiiiiiii!*, the editors stated that “America does not recognize Asian America as a presence, though Asian-Americans have been here seven generations” (ix). For their “claiming America” agenda, they emphasized “the existence of Asian-American sensibilities and culture that might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America” (viii).5 Influenced by the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, Asian American cultural nationalism started as a part of activist resistance to American racial policies and mainstream American culture. At the same time, in claiming Asian

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5 The term “claiming America” was first used in 1980 by Maxine Hong Kingston but Asian American critics like Wong have used it to refer to early Asian American cultural nationalist agendas, especially the *Aiiiiiiiiii!* group’s unwavering emphasis on Asian Americans’ historical contribution to American identity.
Americans’ right to America, the Aiiieeeee! editors were conscious about the American public’s conflation of Asian America and Asia and wanted to make a clear distinction between the two.6

The Aiiieeeee! group’s cultural nationalism, like other nationalisms, is highly gendered, and it has been accused of aggravating gender issues.7 The group articulated the “claiming America” agenda in conspicuously masculine terms, in part, as a response to the gendered American imagining of Asia. Culturally, Asia in general has been imagined as feminine, passive, and submissive to the penetrating West. Historically, many early Asian American men held traditionally feminine occupations. Legally, immigration laws forbidding Asian American men to bring wives from Asia and miscegenation laws prohibiting them from marrying American citizens left them in “bachelor societies,” which only exacerbated the stereotype of womanly and emasculated Asian men. In “Racist Love,” Chin and Chan lamented that “[t]he white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype completely devoid of manhood” (68).

The Aiiieeeee! group’s cultural nationalism was a recuperative project of Asian American masculinity as exemplified by Chin’s emphasis on Chinese American men’s physical strength and bravery during the American transcontinental railroad construction period; to Chin, Chinese American men’s contribution to railroad construction evidenced not only their contribution to building America but their manliness. In effect, the Aiiieeeee! group’s cultural nationalism defined building and participating in the American nation as a manly work.

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6 Chin later shifted his view about the relationship between Asian America and Asia. In his later novel, Donald Duk, published in 1991, for instance, Chin found a model of Asian American masculinity in the Chinese “heroic tradition.” In the novel, he took heroic male characters from Chinese classics such as Water Margin and Three Kingdoms and imaginarily placed them at an American transcontinental railroad construction site and a Chinatown to guide the Chinese American male protagonist’s cultural awakening.

The transnational perspective has provided valuable criticisms of the gendered nature of the *Aiiieee*! group’s national approach. It posits that Asian American populations are more variegated and heterogeneous than cultural nationalism suggests because of their different relationships to “homelands” and different histories of Asian nations, which in many cases are directly responsible for Asian migration to the U.S. In her frequently cited essay, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences,” Lisa Lowe draws attention to “the uneven process through which immigrant communities encounter the violence of the U.S. state, and the capital imperatives served by the United States and by the Asian states from which they come, and the process through which they survive those violences by living, inventing, and reproducing different cultural alternatives” (82). As Lowe points out, not only do immigrants enter the U.S. with different material, cultural, and historical baggage and resources, but they are influenced by “several different axes of power” such as “capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations” within the U.S. (67). Wong’s observation that the transnational perspective is not necessarily a more advanced approach than the national perspective is valid and valuable. Yet, it is also true that the former points to certain blind spots of cultural nationalism and encourages us to see migrant subjectivity as an over-determined construction of diverse forces.

I selectively borrow premises of “new” cosmopolitanisms in order to argue that transnationalism is not necessarily in opposition to nationalism in Conrad, Rhys, and Lee and to explain how their multiple allegiances to “homes” of varying scales are negotiated. There are significant transnational interactions as well as complicated relations among “homes” of different spatial scales—familial, national, regional (“the West” in Conrad, the Caribbean in Rhys, and Asia in Lee), and transnational—in the migrant writers’ texts. Conrad’s transnational project of affiliating Poland and England is invested in Polish nationalism; Rhys’s transnational
self-fashioning can hardly be separated from her response to nationalism in the West Indies; Lee’s trans-Pacific cultural representation aims to claim full national citizenship and re-define the American nation. The migrant writers articulate national identity as a site of negotiation and contestation rather than something to be completely transcended. By examining national dimensions of transnationality, or conversely transnational dimensions of national belonging, I address partial or multiple identifications (instead of non-identification) and tactically constructed “homes” (instead of homelessness) in the work of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee.

The Private and the Public

I use the term “home” to mean multiple locations that allow a sense of belonging and identity at a given moment, which include, but are not restricted to, the nation. “Home” is political in the sense that it is governed by the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and even reinforces and reproduces them. Yet it also covers areas of affect, those that Said associates with “culture”—“the nuances, principally of reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase at home or in place” (“Secular” 8, original emphasis). In addition, the term “home” registers “home-country” and home-the-private in one place, thus defying the gendered opposition between the public and the private. With its double registry in the social space, “home” presents the nation and the family, the public and the private, as fundamentally interwoven. One lesson that Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction teaches us is that representations of the private sphere have important public functions. Adopting a Foucauldian approach, Armstrong convincingly contends that the public sphere of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England operated by prescribing certain images of domesticity and sexuality. She explains, for instance, that by discursively producing the Victorian household as an apolitical, safe haven in opposition to the competitive public sphere and gendering the domestic space as a female domain, Victorian novels united conflicting classes under one
domestic ideal. As a result, she argues, “[s]exual differences appear to have become much more important than economic differences in defining an individual’s place in the world” (74). By fortifying the gendered boundary between the private and the public, Victorian domestic novels and conduct books blurred class lines and re-configured the public sphere. In this sense, Armstrong asserts, it was the family and the figure of the female that mediated the struggle among competing class ideologies in nineteenth-century England.

But what role does gender play in twentieth-century transnational settings? I expand Armstrong’s discussion, which does not address race, and examine the ways in which Conrad, Rhys, and Lee mobilize gender to cross racial lines. In the work of migrant writers under consideration, constructing “home” entails blurring racial boundaries, and they often achieve cross-racial self-fashioning by stressing gender as a primal site of conflicts and gendering race and nationality. I shall investigate the ways in which gender shifts racial and national borders in the works of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee in order to understand the implications of gender in their conceptions of “home.” I argue that Rhys’s representation of victimized womanhood makes her feel closer to the West Indies, ambivalently mitigating racial antagonism between the white Creole and Afro-Caribbeans through imaginary identification; and Lee’s racial frustration is projected onto the figure of the Korean woman and his Asian American male authorship is constructed at the expense of the abjection of the Asian woman.

Throughout this study, I emphasize the interconnectedness of the private and the public in Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s ideas of “home.” Theoretical considerations aside, this approach is necessitated by the writers’ personal and racial histories. The fact that Conrad’s father was a prominent figure in Polish nationalism and Conrad lost both parents and close relatives to the national cause of Polish independence makes his imaginings of the nation and the family
inseparable from each other. Armstrong’s study indicates that, in the nineteenth century, the domestic sphere was the real stage where public matters were contested, rehearsed, and negotiated, and yet the private sphere performed such a public function by ostensibly distancing itself from the public domain and maintaining its “neutral” appearance. In Conrad’s autobiography, however, the family is where national dramas take place with little pretense of being “private,” so that his tragic family history allegorizes Polish national history. To Rhys, the relationship between her family and Dominica is more problematic because her white Creole family represents an avatar of British colonialism, the antithesis of Dominican nationhood. Whereas Conrad demonstrates his allegiance to the Polish nation by reconnecting to his family history, Rhys’s allegiance to the West Indies entails repressing or fabricating her family history in such a way that its relation to the emergent nation of Dominica is redefined. On the other hand, the family serves Lee as cultural material that he can utilize for the American reading public because it has occupied a privileged site in the mainstream American perception of Asian culture as well as in Asian American writers’ representations of Asia.

**Fashion-able Selves**

The first known Asian American novel, *Miss Numè of Japan: A Japanese American Romance* (1899), was written by Onoto Watanna (1875–1954). The author of more than a dozen best-selling, internationally circulated novels, including *A Japanese Nightingale* (1902) and *The Heart of Hyacinth* (1903), she was “one of the few women writers in her time who was able to support herself and her family entirely with her pen” (Najmi xix). Most of her novels are romances set in Japan, with simple storylines heavily decorated with cherry blossoms and dainty Japanese women. She was received as an “authentic” deliverer of Japanese culture. But, in fact, Watanna was not Japanese at all. Onoto Watanna was the pseudonym of Winnifred Eaton who was born in Canada to an Irish Englishman and a Chinese woman and later moved to Jamaica
and then the U.S. She did not write as a Chinese descendent like her eldest sister, Edith Eaton (1865–1914), who criticized racial discrimination in North America under the Chinese penname of Sui Sin Far. Neither did Watanna choose to pass as white, which she could as most of the Eaton children did (Najmi xv). Her posing as a Japanese American writer was a strategic response to the U.S. racial discrimination against the Chinese, on the one hand, and the Orientalistic fascination with commodified images of Asia, on the other; “While the Chinese were vilified, in the first quarter of the twentieth century ‘positive’ Orientalist sensibilities focused mostly on Japan”—until the Japanese became the obvious target of racial discrimination in the 1940s (Najmi xi). Not only did Watanna present herself as fashion-able, but she also thematized racial passing in *The Heart of Hyacinth*. In the novel, Hyacinth Lorrimer is born to white English parents but raised in Japan by a Japanese woman. Despite her blue eyes, Japanese clothing makes Hyacinth “more Japanese than anything else” (145). Although Watanna’s self-Orientalization is problematic, she defined identity as a matter of fashion and performance instead of pigmentation, decoupling race from “authenticity.”

Migrant writers such as Onoto Watanna / Winnifred Eaton prove the dichotomy of assimilation versus resistance, or the “good” subject versus the “bad” subject, to be overly simplistic. I use the concept of self-fashioning as a productive alternative to the binary in explaining migrant writers’ relation to adopted cultures. The term self-fashioning was originally theorized by the new historicist Stephen Greenblatt in his 1980 study of Renaissance writers and subsequently appropriated by critics like Clifford (“ethnographic self-fashioning”) and Nico Israel (“diasporic self-fashioning”). Vivek Dhareshwar adopted “self-fashioning” to read V. S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* and Rebecca L. Walkowitz saw “ethnographic self-fashioning” as a key aspect of cosmopolitan modernism. I use “self-fashioning” to explain migrant writers’ tactics
to construct “home” as well as their relation to literary characters and to literary traditions upon or against which they build authorship.

Greenblatt explains that, with increased social mobility in the Renaissance era, there emerged “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulative, artful process” (2). The idea of fashioning oneself, the understanding of a self in terms of art rather than nature, should not be mistaken for the belief in “identity freely chosen” because self-fashioning has nothing to do with “pure, unfettered subjectivity” but has everything to do with “the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society” (Greenblatt 256). What is crucial in self-fashioning is not simply an individual’s will to create a self anew but the dynamics of subjecting oneself to authority and appropriating the authority to construct an identity. This double relation of subjectivity to authority—being subjected and being a subject simultaneously—provides a link between Greenblatt’s “self-fashioning” and Bhabha’s “mimicry,” a connection that Dhareshwar explicitly makes in his study. In Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, “mimicry” refers to a colonial subject’s partial and ironic identification with colonial disciplinary powers. The effect of “colonial mimicry” is produced when a colonial subject strategically mimics a colonial discourse in an “almost the same, but not quite”—that is, ambivalent—way and mocks it as a reproducible and repeatable construct, consequently undermining its authority (Bhabha, “Mimicry” 86). The mimicking subject is not reducible to the subjection to colonial institutions as s/he recognizes the power to appropriate them. Both Greenblatt’s “self-fashioning” and Bhabha’s “mimicry” posit that a subject is already implicated in the cultural formation that s/he opposes. Nevertheless, they acknowledge an individual’s agency that is not completely controlled by disciplinary powers—not because s/he is free from them but because s/he is more flexible.
Clifford’s “ethnographic self-fashioning” also underscores the double relation between subjectivity and culture that consists of the ethnographic standpoint of a participant-observer, or “a state of being in culture while looking at culture” (Clifford 141). According to him, in the twentieth century, the idea of culture as a singular ideal of human development dissolved, and instead culture came to be understood as multiple and artificial constructs. As culture became an object of comparative analyses rather than the ultimate stage of evolution, the conception of self as a “participant analyst” became visible in cultural productions (Clifford 142). Clifford illustrates “ethnographic self-fashioning” by analyzing texts written by two Polish-born migrants, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the *Diary* by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), the anthropologist who pioneered ethnographic fieldwork. To Clifford, migrants embody ethnographic subjectivity most notably because they are simultaneously inside and outside a particular culture, and as a result, they are “deeply aware of the arbitrariness of conventions” even as they depend on the conventions for their identities (Clifford 144). Migrants fashion their selves by consciously enacting this participant-observer position and putting the culture they partake in under comparative scrutiny.

The subject’s ambivalent relationship to culture helps us understand the authorship of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee as the vehicle for their agency that defies the “good” subject versus the “bad” subject binary. It allows us to recognize their complicity in dominant cultures, on the one hand, and their critical interventions in those cultures, on the other. Their authorship can be best defined as a manifestation of the tension between the partial subjection to dominant cultural conventions and the appropriations of such conventions. For example, Conrad’s loyalty to Englishness and his exposure of the arbitrariness of English values are not as contradictory as they might appear. Indeed, Englishness is such an important issue to Conrad precisely for its
constructed and changeable nature as he builds his authorship and constructs “home” by reproducing and simulating Englishness. Likewise, a comparative reading of Wide Sargasso Sea and “The Imperial Road” will illustrate that Rhys fashions her white Creole identity by subjecting herself to British imperial culture and appropriating its authority to place herself in the West Indies. I shall advance this argument by discussing Rhys’s tactical use of Jane Eyre as well as the figure of the white Englishman in Wide Sargasso Sea. Lee’s Native Speaker offers an extended allegory for a U.S. ethnic writer’s duplicitous relationship to American racial culture through the parallel between an ethnic writer and an ethnic spy. Lee builds his Asian American authorship by self-reflectively depicting the ways in which Asian America has internalized mainstream U.S. racial culture and exploring a working form of agency for Asian Americans. By adopting the idea of self-fashioning, I emphasize that the authorship of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee speaks to the difficult situations of displacement, but it is also a site of their agency.

Recognizing migrant writers’ agency in their appropriations of dominant cultural conventions, I also bring into clearer focus the notion of a self as a narrative process. Not only is the thesis that a self is a discursive construction now widely accepted, but this thesis also constitutes an integral part of Greenblatt’s conception of self-fashioning. Still, it might be useful to explain what the narrative construction of a self entails in Conrad, Rhys, and Lee and how it is related to their ideas of “home.” Self-fashioning assumes that there is no clear demarcation between a writing self and a written self because self-fashioning “invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one’s control, the attempt to fashion other selves” (Greenblatt 3). The most fundamental implication of this thesis is that, just like literary characters, selves are cultural artifacts that are created through linguistic activities and participate
in “the complex interactions of meaning in a given culture” (Greenblatt 3). Of course, it does not mean that literary characters are to be identified with their authors in any direct way. Rather, it means that writers fashion themselves as they author their characters, and their identities are being shaped as they engage with the dynamics of culture to make it more inhabitable for them. To borrow Martin Bidney’s words, “[e]thnographic self-fashioning is a paradoxical concept. A writer […] becomes who he is by writing, including writing about others: the persona projected in a piece of interpretive writing is an imaginative shaping of a person, a constructed self” (423). Furthermore, a writer fashions herself/himself by tactically responding to the publishing industry. Writing, in this case, is projection and performance as much as reflection on displacement. Therefore, I approach the texts in question not as some transparent inscriptions of the writers’ homelessness but as the sites where their interventions in culture take place and they author themselves in the process.

As I have discussed, the process of Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s self-fashioning includes the subjection to and the re-appropriation of cultural authority. At the same time, their constructions of selves also involve the presence of the alien Other in a critical way. A self is fashioned not only in relation to cultural authority but also “to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile” that “must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed” (Greenblatt 9). The representation of the alien Other is important in the work of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee not only because the writers construct their selves in opposition to the unfamiliar Other but also because they employ it as a route to “home.” By analyzing the ways in which Conrad, Rhys, and Lee represent the strange or hostile Other, which is embodied in Russia (Conrad), the white Englishman and the Afro-Caribbean (Rhys), and the Asian woman (Lee), this dissertation explores the writers’ mediated tactics for constructing selves and “homes.”
Unhomely Homes

Once we re-conceive “home” as a matter of (re)location instead of root, the opposition of “home” and homelessness turns out to be more obfuscating than clarifying. In “The Uncanny,” one of the most suggestive studies on the relationship between “home” and homelessness, Sigmund Freud articulates that das Heim, the German word for “home,” is an intrinsically ambiguous and contradictory concept by examining German usages of cognates of the word. In particular, he focuses on the semantic convergence of the opposite adjectives of das Heim, unheimlich (customarily translated as “uncanny”) and heimlich (meaning not only “familiar” and “homely” but also “concealed” or “hidden”). Freud maintains that “[u]nheimlich is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich” because, in some cases, the opposites have the identical meaning related to “clandestine” or “obscure” (201). The unfamiliar or the uncanny is nothing alien but in fact something that is familiar but has been hidden, repressed, and alienated. Although the unfamiliar is always an integral part of the familiar, it is so only in a covert way. According to Freud, the uncanny is nothing but the revelation of this hidden truth, the unsettling realization that what has been considered alien is, in reality, a part of the familiar. He recounts his own experience of an uncanny incident to illustrate the disturbing effect of the unfamiliar turning into the familiar; in a wagon-lit compartment, he saw “an elderly gentleman,” whose appearance he disliked, coming into his compartment by mistake and meant to correct the “stranger” only to realize that, to his dismay, it was his own reflection in the mirror on the compartment door (225). Freud’s primary interest in the theorization of the uncanny lies in explaining the return of infantile or primitive experiences that have been repressed and believed to be surmounted. In this dissertation, I do not pursue psychoanalytic approaches per se, but Freud’s formulation of the uncanny nonetheless could be expanded and elaborated to explain the inherently unstable and uncanny / unhomely aspect of “home.”
Indeed, Bhabha puts a postcolonial spin on Freud’s conception of the uncanny, translating *unheimlich* as “unhomely” and attributing “unhomeliness” to the cultural location of in-betweenness. If Freud indicates that homeliness and unhomeliness are inseparable doubles and “home” is a highly uncanny place where the repressed Other (or self) haunts and tries to return, Bhabha specifically aligns the ambivalence of “home” with the location of cultural negotiation and resistance in a (post)colonial context. “Although the ‘unhomely’ is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition,” he writes, “it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites” (“Locations” 9). The location of in-between is a precarious and painful place to inhabit where belonging is constantly questioned from within and without. And yet it is also where “home” is de-naturalized, the boundaries between the private and the public, the personal and the political, the national and the transnational, aesthetics and history collapse, and perhaps alternative concepts of “home” emerge from those jarring moments. “To be unhomed is not to be homeless,” Bhabha asserts (“Locations” 9). It is to stay open to a new time-space and critically acknowledge what it takes to be at home. This dissertation, “Unhomely Homes,” is an attempt to better understand the ambivalent and unhomely nature of belonging in (post)colonial contexts by analyzing culturally embedded articulations of “home” by Conrad, Rhys, and Lee.

**The Map**

Chapter 2, “Joseph Conrad’s Re-mapping Home,” reads *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* to re-evaluate the popular characterization of Conrad as “homo duplex,” split between his Polish past and English authorship. I argue that, contrary to the popular assumption, Conrad cognitively re-maps his two “homes” as ultimately reconcilable spaces by actively appropriating the umbrella term “the West” that gained a new significance in the early twentieth century. *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* exemplify the ways in which Conrad
negotiates his Polish heritage and English authorship to deal with his experience of double
displacement—one resulting from the Russian colonization of Poland and the other from his
migration to England. This chapter complicates Conrad’s relationship to imperialism by
emphasizing that his complicity in British imperialism should be examined in the context of his
Polish past as well as his antagonism against Russian imperialism.

In Chapter 3, “Jean Rhys’s Home In-between,” I contrast Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys’s
most influential novel, and “The Imperial Road,” her unfinished autobiographical manuscript
that describes her homecoming. This chapter contends that being a white Creole woman located
in-between the Caribbean and England, Rhys tries to “home” herself by alternately placing
herself against white Englishmen and Afro-Caribbeans. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys appropriates
Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester as a mutual Other of the white planter class and Afro-Caribbeans
and employs him as a paradoxical mediator between her family history and Dominican national
history. “The Imperial Road,” by contrast, reflects her racially charged response to Afro-
Caribbeans’ antagonism against the white planter class in the process of Dominican national
independence. I approach Rhys’s contradictory racial attitude in terms of tactics of self-
fashioning and foreground her agency that has been overshadowed by the much debated
passivity of her female characters.

Chapter 4, “Chang-rae Lee’s Immigrant Plot,” analyzes Lee’s debut novel, Native
Speaker, to explore his appropriation of mainstream cultural expectations of Asian Americans as
well as the gender implications of such an effort. Not only does Native Speaker describe the
problem of Asian American inclusion, but it also addresses the problem of Asian American
authoring. I first discuss the ways in which Lee revises stereotypes of Asian Americans by
reworking bildungsroman and spy novel conventions in order to challenge American
exclusiveness. The later part of the chapter examines his use of the popular Asian American literary trope of the “authentic” Asian family as a strategic response to American multiculturalism. I maintain that the tension between Lee’s criticism of American exclusiveness and his auto-exoticism of Asian American ethnicity is a sign of his ambivalent relationship to multicultural America. The chapter closes by considering the gendering of Lee’s self-fashioning. I argue that Lee represents both Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring as manly projects and thus his idea of “home” ultimately reinstates the masculine narrative of the American nation.

These three writers tell different stories of “home” responding to varying historical and cultural contexts. But they all challenge the notion of “home” as a fixed and unified place by bringing its ambiguities and tensions into focus. One of the common themes that bind these chapters is the dynamics between displacement and placement, between elsewhere and “home.” Julia Kristeva is probably right that we can “avoid sinking into the mire of common sense” only “by becoming a stranger to one’s own country, language, sex and identity” and “[w]riting is impossible without some kind of exile” (“New” 298). But then, how does writing, in turn, enable migrant writers to relocate themselves? This study will pursue answers to this question, beginning with the representative modernist exile, Conrad.
CHAPTER 2
JOSEPH CONRAD’S RE-MAPPING HOME

I always remember what you said when I was leaving Cracow: ‘Remember’—
you said—‘wherever you may sail you are sailing towards Poland!’
That I have never forgotten, and never will forget!
— Conrad’s Letter to Stefan Buszczynski (15 August 1883)

Born a Pole who was legally a Russian citizen, Conrad became a Pole who was
legally British.
— Eloise Knapp Hay, The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad 56

Introduction

Most biographers and critics of Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) have pictured the writer’s
life as a remarkably discontinuous one. The title of Frederick Karl’s influential book, Joseph
Conrad: The Three Lives, succinctly epitomizes this dominant view, foregrounding Conrad’s
curious transformations from a Pole colonized by Tsarist Russia, to a French sailor, and finally to
an English writer. Excluding his life at sea, on the one hand, we have the young Polish Conrad,
or Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, who accompanied his parents’ exile and marched at the
head of his father’s funeral procession, which also served as a huge patriotic demonstration
against Russian imperialism. Until the end of World War I (1914–1918), Poland had been
occupied by three powers, Russia, Prussia, and Austria, as a result of three successive partitions
in the late eighteenth century. Conrad was born in the present-day Ukraine that was colonized by
Russia. As is well known, his father, Apollo Korzeniowski, was a leading Polish nationalist in
the struggle against Russia, as well as a writer who also translated Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens,
and Shakespeare into the Polish language. For their radical patriotic activities, Conrad’s parents
were sentenced to exile. His mother, Ewa Bobrowska, died in exile when he was seven years old
and Apollo four years later. Conrad’s family history is intricately tied to Polish nationalism, and
his Polish past is inevitably shaped by Russian imperialism. On the other hand, we have the

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1 All this biographical information is taken from Najder 1–11.
English Conrad who wrote his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly* (1895), in English and was embraced by F. R. Leavis as an adopted heir to the “great tradition” of English literature. The view of Conrad as a divided self with divided national allegiance was promoted by Conrad himself, as well. He wrote in a frequently cited letter to Kazimierz Waliszewski (5 December 1903): “Both at sea and on land my point of view is English, from which the conclusion should not be drawn that I have become an Englishman. That is not the case. Homo duplex has in my case more than one meaning” (Najder 240). Still, was Conrad so agonizingly torn apart between his two “homes,” Poland and England, as it has been commonly assumed?

This chapter reconsiders this familiar reading of Conrad that (over-)emphasizes duality in Conrad’s idea of “home.” I do not deny that there is a tension between Conrad the Pole and Conrad the Englishman, as has been extensively discussed by many critics. Rather, I mean to redress a critical imbalance by examining Conrad’s effort to reconcile his two national identities, which was all the more important for him because of his acute sense of personal duality. My argument here is that Conrad tried to cognitively re-map Poland and England as reconcilable and ultimately continuous spaces in order to cope with displacement and to construct his authorship. Critics have explained how certain passages in Conrad’s autobiography, *A Personal Record* (1912), or the motif of guilt in *Lord Jim* (1900) and his other early works could be read as his response to accusations of “desertion” of Poland. In *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* (1911), however, Conrad engages in a more ambitious project than simply denying the charge of “desertion”; what he attempts to demonstrate in the two books is that his Polish heritage and English authorship are so meaningfully related that he can be a genuine English writer without betraying or abandoning Poland. To advance this argument, I first examine the ways in which Conrad creates an underlying continuity between his Polish childhood and English literary career
in *A Personal Record*; second, I read *Under Western Eyes*, focusing on Conrad’s construction of “the West” as an umbrella term that integrates Poland and England against Russia. During the middle and last phases of his literary career, Conrad sought to mentally merge his Polish identity and Englishness, instead of seeing the two as mutually exclusive national identities to choose from. The term “the West” gave him the language to map Poland and England as one territory of civilization that is to be protected from Russian autocracy; as Conrad’s late political essays indicate, in his mind, Poland was a Western country that had long suffered from Russian imperialism, and other Western countries were potential victims of the same power. Against the mutual enemy of Russian autocracy, Conrad saw only reconcilable differences between his Polish heritage and adopted Englishness.

Written around the same time, *A Personal Record* (written 1908–1909) and *Under Western Eyes* (written 1907–1910) are closely connected texts. In a letter to his literary agent, J. B. Pinker (13 September 1911), Conrad wrote that in *A Personal Record*, he “wished to explain (in a sense) how [he] came to write such a novel as *Under Western Eyes* […] so utterly unlike in subject and treatment from anything [he] had ever done before” (*Letters* IV: 477). He thought that his autobiography would make the writing of *Under Western Eyes* “intelligible” to the public who took a serious interest in his work (*Letters* IV: 477). The proposition that *A Personal Record* would illuminate the writing of *Under Western Eyes*, among his many novels, is an interesting one and invites further examination of connections between the two texts; for there is no reference to *Under Western Eyes* in *A Personal Record* and there is no mention of Poland or seafaring—two prominent motifs of the autobiography—in *Under Western Eyes*. Despite the

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2 The idea that Russia is a threat to “the West” and Poland provides a cautionary tale for all Western countries was also what Conrad’s father, Apollo, believed. According to Czesław Miłosz, Apollo was concerned with “the slow but constant march of the Russian Empire toward the West” and “the imminent destruction of European civilization of which only the countries absorbed by Russia are aware” (qtd. in Hay, *Political* 265–66).
lack of a direct reference to Poland and Conrad’s emphasis on “neutrality” in *Under Western Eyes*, his letter to Pinker suggests that the novel is a personally invested work with Poland serving as a hidden motivation for its composition. *A Personal Record* helps us better understand *Under Western Eyes* not because it offers a ready cross-reference to the novel but because the two texts are invested in the same project—a creation of a conceptual place that encompasses Poland and England.

Conrad’s attitude towards Poland was complex and changed over time as the map of early twentieth-century Europe was redrawn. In 1885, Conrad thought that Poland was an already “dead” nation, for which “nothing remain[ed] […] but the darkness of oblivion,” and he wrote: “When speaking, writing or thinking in English the word Home always means for me the hospitable shores of Great Britain” (*Letters* I: 12). And yet, in a 1903 letter to Waliszewski (15 November 1903), Conrad stressed his strong attachment to Poland: “during the course of all my travels round the world I never, in mind or heart, separated myself from my country [….] I may surely be accepted [in Poland] as a compatriot, in spite of my writing in English” (Najder 237). If he did not sever himself from Poland “in mind or heart,” he kept silent about Poland in public during his early literary career. Conrad’s early novels are mostly set in neutral spaces such as ships, the sea, or imaginary countries. Throughout his career, he wrote only one fiction about Poland, “Prince Roman,” and it was not published until 1911—sixteen years after the publication of his first novel in 1895. When a Polish British friend suggested in 1896 that he write about Poland, Conrad reportedly answered: “I would lose my public” (Najder 26). Until World War I, Poland was not a topic for Conrad to discuss openly.

Around World War I, however, Conrad’s public attitude towards Poland changed quite dramatically. Conrad visited Poland in July 1914 and was caught by World War I there; he
escaped the war and returned to England in November. During his stay in Poland, “Conrad became convinced that the political revival of the country was possible” (Najder 27). The war heralded a “new map of Europe” and Conrad was opened up to the “possibility that a new Poland could enter a new community of ‘Western’ nations” (Hay, “Reconstructing” 22, original emphasis). Conrad’s late essays such as “A Note on the Polish Problem” (1916) and “The Crime of Partition” (1919) reflect his newly kindled hope for an independent Poland. In these essays, Conrad explained for Western readers the injustice of the partition of Poland and urged them to support Poland’s right to nationhood. Appealing to Western readers to sympathize with the Polish people, Conrad wrote, “the Western Powers […] must recognize the moral and intellectual kinship of that distant outpost of their own type of civilisation” (“Crime” 131). Here Poland is described as a neglected “offspring of the West” that is now in need of Western support more than ever (“Crime” 133).

The injustice of the partition of Poland, however, did not necessarily cause Conrad to unequivocally criticize imperialism in general. As I will contend, his view of imperialism, especially British imperialism, was ambivalent. The evils of Russian imperialism led him to believe in “the West,” instead of making him a firm anti-colonialist. For example, while he was indignant about the partition of Poland, he was surprisingly indifferent to the Irish national cause. To my knowledge, he mentioned the partition of Ireland only once, unsympathetically. In 1918, he wrote a letter to John Quinn, an Irish American lawyer who collected modernist art including Conrad’s. To Quinn’s concern over the Irish problem, obviously motivated by his national background, Conrad responded: “I will tell you frankly that we don’t think much about Irishmen now. As long as they didn’t actually and materially add to the deadly dangers of our situation we were satisfied. I am speaking now of the bulk of the people, not of our politicians” (Letters VI:
This letter was written between “A Note on the Polish Problem” and “The Crime of Partition.” Conrad’s apathy to the partition of Ireland suggests that he distinguished British imperialism from Russian imperialism. He ambivalently identified with the former, while vehemently opposing the latter.

In his late writings, Conrad repeatedly associated Poland with “the West.” At the same time, he obsessively distinguished Poles from Slavs because of the latter’s strong association with Russia. In “A Note on the Polish Problem,” for instance, Conrad insisted that Poles are “in truth not Slavonic at all” but “Western, with an absolute comprehension of all Western modes of thought” (135). As indicated in Conrad’s letter to George T. Keating (14 December 1922), Conrad’s identification of Poland as an “outpost of Westernism” was closely linked to his self-definition as a Western writer who inherited a “Western Roman culture” (Jean-Aubry II: 289). In the letter, he emphasized the seamlessness of the transition from being Polish to being English: “I went out into the world before I was seventeen, to France and England, and in neither country did I feel myself a stranger for a moment; neither as regards ideas, sentiments, nor institutions” (Jean-Aubry II: 289). It is not clear, and perhaps not so productive to ask, whether he chose to represent Poland as a Western country as a tactic to elicit Western support for Poland’s independence, or whether the claim came from his genuine belief. Either way, speaking for the national existence of Poland did not divide Conrad’s allegiance, or “fidelity,” to use his own favorite word. On the contrary, it helped Conrad bridge his two “homes,” Poland and England, now couched in the vague yet powerful term, “the West.”

While Eloise Knapp Hay and other scholars maintain that Conrad’s changed attitude towards Poland first took an articulate and definite form during World War I, I contend that Conrad embarked on some serious effort to cognitively re-map Poland and England before
World War I, particularly during the decade leading to the war. Although Conrad strongly protested against being called a Slav on several occasions, Hay argues that “Conrad’s implications after 1916, that Poland is a ‘Western’ nation and that ‘Slavonism’ is foreign to the Polish temperament, were evidently at the time quite new ideas in his thinking”; until 1916, Conrad “had long believed that Poland was an isolated, East European nation, chiefly made up of Slavonic peoples” (“Reconstructing” 22, original emphasis). In fact, in 1899, Conrad mentioned his “ultra-Slav nature” in the context that is highly ironic in the light of the argument presented here: “‘The tiger cannot change his stripes’—and I—my ultra-Slav nature” (Letters II: 230).

Critics have attributed Conrad’s new outlook to World War I and its aftermath. As mentioned before, it is a new Europe emerging from the war that awakened Conrad to the possibility of Poland’s national future. But the idea that Poland is a Western country was not really new to Conrad. His father, Apollo, and other Polish Romantic nationalists “considered the multi-ethnic Old Polish Commonwealth to have been a European state, whose Western political values and freedoms were enshrined in the constitution of 3 May 1791” (Carabine, Life 67). Moreover, the war does not fully explain why Conrad imagined Poland’s national existence only by mapping the country as Western. Conrad already began to construct cultural and mental affinities between Poland and England before the war, even as he subjected the project to his typical skepticism. World War I helped him expand on the project for the liberation of Poland. A Personal Record and Under Western Eyes together expose the process through which Conrad reconciled his two “homes,” before World War I provided him with an opportune historical context to envision Poland as a Western and independent nation.

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3 Conrad’s 1907 letter to Edward Garnett (8 October 1907) has often been cited as an example of Conrad’s protest against being identified as a Slav. The letter in question reads: “You remember always that I am a Slav (it’s your idée fixe) but you seem to forget that I am a Pole (Letters III: 492). Hay suggests that Conrad’s emphasis here is on the contrast of “remember” and “forget,” not “Slav” and “Pole,” thus substantiating her argument that “Slav” and “Pole” did not form a contradiction in Conrad’s mind until 1916 (“Reconstructing” 33).
Conrad’s confusing articulations of racial and national identity can be partly ascribed to the inherent slipperiness of the concepts of “race” and “the West.” As Ivan Hannaford extensively discusses, “the word ‘race,’” as used in Western languages, is of extremely recent origin” (4). He explains that the term “race” did not come into general use in European languages until the sixteenth century and “it was not until after the French and American Revolutions and the social upheavals which followed that the idea of race was fully conceptualized and became deeply embedded in our understandings and explanations of the world” (6). Judging from Western etymologies of the word, the idea of race did not exist for the most part of human history, and for centuries even after its entrance into European languages, it primarily connoted “descent,” “lineage,” “pedigree,” and “family” (Hannaford 5). As I will suggest throughout the chapter, Conrad’s racial self-representation in *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* strongly evokes these earlier connotations of “race” rather than its contemporary meaning. The two texts demonstrate Conrad’s concern with “race” as inheritance, heritage, lineage, and family disrupted by colonial history rather than as a DNA-based categorization of ethnic groups. When Conrad distances the Poles (including himself) from Slavs (thus from the Russian people) and maps Poland as a Western country, he genealogically re-defines himself and geographically re-maps his “home.” His engagement in genealogy and geography, which I wish to show are inseparably connected to each other in Conrad and central in his idea of self and “home,” points to the artificiality and fuzziness of much-naturalized terms such as “race” and “home.”

When Conrad was writing *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes*, he was solidifying his status in English literary circles. Significantly, this was also when Conrad was

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4 He had already published about a dozen books, including *Heart of Darkness* (1899), *Lord Jim, Typhoon* (1902), *Nostromo* (1904), and *The Secret Agent* (1907).
writing about Poland and Russia for English readers for the first time in his career. In fact, not only did he start to write publicly about his suffering homeland and her oppressor, but his writing around 1910 was preoccupied by them. In 1905, responding to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), he wrote “Autocracy and War,” an essay that contains Conrad’s first public mention of Poland and Russia. In the essay, elevated by Russia’s defeat by Japan, he criticizes “the decrepit, old, hundred years old, spectre of Russia’s might” and asks “the Western world […] to look so deep into the black abyss which separates a soulless autocracy posing as, and even believing itself to be, the arbiter of Europe, from the benighted, starved souls of its people” (89). At the same time, he warns against “Russia’s influence in Europe” on the ground that it is dangerous and “baseless” (“Autocracy” 92). Also, he wrote A Personal Record, to borrow Conrad’s own words, “[t]o make Polish life enter English literature” (Letters IV: 138). The fact that not only A Personal Record and Under Western Eyes but also his only Polish fiction, “Prince Roman,” were written almost simultaneously further suggests the degree to which he was absorbed by the question of his national identity around 1910.

And it is not just international politics that motivated Conrad to relate Poland and England. Around the time, Conrad’s decision to write in English was attacked both in Poland and in England. In 1899, a well-known Polish writer, Maria Orzeszkowa (1842–1910), accused Conrad of betraying Poland and the Polish language “for bread” (Najder 22–23). In fact, Conrad could not support himself and his family until the publication of Chance in 1913, and his correspondence tells us that he lived mostly on cash advances from his literary agent. In a letter to Józef Korzeniowski (14 February 1901), which could be read as a direct response to Orzeszkowa’s criticism, Conrad denied “deserting” Poland for his career: “I have in no way disavowed either my nationality or the name we share for the sake of success. It is widely known
that I am a Pole and that Józef Konrad are my two Christian names, the latter being used by me as a surname so that foreign mouths should not distort my real surname—a distortion which I cannot stand” (Letters II: 322–23). But Orzeszkowa’s attack had an enduring effect on Conrad. It “still rankled” when he visited Poland in 1914 (Baines 353). The accusation coming from the Polish novelist who put “national duties” before everything else—just as Apollo did and wanted Conrad to do—“made Conrad more acutely aware of his personal and national predicament” (Najder 23). Whether the charge of “desertion” was well founded or not, it certainly hit Conrad in a vulnerable spot.

The issue became even more poignant in 1908 when Robert Lynd, an English reviewer, called Conrad a “homeless person,” a man “without either country or language” (211). In a Daily News review of A Set of Six (1908), Lynd wrote that Conrad’s writing in English was a “very regrettable thing, even from the point of view of English literature” because his work would have been better if it had been written in Polish and then translated into English (210–11). Infuriated by the review, Conrad wrote to his close friend and writer, Edward Garnett (21 August 1908): “any answer [to the review] would involve too many feelings of one’s inner life, stir too much secret bitterness and complex loyalty to be even attempted with any hope of being understood. I thought that a man who has written the Nigger, Typhoon, The End of the Tether, Youth, was safe from that sort of thing. But apparently not” (Letters IV: 108). Lynd’s review raised Conrad’s Polish origin as a focal point of his authorship, making Conrad realize that his Polish past could not be separated from his English authorship. When Lynd’s review was published, Conrad was writing Under Western Eyes; he started A Personal Record about a month after the review. A

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5 Józef Korzeniowski was a librarian in Cracow whose name happened to be the same as Conrad’s Polish name. He sent Conrad the memoirs by Tadeusz Bobrowski, Conrad’s maternal uncle and guardian. As I will explain later, A Personal Record is partly based on Tadeusz’s memoirs.
Personal Record and Under Western Eyes are extended and convoluted responses to what was perceived as Conrad’s displaced loyalty.

Important in the shaping of Conrad’s idea of “home” and authorship is the fact that the early twentieth century was the time when Russian literature was enthusiastically introduced to England. The criticism of Conrad’s English was not the only reason that Lynd’s review was so irritating to Conrad. In the review, Lynd compared Russian literature translated by Constance Garnett with Conrad’s work written in English. When Conrad was building his literary career, books by great Russian writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Chekhov were first translated into English—most importantly, by Constance Garnett, wife of Conrad’s close friend, Edward Garnett. Virginia Woolf was not exaggerating when she wrote in “Modern Fiction” (1919) that “[t]he most elementary remarks upon modern English fiction can hardly avoid some mention of the Russian influence, and if the Russians are mentioned one runs the risk of feeling that to write of any fiction save theirs is waste of time” (216–17). After all, her essay, “The Russian Point of View” (1925), did not come out of a cultural vacuum. Conrad recollected in a letter to Charles Chassé (31 January 1924) that English critics misidentified him due to their interest in Russian writers: “The critics detected in me a new note and as, just when I began to write, they had discovered the existence of Russian authors, they stuck that label on me under the name of Slavonism. What I venture to say is that it would have been more just to charge me at most with ‘Polonism’” (Jean-Aubry II: 336). And Conrad once again emphasized the Western-ness of his authorship: “the formative forces acting on me, at the most plastic and impressionable age, were purely Western: […] as far as I can remember, those forces found in me no resistance, no vague, deep-seated antagonism, either racial or temperamental” (Jean-Aubry II: 336). The letter suggests that, at least as Conrad felt it, displacement resulted from English critics’
conflation of Russian and Polish cultures, not from his migration to England. For Conrad, “the West” is a mantra that distinguishes him from Russian writers when their influence was growing in his adopted country.

What Russia represents for Conrad plays a crucial role in Conrad’s self-fashioning as a Western writer. His lifelong antagonism against Russia, for which his tragic family history is responsible to a great extent, is well documented. What is less apparent is the relationship between his repeatedly professed hatred of anything Russian and the remarkable influence of Russian writers—especially Dostoevsky’s—on his writing. Many critics detect a secret fascination for, and unconscious internalization of, things Russian behind Conrad’s vehement denial of Russian influence. From this perspective, Conrad’s overt hatred of Russia is the work of a defense mechanism against what he intuitively understood so well even as he ideologically detested it. The psychological and historical reasons behind Conrad’s view on Russia have been amply and insightfully examined. My interest is in the role that things Russian played in Conrad’s project of reconciling his Polish past and English identity. It should be remembered that, as Poland was not an independent state, “[w]hat he renounced in 1886 [when he became a British citizen] was Russian, not Polish, citizenship” (Crankshaw 92). One very probable motive behind Conrad’s decision to leave Poland and become a British subject was to avoid conscription into the Russian army (Baines 43; Wheeler 24). When he was not allowed to be a Pole, officially, he was willing to be a British citizen in order not to be a Russian. Against Russia, Poland and England were compatible for Conrad.

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6 Jeffrey Berman’s conclusion to “Introduction to Conrad and the Russians” represents this dominant view: “For all of Conrad’s horror of Russia, then, there was fascination and intense unconscious identification” (10).
Reconcilable Differences: Poland and England in *A Personal Record*

When *Under Western Eyes* became a bigger and more challenging project than Conrad initially had planned, he decided to undertake “intimate personal autobiographical things” to contribute to a new magazine (*Letters* IV: 125). Conrad’s letter to his literary agent (7 October 1908) suggests the excitement that Conrad felt about the autobiography that would be titled *A Personal Record*:

> This seems the psychological moment—and the appearance of a new Review is a good determining factor. My friendship for the editor (which is known) is a sufficient motive. It is a generally lucky concourse of circumstances. It may be, so to speak, the chance of a lifetime—coming neither too soon nor yet too late: for, my acceptance as an English writer is an accomplished fact—and the writer himself is not “used up,” either in regard to his own mind or in the public estimation of his work. (*Letters* IV: 138, original emphasis)

Conrad was referring to *The English Review*, the new magazine that would serialize *A Personal Record* (under the title of *Some Reminiscences*) as well as *Under Western Eyes* before they were published in book form.7

*A Personal Record* has been generally neglected for a few reasons despite Conrad’s thought that the autobiography “must be treated as a very special thing” (*Letters* IV: 125). It has been received as less than an important work because of the perception that Conrad wrote it as a diversion from more serious works, that is, *Under Western Eyes* and *Chance*. In addition, it has been considered as less than a “real” autobiography because of the disregard of generic conventions of autobiography both in form and content. *A Personal Record* does not contain much intimate information about the writer and does not follow chronological order, leaving many readers unsatisfied and confused. An early review published in *The Nation* (24 February

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7 *A Personal Record* was serialized in *The English Review* as *Some Reminiscences* from December 1908 to June 1909. The American book edition was titled *A Personal Record*. In England, the first book edition was published as *Some Reminiscences* and subsequent editions as *A Personal Record*. *Under Western Eyes* was serialized simultaneously in *The English Review* and *The North American Review* from December 1910 to October 1911.
1912) begins with a complaint that many readers would chorus: “In the whole fascinating library of confession, we suppose there was never a volume so wild in its disorder. […] Most writers of autobiography have the decency to tell us where and when they were born. Mr. Conrad deigns to tell us nothing of the kind” (“Elusive” 857). More recently, J. M. Kertzer asserted that “[d]espite its title, the book is not profoundly personal and none too accurate a record” (290).

I read the unconventionality of *A Personal Record* as an integral part of Conrad’s self-fashioning that aims to demonstrate his simultaneous commitment to Poland and England. *A Personal Record* consists of fragmentary episodes only loosely connected through free associations. Modernist aesthetics enabled Conrad to present his life as fragments, and in this sense, modernism was a fitting form for his project. Conrad appropriated modernism to integrate his Polish past and English authorship by fragmentarily presenting Polish experience and his first English book yet deliberately creating an underlying continuity between them. Before I further develop this argument about *A Personal Record*, however, I shall discuss *The English Review*—not only because *A Personal Record* first appeared in the magazine, but also because it tells us the cultural context that encouraged Conrad to publicly write about Poland. My argument is that, on the one hand, the internationalization of English culture promoted by *The English Review* allowed Conrad to combine his two nationalities to fashion one identity, and on the other, the magazine’s fascination with Russian literature made it necessary for Conrad to be more assertive about his Polish national history. As Conrad put it, “a generally lucky concourse of circumstances” presented itself to him, and *The English Review* provided him with “the chance of a lifetime.”

*The English Review and the Russian Connection*

The composition of *A Personal Record*, its beginning and ending, is directly linked to the birth and fluctuating course of *The English Review*. The magazine was founded in 1908 by Ford
Madox Ford and published monthly until 1937. Ford was editor of the magazine for the first fifteen issues before he was replaced with Austin Harrison in early 1910. Belonging to Ford’s close literary circle, Conrad, Edward Garnett, H. G. Wells, and John Galsworthy were involved in the conception of the magazine. Ford had consulted them about starting a new review, and in late 1908, a “whole number of the magazine was put together one night at Conrad’s house in the country” (MacShane 313). Karl calls “[t]he four early issues when Ford had full editorial command of the Review” “Conrad-Ford issues” (“Joseph” 348). According to Karl, Conrad probably named the magazine (Joseph 654). The first installment of *A Personal Record*—titled *Some Reminiscences* during serialization—appeared in the inaugural issue of *The English Review* in December 1908. Also included in the issue was Thomas Hardy’s poem, “A Sunday Morning Tragedy,” which had been rejected by all other magazines in London. It was alleged that Ford started *The English Review* to publish Hardy’s poem. Denying the allegation, however, Ford later wrote: “My own most urgent motive was to provide some money for Conrad by printing *A Personal Record* and other things which I extracted from him” (191). If *A Personal Record* motivated Ford to start *The English Review*, it worked the other way around, as well, because Ford certainly motivated Conrad to write *A Personal Record*. As Conrad wrote in “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*, the autobiography is “the result of a friendly suggestion, and even of a little friendly pressure” from Ford (xv). *A Personal Record* and *The English Review*, at least in part, owe their beginnings to each other.

*The English Review* incorporated international trends to expand the horizon of English literature. The magazine took a great interest in the refinement of English national culture. It published works by many prominent British modernist writers such as Conrad, Hardy, Wells, Henry James, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Galsworthy, Cunninghame Graham, Edward Garnett,
Algernon Charles Swinburne, and E. M. Forster. With Ford’s fine eye for spotting hidden talent, the magazine also “discovered” D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, and Norman Douglas by publishing their first works (MacShane 315–16). At the same time, it embraced internationalism as an integral part of an English cultural life by introducing foreign writers, especially French, German, and Russian ones. The magazine’s inaugural issue, for example, featured not only works by Hardy, James, Conrad, Galsworthy, W. H. Hudson, and Wells, but also Tolstoy’s “The Raid” and Conrad’s review of Anatole France’s *L’Ile des Pingouins*. The scope of the magazine was not limited to literature, either. The section called “The Month” covered domestic and international politics and social issues—from unemployment to political situations in the Balkans and the pan-Polish party. The name of *The English Review* points to its central interest in the state of English literature, but the magazine aimed to refine English culture by putting it in an international context. As Eric Homberger notes, Ford “sought to make an ‘English’ review a vehicle for cultural cosmopolitanism” (66). The result is an interesting mixture of nationalism and internationalism palpable in the pages of the magazine.

*The English Review* reflected the shift in British modernism’s interest from the British Empire to English culture. John Marx posits that, in the early twentieth century, “the very distinction between British nation and English culture on which empire-building depended” was revised (1). He explains that modernist writers came to define English culture as a part of a network of connected localities, instead of the center of the British Empire that was already in decline. This change “helped authorize immigrants and colonial subjects to write fiction in English that privileged marginality for a cosmopolitan readership” (Marx 1). At the same time, less emphasis was placed on solidifying a British identity between the metropole and the colony, and instead there emerged increased attention to cultures outside Britain. This explains the
international scope of *The English Review* as well as the strong presence of exiles in British modernism in general. For Conrad, this shift offered the perfect opportunity to connect his Polishness and Englishness. On the other hand, it also resulted in a stronger influence of Russian literature on English culture.

By writing about Poland in *The English Review*, Conrad symbolically bridged his Polish past and English authorship. Russian influence on English culture, however, was a bitter reminder of the Russian occupation of Poland. *The English Review* devoted considerable pages of each issue to foreign literatures and affairs. Reflecting the English fascination for Russian literature, it published works by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. The May 1909 issue, for example, featured Constance Garnett’s translation of Dostoevsky’s “An Honest Thief” immediately followed by Conrad’s *Some Reminiscences [A Personal Record]—*an interesting editorial decision given Dostoevsky’s open antagonism against the Poles and Conrad’s professed dislike of Dostoevsky. The same issue also included “The Rise of the Pan-Polish Party” in “The Month” section as well as Wyndham Lewis’s satire, “The ‘Pole.’” In “The ‘Pole,’” Lewis described bohemian pseudo-artists and social parasites passing as “Poles” and added: “‘Polonais’ or ‘Pole,’ means to a Breton peasant the member of no particular nation, but merely the kind of being leading the life that I am here introducing cursorily to the reader” (256). The May 1909 issue provides a good picture of Conrad complexly located among Poland, England, and Russia. Conrad was writing *A Personal Record* “[t]o make Polish life enter English literature,” when Poland had become “no particular nation” but just a signifier of a cultural stereotype to the English public, and English culture was actively absorbing Russian literature.

Not only did English literati respect Russian literature, but some of Conrad’s close friends also had personal Russian associations. Ford’s brother-in-law was Russian. The house of
the Garnett family was frequented by Russian émigrés. Constance and Edward Garnett were enthusiastic about introducing Russian literature to the English public. Olive Garnett, Edward’s younger sister and writer of *Petersburg Tales* (1900) and *In Russia’s Night* (1918), was romantically involved with the exiled Russian revolutionary, Sergey Stepniak. In a letter to Edward Garnett (20 October 1911), Conrad sarcastically called him “Russian Embassador to the Republic of Letters” and added: “You are so russianised my dear that you don’t know the truth when you see it—unless it smells of cabbage-soup when it at once secures your profoundest respect” (*Letters IV*: 488). Although Conrad remained close to the Garnett family, the latter’s sympathy with Russians irritated Conrad.

The ending of *A Personal Record* illustrates the entanglement of *The English Review*, Russian influence, and Conrad’s Polish life in a rather dramatic way. Ford was good at finding new talents, but not at managing finances. After Ford’s financial mismanagement, David Soskice, Ford’s Russian brother-in-law, took over the management of *The English Review* in the summer of 1909. In the July 1909 issue of *The English Review*, instead of the expected eighth installment of Conrad’s autobiography, there appeared an editorial note: “We regret that owing to the serious illness of Mr. Joseph Conrad we are compelled to postpone the publication of the next instalment of his *Reminiscences*” (824). In fact, Conrad discontinued his contribution to *The English Review*, and the eighth installment was never written either for the magazine or for book editions. Conrad’s letter to Galsworthy (7 September 1909) indicates that Soskice’s nationality directly affected Conrad’s decision to discontinue his contribution to the magazine in such an abrupt manner: “A Russian has got hold of the *English Review* and I can not contribute any

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8 Thomas C. Moser argues that Sergey Stepniak and Olive Garnett influenced Conrad’s characterization of Russians in *Under Western Eyes*. 

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more” (*Letters* IV: 272). The fact that Russian influence led Conrad to unexpectedly end the serialization of his autobiography, which he had called “the chance of a lifetime,” suggests the degree to which Conrad saw his authorship in opposition to Russia.

One can hardly miss the grandiosity with which Conrad reconstructs the significance of the English language and flag in his life. In response to Ford’s charge that he left *Some Reminiscences* in “ragged condition,” Conrad wrote (31 July 1909): “It is so little *ragged* to my feeling […]. [T]he very phrase ending the 7th instalment is to my mind an excellent terminal, a perfect pause carrying out the spirit of the work” (*Letters* IV: 264, original emphasis). Even though it is an after-the-fact justification, it is still significant that Conrad considered the ending as “an excellent terminal” effectively delivering “the spirit of the work.” Chapter VII of *A Personal Record*—which corresponds to the seventh installment of *Some Reminiscences*—describes Conrad’s very early days at sea. In the last pages of the autobiography, Conrad recollects his first contact with an English ship. On board a French ship, he sees an English ship approaching and hears English words addressed to him for the first time in his life. As he admits, the address—“Look out there”—is “[t]oo short for eloquence and devoid of all charm of tone” (*Personal* 136). Conrad nevertheless describes it as an indelible moment because English is “the speech of [his] secret choice, of [his] future, of long friendships, of the deepest affections, of hours of toil and hours of ease, and of solitary hours too, of books read, of thoughts pursued, of remembered emotions—of [his] very dreams!” (*Personal* 136). As the English ship moves away, he watches her flag hoisted. The very ending to the autobiography is a description of the

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9 Ford confirmed that Conrad’s decision to discontinue contribution to the magazine was due to Soskice’s being Russian (193). The long sustained Conrad-Ford relationship fell apart in 1909 for a few reasons. Ford’s liaison with Violet Hunt was a major reason of the breakdown. Also, Conrad’s “private and confidential” letter to Pinker (4 August 1909) indicates that Conrad was furious when Ford tried to force him to see Willa Cather to help sell the ownership of *The English Review*. When Conrad refused to see Cather, Conrad was “made responsible for the failure of a negotiation with McClure for the sale of the ER” (*Letters* IV: 265).
“warmth” of the English flag: “The Red Ensign—the symbolic, protecting warm bit of bunting flung wide upon the seas, and destined for so many years to be the only roof over my head” (Personal 138). The “spirit of the book” that the ending phrase captures is a reaffirmation of England’s hospitality and his commitment to the adopted country. Throughout A Personal Record, Conrad interweaves this “spirit” with his Polish memory to assert his fidelity to both Poland and England without betraying either.

J. C. K: The English Book and “The Inexorable Past”

As I mentioned earlier, since its first appearance in The English Review, A Personal Record has been criticized for deviating from conventions of autobiographical writing—especially for a paucity of personal information in it and its blatant disregard of chronological order. Readers of A Personal Record seem to agree that it is “one of the most anomalous texts in its subgenres” (Abbott 135). Even though it is an “anomalous” autobiography, as I will argue, A Personal Record is a highly controlled narrative. And its unconventionality is Conrad’s chosen strategy for creating one workable personality out of two national heritages. Jocelyn Baines, Conrad’s biographer, is probably right that “it was never the intention of a man so reticent about himself in public as Conrad to reveal much of himself” (354). Rather, it was to smooth out the cultural threshold between Poland and England and render differences between the two cultures reconcilable for his reading public.

In “A Familiar Preface” to A Personal Record, Conrad explains the reasoning behind his decision to abandon autobiographical conventions: “Could I begin with the sacramental words, ‘I was born on such a date in such a place?’ The remoteness of the locality would have robbed the statement of all interest” (xxiv). Because of his Polish origin, which the English reading public would find distant, he decides that his life is not good material for a chronological autobiography. As indicated in a letter to E. V. Lucas (23 June 1909), Conrad felt acutely about
the challenge that his life posed to autobiographical writing: “I know that the form is unconventional [...] It has been thought out. [...] My case (as before the public) being not only exceptional but even unique, I felt I could not proceed in cold blood on the usual lines of an autobiography” (Jean-Aubry II: 100). Discarding generic conventions of autobiography, he creates his own “system” with the “hope that from the reading of these pages there may emerge at last the vision of a personality [...] a coherent, justifiable personality both in its origin and its action” (xxv). *A Personal Record* is not unique in aiming to create a “coherent” and “justifiable personality” out of chaotic life experience. What makes Conrad’s autobiography unique, however, is the unconventional yet very calculated way in which Conrad tries to achieve this aim.

*A Personal Record* begins with Conrad writing his first book, *Almayer’s Folly*—and thus with the birth of Conrad the writer, instead of Conrad the person—insisting that “a writer is no older than his first published book” (108). Recounting how “the story-teller [was] being born into the body of a seaman,” he recalls the places where he brought the manuscript of *Almayer’s Folly* during the prolonged composition of the book (17). As Conrad guides the reader through his peculiar transformation from a seaman to a writer as well as the many places he traveled with the manuscript, he evokes the book as an “inseparable companion” and “a talisman or a treasure” to connect distant places and times (20, 13). One of the places is Africa, which brings him to the memory of his childhood—the famous moment when Conrad pointed at Africa in a map and decided to go to the “blankest of blank spaces on the earth’s figured surface” someday (13).

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10 Conrad expressed the same idea in other letters, as well: “I am not a personage for an orderly biography auto or otherwise. It did cost an effort to begin—I assure you. Now there will, in the end, be a book and, who knows, from the rambling discourse a personality of sorts will yet emerge” (*Letters* IV: 175). In a letter to Pinker, Conrad wrote: “Of course the thing [*A Personal Record*] is very far from conventional in its composition. It does not much resemble other people’s reminiscences. Oh dear no!” (*Letters* IV: 159).
Poland is first introduced as another place where the manuscript of *Almayer’s Folly* traveled with the writer. Being carried to his uncle’s house by sledge, Conrad learns that the coachman is the son of “the trusty Joseph who used to drive [his] grandmother” (21). As he discovers this solemn continuity in human life, he once again reminds the reader that the “MS. of ‘Almayer’s Folly’ was reposing in the bag” (22).

In early chapters of the autobiography, Conrad constantly takes the reader back to the writing of *Almayer’s Folly*, which then not only bridges distance in time and place but also binds different parts of the narrative of *A Personal Record*. In the autobiography, *Almayer’s Folly* connotes more than a physical volume. It symbolizes the beginning of Conrad’s English authorship, his first sustained commitment to the English language. As such, it marks a rupture in his life, a moment of metamorphosis in terms of profession and nationality. Instead of employing a chronological perspective that will only accentuate the rupture, *A Personal Record* associates places, times, and events through the figure of the book that is written in English and yet travels so well to remote places, most importantly, to Poland. His English book literally and figuratively transcends national boundaries. In the opening sentence of *A Personal Record*, Conrad diverts the reader’s attention from his birthplace and instead emphasizes how writing transcends spatial boundaries: “Books may be written in all sorts of places” (3).

This opening sentence seems to claim exactly the opposite of what Conrad’s writing career points to because his career illustrates that writing does depend on location. Insightfully recognizing “the relation between writing and place” as the central concern of *A Personal Record*, Christopher GoGwilt reads in the opening sentence “an underlying pathos” of Conrad’s oeuvre in the recognition that “books may be written in all sorts of places, but Conrad’s books could not be written in or about Poland” (111, 113). The claim that the opening sentence makes
is not a reflection of his life experience but a projection of his ideological project, which is to cross the boundary between England and Poland. What Conrad stresses in early chapters of *A Personal Record* is the English book’s ability to travel and its international, or rather Polish, shaping. In its implicit assertion that *Almayer’s Folly* is English and yet it encompasses a larger territory, *A Personal Record* mirrors the core tenet of *The English Review*—namely, the international shaping of English literature.

H. Porter Abbott has argued that Conrad’s autobiography renders a conversion experience in a fundamentally different way than the linear developmental mode that dominated nineteenth-century narratives. He explains that, in the late nineteenth century, impacted by Darwinism, human development was understood as a gradual and organic progress, not an abrupt and drastic change. According to him, “the nineteenth-century triumph of gradualism over catastrophism in the natural sciences finds a direct analogue in the steady triumph of the novel over romance” (138). Unlike romance that represents character development as a series of “leaps” and “rebirths,” the late nineteenth-century novel describes it as a gradual growth (Abbott 138–39). Based on this historical examination of the two different modes of narrative, Abbott argues that in his disregard of the linear narrative mode, “Conrad was not only resisting the prevailing model of human change—prevailing at least in intellectual culture—but actively seeking an obverse alternative to it” (141). He further suggests that Conrad magnified romantic elements of his life in the pursuit of an alternative mode of life-writing: “From a strictly biographical point of view, Conrad’s transformation from sailor to writer is not nearly so astonishing and abrupt as it is made to appear in *A Personal Record*” (142). Abbott’s argument is compelling especially given that Conrad valued and justified romance even when it was perceived as a trivial genre unworthy of serious attention. Also, we might recall “leaps”
dramatized in Conrad’s work. In *Lord Jim*, for instance, Jim’s two “leaps”—the first from the Patna and the second to Patusan—mark exilic moments *par excellence*, strikingly resembling a symbolic “death” and a subsequent “rebirth.” For Conrad, “leaps” are a necessary step of character development, and significantly enough, they take the form of spatial migration.

Even so, the predominance of discontinuous “leaps” in Conrad’s representation of character development should not overshadow the other side of his project; if *A Personal Record* alludes to dramatic moments of discontinuities, it also establishes some underlying continuity as a way of making sense of the “leaps.” Although critics like Fredric Jameson point out the rupture between the Patna and Patusan parts in *Lord Jim*, J. Hillis Miller notes in *Fiction and Repetition* that the Patusan part mirrors the Patna episode rather than drastically diverges from it (32–33). Not coincidentally, the names of the ship and the imaginary place, Patna and Patusan, recall each other (Miller 33). Similarly, *A Personal Record* consciously deviates from a linear narrative progression not to emphasize “leaps” in Conrad’s life but instead to rediscover a continuity that survives the “leaps.” For this purpose, Conrad depicts seamanship and authorship as different yet analogous experiences, which becomes apparent in sentences like this: “I am compelled, unconsciously compelled, now to write volume after volume, as in past years I was compelled to go to sea, voyage after voyage” (18). He also relies on Wordsworthian “spots of time” to register his migration to England as a preordained course.11

Conrad’s description of his first important encounter with an Englishman provides a superb example of a Wordsworthian “spot of time.” At the age of fifteen, Conrad was sent on a

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11 Here I expand on Ray Stevens’s observation that *A Personal Record* “focuses on Wordsworthian spots of time that have had significant impact on Conrad’s life, taking the reader deeply into Conrad’s being as he suggests connections between seemingly insignificant incidents that over time become both physically and psychologically significant” (306). In *A Personal Record*, Conrad recalls crucial childhood moments (“spots of time”) that he insists shaped his adult life, his migration to England, in particular.
tour to Europe with his tutor. It was the year when he first expressed his desire to leave Poland to go to sea, and his maternal uncle, Tadeusz Bobrowski, arranged the tour, hoping that the tutor could dissuade Conrad from his “romantic folly” (43). On an Alpine pass, the tutor almost succeeded in his “confidential mission” before an “unforgettable Englishman” in “a knickerbocker suit” passed by (43, 40). For an inexplicable reason, the sight of the Englishman inspired Conrad to feel confident in his decision to leave Poland. The tutor gave up on his “mission” with a remark that made Conrad feel “vaguely flattered”: “You are an incorrigible, hopeless Don Quixote” (44). Recalling this incident, Conrad magically transforms the passing Englishman into “the ambassador of [his] future, sent out to turn the scale at a critical moment” (41). On the one hand, Conrad acknowledges “leaps” as a crucial component of his life. On the other hand, however, he compensates for the “leaps” by imposing his own “system” of signification—such as his own narrative ordering and interpretation with hindsight—that are designed to construct “a coherent, justifiable personality” out of two national heritages.

Conrad’s attempt at his own “system” of signification is most emblematically manifested in the initials he used in “A Familiar Preface” written in 1911 for the English book edition of the autobiography. He signed the original preface J. C. K., which appeared in the first English and the first American editions (Szczeypien, “Untyrannical” 17). As Jean M. Szczeypien observes, the initials “are unique among the initials in Conrad’s prefaces, including author’s notes, which are signed J. C.” (“Untyrannical” 17). Furthermore, the 25-page handwritten manuscript of “A Familiar Preface” in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library is branded with more

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12 Tadeusz became Conrad’s guardian after Conrad lost both parents. After Conrad left Poland, he also served as Conrad’s main link with the country. Many critics and biographers of Conrad picture Tadeusz as Apollo’s opposite. Politically being on the moderate side, Tadeusz was “a convinced opponent of the 1863 insurrection and generally of all projects for regaining the independence of Poland by force. He was equally strongly opposed to all socially radical movements” (Najder 17). He would charge Conrad’s father, Apollo, with irresponsible and foolhardy romanticism and warn Conrad against the same “character flaw” that he thought Conrad inherited from Apollo. The conflicting influence of Tadeusz and Apollo on Conrad has encouraged some critics to see him as homo duplex in another sense.
than a dozen, sometimes ornate, drawings of the letter K in the margin (Szczypien, “Manuscript” 166). Szczypien explains that the marginal K’s appear particularly when Conrad is referring to “revolution,” “silences in his boyhood,” others’ criticisms against his work, his writing, and “overcoming his adversaries” (“Manuscript” 166–67). The K’s offer another link between A Personal Record and Under Western Eyes because the manuscript of the latter also contains 72 similar marginal K’s (Szczypien, “Manuscript” 166). While the letter K can represent either Conrad’s Polish patronymic Korzeniowski or his Polish given name, Konrad, it may very well be a condensation of both as significances of the two names converge.

Apollo named his only son Konrad after Polish patriotic heroes of Adam Mickiewicz’s Konrad Wallenrod (1827) and Forefathers’ Eve (1832). Apollo wrote, “My child, my son—tell yourself that you are without land, without love, without Fatherland, without humanity—as long as Poland, our Mother, is enslaved” (qtd. in Najder 5). The markings of K, then, testify that in the autobiography as well as in his Russian novel, Under Western Eyes, Conrad was deeply engaged in the recuperation of his Polish identity especially as related to Poland’s occupation by imperial Russia. Significantly, the heroes in Mickiewicz’s two poems assume Western European identity before emerging as Polish national heroes (Najder 4–5). Unlike Mickiewicz’s Konrads, Conrad seriously committed himself to his adopted country, and his English identity meant much more than a disguised or temporary identity. And yet, like them, Conrad wanted to make his Western identity useful for Poland. Szczypien interprets the ornate K’s in the margin of “A Familiar Preface” as signs of Conrad’s “gaiety,” signs that he “has overcome the tragedies” (“Manuscript” 168). However, they might be signs of Conrad’s unwritten deliberation and lingering contemplation over reconciling his English and Polish identities.
Lynda Prescott reads J. C. K. as an indication of Conrad’s “sense of being homo duplex,” subscribing to the popular view of Conrad’s divided self (184). From a rather different perspective, GoGwilt argues that “[t]he signature marks Conrad’s success at having given a place in his fiction to this Polish past; but it also indicates the importance of making it a marginal place” (110, original emphasis). GoGwilt suggests that Conrad introduces the letter K, and with it, his Polish past, only as a “supplemental” identity, which he ultimately withdraws just as the letter K would be withdrawn in the preface to subsequent editions of A Personal Record (110).

On the contrary to Prescott’s reading, I contend that by combining his English and Polish names, Conrad literally names himself as both English and Polish, fashioning a self that claims both lineages simultaneously. It might be true that in A Personal Record, as GoGwilt suggests, Conrad incorporates his Polish past into his English authorship only provisionally. What the oddly mixed signature represents is significant nonetheless because it exemplifies Conrad’s experiment with bridging his Polish past and English authorship in the autobiography.

In chapter II, where Conrad depicts a visit to Poland during the composition of Almayer’s Folly, he makes a symbolic connection between his English book and the national history of Poland’s opposition to Russia. Arriving at his maternal uncle’s house in the Ukraine, he “unostentatiously” places the book manuscript on the writing table in the guest room (26). Conrad’s uncle, Tadeusz, explains that the writing table used to belong to Conrad’s mother, Ewa, who in turn received the table as a gift from Conrad’s maternal granduncle, Nicholas Bobrowski (referred to as Nicholas B. in the autobiography). The history of the family heirloom reminds Tadeusz of Conrad’s mother who met “with calm fortitude the cruel trials of a life reflecting all the national and social misfortunes of the community” and “realised the highest conceptions of duty as a wife, a mother and a patriot, sharing the exile of her husband and representing nobly
the ideal of Polish womanhood” (29). If Ewa represents dutiful and strong “Polish womanhood,” Nicholas B. personifies the tragically frustrated dream of independent Poland. The life of Nicholas B. spans those painful years between Poland’s loss of statehood and the failed 1863 uprising against Russia. Conrad writes, “The first memories of Mr. Nicholas B. might have been shaped by the events of the last partition of Poland [in 1795], and he lived long enough to suffer from the last armed rising in 1863, an event which affected the future of all my generation and has coloured my earliest impressions” (56). Conrad’s father, Apollo, played a leading role in planning the 1863 uprising. Although casually introduced, then, the writing table is a reminder of Conrad’s family history as intertwined with Poland’s national history.

Not only does Nicholas B. symbolize the history of Poland between the final partition and the 1863 uprising, which importantly contextualizes Conrad’s exile, but he also represents Poland’s wasted sacrifice for Western Europe. In chapter II, Conrad describes in detail how the patriotic granduncle served the Polish army as well as the French army during the Napoleonic era in the hope that Napoleon’s France would help free Poland from Russian imperialism. During Napoleon’s disastrous retreat from the Moscow campaign, Nicholas B. and two other soldiers were isolated in a Lithuanian village occupied by Cossacks, and they were forced to eat a dog for survival. Having heard the tale as a child from his grandmother, Conrad recounts it with a touch of boyish “shudders” (34). From the perspective of the mature Conrad, however, the horror comes from the realization that “Nicholas’s fate becomes emblematic of Poland’s fate, and Nicholas himself becomes a hero as he becomes a symbol of the national condition” (Demory 61). Conrad calls Nicholas B. “the unfortunate and miserable (but heroic) being” (32). And “unfortunate” and “heroic” are the two words that Conrad would frequently use to describe

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13 According to Szczypien, although Conrad believed his uncle’s account that his mother voluntarily accompanied Apollo into exile, “she was actually sentenced together with her husband” (“Personal” 84).
Poland as a nation. Through the episode of Nicholas B., Conrad also makes a historical point that Poland fought for “the West” against Russia although “the West” let Poles down and left them under Russian imperialism. This is a particularly pungent point, given that his autobiography was written for an English magazine that actively introduced Russian literature to the English public. It should not be very surprising, then, that Conrad opens chapter III by mentioning Nicholas B. once again and in a bitter tone: “It was morally reprehensible for that great captain [Napoleon the Great] to induce a simple-minded Polish gentleman to eat dog by raising in his breast a false hope of national independence. It has been the fate of that credulous nation to starve for upwards of a hundred years on a diet of false hopes and—well—dog” (46). Conrad’s characterization of Poland, the “credulous nation” of “simple-minded” people who have been left in an abject condition, directly contradicts the image of the “Pole” described in Lewis’s “The ‘Pole’”—bohemians who exploit simple English peasants’ hospitality. In addition, the story of Nicholas B. offers a historical lesson of the disastrous effect of a mistaken alliance, which Conrad dwells on before suggesting another kind of international alliance.

By placing his manuscript on the Polish heirloom, Conrad creates proximity between the English book and his Polish background. It can be read as a gesture to compensate for “the remoteness of the locality,” which he mentions in “A Familiar Preface” as a particular challenge of writing about Poland for the English reading public. At the same time, he unceremoniously yet symbolically dedicates his first book to his Polish lineage. He makes sure to note that “the oppressive shadow of the great Russian Empire—the shadow lowering with the darkness of a new-born national hatred fostered by the Moscow school of journalists against the Poles after the ill-omened rising of 1863” was “a far cry back from the MS. of ‘Almayer’s Folly’” although they may appear distant from each other in time and place (24). In the scene, then, Conrad associates
his England authorship and Polish heritage against Russian imperialism. The significance of this scene—the English book on the family heirloom—is doubled by the fact that parts of *A Personal Record*, especially chapter II, were written based upon Tadeusz’s memoirs. Tadeusz’s memoirs, written in Polish, were posthumously published in 1900. Conrad’s 1908 letter confirms that he had a copy of the memoirs and planned to use them for his autobiography (*Letters IV*: 138). Incorporating the memoirs into *A Personal Record*, Conrad translates Tadeusz’s Polish record into English and makes the uncle’s “Polish life enter English literature.”

The story of Nicholas B., who ate the dog “to appease his hunger, no doubt, but also for the sake of an unappeasable and patriotic desire,” is followed by Conrad’s justification of his “desertion” (35). Responding to “men of unstained rectitude who are ready to murmur scornfully the word desertion,” Conrad writes:

> No charge of faithlessness ought to be lightly uttered. [...] The fidelity to a special tradition may last through the events of an unrelated existence, following faithfully, too, the traced way of an inexplicable impulse. It would take too long to explain the intimate alliance of contradictions in human nature which makes love itself wear at times the desperate shape of betrayal. (35–36)

Placed between the story of Nicholas B. and the Englishman on the Alpine pass, the passage is a very calculated insertion. A well-accepted speculation is that Conrad was responding to Orzeszkowa’s 1899 charge of “betrayal.” Conrad implicitly contrasts the tragic result of the granduncle’s apparently commendable patriotism and the presumably positive effect on Poland of his less obvious “fidelity.” Emphasizing the complex way in which his “fidelity” is expressed, Conrad suggests that his departure from Poland and migration to England is an act of “love” although it appears to be a “betrayal.” Put in a rather convoluted way, the justification ultimately points to the central contention of *A Personal Record* that his writing in English does not make him less faithful to his Polish heritage. The seemingly digressive narrative of *A Personal Record*

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14 For more about *A Personal Record*’s debt to the memoirs, see Szczypien, “Personal.”
proceeds in a highly controlled fashion to claim that his writing in English and his fidelity to Polish tradition may appear unrelated and even contradictory, but they are in fact related at some deeper level because “his work of fiction” is “remote from that inexorable past” (25).

The association between English books and Polish memories proliferates in A Personal Record. Even the dearest memory that Conrad has of his father, Apollo, coincides with Conrad’s “first introduction to English literature” (71). Shortly after Ewa’s death, the eight-year-old Conrad ventured to Apollo’s writing table and read loose manuscript pages of Apollo’s translation of Two Gentlemen of Verona. Discovering Conrad engrossed by the reading, instead of scolding him as expected, Apollo told Conrad to read a page aloud. Wondering about “the reason of this mildness,” the mature Conrad now surmises, “all unknown to myself I had earned, in my father’s mind, the right to some latitude in my relations with his writing-table” (72). In this rare description of his father, Conrad captures the moment when he felt close not only to Apollo but also to English books. It was also the moment when Conrad was allowed some access to Apollo’s writing table. Conrad finally links his and Apollo’s last time together in exile and the “first year of [their mutual] bereavement” from Ewa’s death to his first “Shakespearean associations” (73). Significantly enough, this memory of Apollo is followed by the first day of Conrad’s own “writing life” in London. Recalling his first day of writing, Conrad stresses the inexplicability of the motive behind his becoming a writer. Earlier in the autobiography, he has explained that his “first novel was begun in idleness”: “It was not the outcome of a need—the famous need of self-expression which artists find in their search for motives. The necessity which impelled me was a hidden, obscure necessity, a completely masked and unaccounted phenomenon” (68). By recounting how Apollo introduced him into English literature with a
permission to access to the writing table, Conrad insinuates that his decision to become an English writer was made under what he interpreted as Apollo’s unspoken permission.

Now the narrative suddenly switches to the problem of autobiographical writing itself. He says, “I was by no means anxious to justify my existence,” which would have been “not only needless and absurd but almost inconceivable” (94). Instead, he would simply say, “I have existed” (94). He acknowledges that it is “not without some damage here and there to the fine edge of [his] conscience, that heirloom of the ages, of the race, of the group, of the family” (94). And yet, he would “keep these reminiscences from turning into confessions, a form of literary activity discredited by Jean Jacques Rousseau on account of the extreme thoroughness he brought to the work of justifying his own existence” (94–95). Conrad distinguishes *A Personal Record* from confessional autobiographies such as Rousseau’s *Confessions*. And I have suggested that Conrad’s autobiography concerns not a confession but an invention of a self.

Conrad’s biographer observes that “in the twelve months which saw the completion of the reminiscences, the writing of ‘The Secret Sharer’ and the finishing of *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad finally succeeded in coming to terms with his sense of guilt with regard to Poland” (Baines 359). If that is true, it might be because differences of England and Poland were made reconcilable to Conrad’s thus-invented self.

**“Pro Patria!”: Genealogy and Geography in *Under Western Eyes***

In *A Personal Record*, Conrad’s patriotic granduncle, Nicholas B., allies himself with a Western power to combat Russia. Conrad makes clear that the granduncle joined the French army “pro patria” based on the mutual interest of Poland and France against Russia (*Personal* 35). As I have examined, Conrad’s own transnational alliance in *A Personal Record* involves not a military action but a discursive process that links his English book and Polish national history.

The two writing tables in *A Personal Record*, Nicholas B’s and Apollo’s, symbolize the Polish
heritage that Conrad tries to reconcile with his English authorship; the writing tables that used to belong to the Polish patriots are evoked to justify Conrad’s writing in English. In *Under Western Eyes*, Conrad is engaged in a similar project of relating Poland and England. However, *Under Western Eyes* is “a Russian story for Western ears” narrated by an English teacher, and Conrad’s Polish heritage is not directly accessible in the novel (*Western* 140). Any reference to Russia in Conrad’s work can be read as a reference to Poland given that Poland as a nation did not exist and Russia denoted to Conrad the non-existent nationhood of Poland. Still, it is significant that in *Under Western Eyes* Poland functions only as an absent center of the narrative, and Conrad appropriates the narrator’s English eyes to promote the Polish national cause of opposing Russian imperialism. If *A Personal Record* represents Conrad’s Polish heritage as a remote yet readily claimable inheritance, *Under Western Eyes* alludes to it as something that is to be recovered with the help of an English perspective. Indeed, what makes *Under Western Eyes* a drastically exilic text is the implication that there is no familial and national heritage readily available and one can only start a new genealogy, which ultimately turns out to be a geographical project.

A scene in *A Personal Record* describes an interview that Conrad had with an English seamanship examiner during his sea life. “I felt adopted,” writes Conrad, “as though he had been an ancestor” (*Personal* 118). In the scene, the examiner notes Conrad’s Polish nationality and the rarity of Polish seamen. Realizing that he has “never come across one of [his] countrymen at sea,” Conrad wholeheartedly accepts the retired English seaman as “a professional ancestor, a sort of grandfather in the craft” (*Personal* 119). Capturing a moment of Conrad’s creation of his own genealogy, this scene introduces a repetitive Conradian theme—“filial foreclosure and affiliative compensation” (Mallios 178). The idea that one can choose “a professional ancestor”
to compensate for the absence of biological forefathers, the idea of genealogy governed not by
nature but by culture (“craft”), constitutes a foundation for Conrad’s self-fashioning. Like
Conrad in the autobiography, his many characters are fatherless. In *Under Western Eyes*, not
only is there no single functioning father present in the entire narrative, but the significance of
the fatherless state is expanded to refer to the malfunction of *patria*, or fatherland. *Under
Western Eyes* points to Conrad’s concern with *patria* on two different levels. Through the story
of the Russian protagonist, Razumov, Conrad thematizes the malfunction of the father(land),
which importantly conditions Conrad’s two major, related preoccupations—genealogy and
geography. At the same time, Conrad uses the narrator’s “Western eyes” as a route to his own
*patria*, Poland, by having the English narrator discursively contain Russia.

**The Impossible Lineage**

*Under Western Eyes* opens by drawing attention to the filial lineage of the novel’s
Russian protagonist, “the man who called himself, after the Russian custom, Cyril son of
Isidor—Kirylo Sidorovitch—Razumov” (11). Yet, Razumov’s name is an ironic misnomer
because, being an illegitimate and abandoned son of Prince K __, Razumov is “nobody’s child,”
as Conrad characterizes him in “Author’s Note” (8). The lack of Razumov’s filial association
plays a pivotal role in the development of the story that *Under Western Eyes* describes,
underscoring Razumov’s nationality as the only available anchor of his identity. As the narrator
tells us, “There were no Razumovs belonging to him anywhere. His closest parentage was
defined in the statement that he was a Russian. Whatever good he expected from life would be
given to or withheld from his hopes by that connexion alone” (17). Conrad stresses Razumov’s
orphaned status repeatedly in order to elicit readers’ sympathy for his protagonist who secretly
betrays Haldin, a revolutionary and fellow student at the St. Petersburg University, and later
spies on revolutionaries in Geneva for the Tsar’s government. Extremely conscious of the
insecurity resulting from the “peculiar circumstances of [his] parentage, or rather of his lack of parentage,” Razumov tries to stay away from political tumult and “keep an instinctive hold on normal, practical, everyday life”—until Haldin’s unexpected visit makes it impossible (29, 17).

Having just assassinated the Minister of State, Haldin asks Razumov to arrange his escape because he misconstrues Razumov’s reticence as implicit support for revolutionary causes. When it turns out that Haldin’s plan of escape cannot be carried out, feeling misunderstood and ill-used, on the one hand, and fearful of the consequences of his unwilling involvement in Haldin’s assassination, on the other, Razumov informs on Haldin to the Tsar’s authority.

At the most obvious level, *Under Western Eyes* concerns Razumov’s betrayal and its consequences as conditioned by Russian despotism. Not surprisingly, a great deal of criticism has suggested (or has been built upon) parallels between Razumov’s betrayal of Haldin and Conrad’s departure from Poland, on the one hand, and between the idealistic revolutionary Haldin and Conrad’s father, Apollo, on the other. For example, David R. Smith focuses on “the kinship between Razumov and Conrad” and reads the novel, especially Part First, as “Conrad’s disguised *apologia*” (58, 45). Keith Carabine also writes, “Razumov’s betrayal of Haldin enacts Conrad’s guiltiest feelings with regard to the abandonment of the values for which his father, like Haldin, gave his life” (“Figure” 7). The parallel between Razumov’s betrayal and Conrad’s “desertion” has been the basis for autobiographical readings of *Under Western Eyes* that trace Conrad’s Polish past in the novel. Based on the parallel, Smith asserts that *Under Western Eyes* is “the most autobiographical of [Conrad’s] novels” (40). In a less obviously autobiographical way, however, Razumov’s story of betrayal, spying, and confession also points to the inadequacy of filiation as a mode of belonging and the pursuit of an alternative way of anchoring an identity. *Under Western Eyes* presents Razumov’s betrayal and spying as a failure of filial relations in
general rather than Razumov’s individual moral failure.

According to Edward Said, high modernist texts, which are populated by orphans and childless couples, saliently allude to “the difficulties and ultimately the impossibility of natural filiation” (“Secular” 16). Distinguishing two modes of belonging, filiation and affiliation, Said defines filiation as natural, biological, hierarchical ties that are sustained by “natural forms of authority—involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict” (“Secular” 20). By contrast, affiliation refers to non-biological, cultural, and social relationships. It tends to be less personal and more occupational, professional, or ideological than filial relations. Because affiliation assumes individuals’ greater autonomy from institutions or organizations that they belong to, it is ideally characterized by distance and critical consciousness. Said suggests that the unavailability or undesirability of filiation generates the desire for compensatory affiliative relationships in many modernist texts. This move from filiation to affiliation can be generally understood as “the passage from nature to culture” (Said, “Secular” 20). While Said notes this shift as a modernist tendency, he finds a prominent and extreme condition of affiliation in exile since exile, by definition, involves the foreclosure of filiation. Said’s formulation helps understand Razumov’s story of betrayal and confession in terms of his changing relation to the nation-state from filiation to affiliation not as a moral story. As I will demonstrate, by suggesting that Razumov’s relation to the nation-state cannot be re-defined in claustrophobic national space, Conrad advocates internationalism as a critical element of Razumov’s transformation.

Razumov attaches parental authority to the Tsar, the destructive yet strong national patriarch, and replaces the absent family with the troubled nation. Replicating the filial structure in the nation, Razumov envisions Russia as his “home” that grants him belonging and demands unconditional loyalty in return. His betrayal is motivated by the desire to compensate for his
fatherless state by naturalizing his relationship with the nation-state, that is, by filially connecting with the Tsar. Razumov feels justified to betray Haldin as he embraces Russia as his “immense parentage” (17). After the failed attempt to arrange Haldin’s escape, Razumov envisions “the hard ground of Russia” covered with snow as “a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding sheet” (34–35). If the snow is “a winding sheet,” it is also a homogenizing and totalizing power that “cover[s] the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, levelling everything under its uniform whiteness” (35). Razumov equates the snow that both shields and annihilates the corpse-like “mother” with the Tsar’s authority, “a will strong and one” (35). Overwhelmed by the sublime beauty and the destructive power of the snow and morbidly fascinated by “a sort of sacred inertia,” he accepts the Tsar’s authority as something that he should not “touch” (35). The fact that Razumov first informs on Haldin to Prince K __ indicates that Razumov strongly associates the Tsar with his secret biological father.

Razumov’s idea of “home” privileges natural, filial, and hierarchical belonging, and he conceives his relationship with the nation-state as such. Though in a limited way, Councillor Mikulin’s question at the end of Part First challenges Razumov’s assumption about natal belonging. After Haldin is arrested and executed, Razumov is suspected by the authority because of the fact that the assassinator sought refuge in his room. Councillor Mikulin summons Razumov for an interview, and when Razumov is about to “retire” from the exhausting interview, Councillor Mikulin asks, “Where to?” (89). The question closes Part One of the novel, and when Part Two opens, the narrative has moved from Russia to Geneva with Razumov already transformed into a Tsar’s spy. The narrator takes the reader back to the question of “Where to?” later in Part Four, explaining the psychological effect of that question on Razumov.
Razumov does not take the question “in a merely topographical sense” because it concerns his deepest insecurity of homelessness (244). The succinct question makes him realize that there is no safe “home” to return to, and he has been fundamentally uprooted despite his desperate desire to “become a great reforming servant of the greatest of States,” that is, “the Russian nation” (251). Razumov’s transformation into a spy and his international migration makes the effect of Councillor Mikulin’s question double-edged. On the one hand, the sense of homelessness heightened by Councillor Mikulin’s question makes Razumov desperately subscribe to the narrowly defined and misguided notion of patriotism, turning him into an active participant in the Tsar’s operation. On the other hand, it places Razumov in an international setting, allowing him geographical and mental distance from the nation-state.

Razumov’s story follows the spatial pattern of return that entails migration from claustrophobic national space to an international setting and back to the national space. And Conrad ultimately affirms internationalism as a necessary passage to Razumov’s renewed, healthier relation to his nation. In Geneva, Razumov is received as Haldin’s trusted friend by Russian revolutionaries as well as Natalia, Haldin’s sister. He falls in love with her, and feeling increasingly guilty, Razumov confesses his betrayal to her and revolutionaries. One of the revolutionaries, who later turns out to be another spy, bursts Razumov’s eardrums as a punishment. When the deafened Razumov is run over by a tramcar, a good Samaritan woman, Tekla, claims Razumov as her “relation” even though she is not biologically related to him: “This young man is a Russian, and I am his relation” (305). At the end of the novel, Sophia Antonovna, one of the few positive Russian characters in the novel, tells the narrator that Razumov and Tekla have moved back to Russia and live together. Sophia reports that they live “not ‘in the centre,’ but ‘in the south’” of Russia, in “a little two-roomed wooden house, in the
suburb of some very small town, hiding within the high plank-fence of a yard overgrown with nettles” (312). Sophia’s description suggests that the deafened and crippled Razumov now resides at the margin of the nation-state. Furthermore, Russian revolutionaries “always go to see him when passing through. He is intelligent. He has ideas…. He talks well, too” (312). Conrad allows Razumov a sense of belonging that is provided by Tekla’s companionship and a loose connection with revolutionaries, not by uncritical attachment to his native land or desperate patriotism. Having been abroad, Razumov returns to Russia not as the docile and fearful subject that he used to be but as a sage-like figure. Through Razumov as well as the English narrator, Conrad notes that Geneva, “the heart of democracy,” is certainly safer and more leisurely a place than St. Petersburg, yet the safety and leisure are the other side of banality and “the very perfection of mediocrity” (174, 172). Despite its banality and “mediocrity,” however, Geneva provides Razumov with the setting for re-imagining his place in the nation-state.

There is a general sense in Under Western Eyes that an unmediated relation to the nation-state is undesirable. Conrad represents Razumov’s uncritical identification with his fatherland as understandable but damaging. As the geographical movement of the novel demonstrates, Razumov’s relation to his fatherland is to be re-defined via internationalism. Also, through the good Samaritan Tekla, Conrad problematizes the conception of “home” based on natural filial belonging, thus countering Razumov’s initial idea of “home.” In a seemingly digressive episode, the reader is told that Tekla left her father, a clerk in the Ministry of Finances, for an ideological reason. When she was open to “the horrors from which innocent people are made to suffer in this world, only in order that governments might exist” and “once understood the crime of the upper classes,” she “could not go on living with [her] parents” (130). After having lived with the sick and poor, she becomes a secretary to the egomaniacal patriarch of Russian revolutionaries, Peter
Ivanovitch, who despite her dedication, despises and abuses her. By leaving her biological father and then the ideological father, Peter, to join Razumov, Tekla ultimately refuses paternal influence as detrimental to her identity. Conrad describes Tekla as a wretched being in order to satirize Peter’s hypocritical “feminism.” Nevertheless, Tekla is the one who de-familiarizes the concept of “home,” providing Razumov with an alternative way of belonging.

Given the symbolic importance of Apollo in Conrad’s life and Apollo’s involvement in Polish national history, the representation of paternal influence either as unavailable or undesirable in Under Western Eyes seems significant. I do not mean to impose a strict parallel between Razumov’s Russian story and Conrad’s Polish past. Instead, I suggest that the malfunction of parental lineages dramatized in Razumov’s story is reflected in Conrad’s use of the English narrator. Depicting his enemy country that has colonized his homeland, Conrad inserts the English narrator to deliver the Russian story. In A Personal Record, Conrad conjures up his Polish familial and national heritage to make it compatible with his English authorship. In Under Western Eyes, however, the use of the English narrator betrays the unavailability of his Polish lineage as an effective agent to combat Russia. Instead of his Polish paternal lineage that has proved ineffectual against Russia, Conrad appropriates the narrator to speak for Poland.

Mapping “the West”

Scholars have criticized the narrator, an English teacher of languages living in Geneva, for his inadequacy and sweeping generalization about anything Russian. Repeating disclaimers—such as “I have no comprehension of the Russian character” (12); “my excuse for this undertaking lies not in its art, but in its artlessness” (90); “one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity” (93); “Difference of nationality is a terrible obstacle for our complex Western natures” (103)—the narrator claims that he is unable to offer much insight into the Russian story that he undertakes to translate and render for the Western reader. The narrator’s
preoccupation is accentuating, and not elucidating, “[t]he illogicality of [Russians’] attitude, the arbitrariness of their conclusions, the frequency of the exceptional” (12). He stresses his inability to comprehend the Russian people as a way of establishing the Manichean binary of Russia and “the West” and further widening the gulf between the two worlds, which is the exact opposite of what a traditional translator and narrator is supposed to do.

Unlike early readers who conflated the narrator’s inability and prejudice with Conrad’s own, recent critics have suggested that the narrator and Conrad need to be distinguished in this complicedly framed narrative. Jakob Lothe, for example, discusses a tension between Conrad’s narrative and the narrator’s, arguing that “this tension is dramatized as a process during which the attitudes and views of the narrator are not so much openly contradicted as gradually undermined by the narrative movement itself” (288). Conrad keeps an ironic distance from the English narrator and exposes the limitations of the narrator’s Western perspective through his Russian characters as well as through the narrator’s contradictions. Nevertheless, the narrator’s generalization of the Russian people can be ascribed to Conrad’s own view, obviously shaped by his personal experience as a Pole. In “Author’s Note,” Conrad asserts: “The most terrifying reflection (I am speaking now for myself) is that all these people are not the product of the exceptional but of the general—as of the normality of their place, and time, and race” (8). And he continues, “The oppressors and the oppressed are all Russians together; and the world is brought once more face to face with the truth of the saying that the tiger cannot change his stripes nor the leopard his spots” (9). Conrad does not always endorse the English narrator’s interpretation of characters and events, and yet he uses the English teacher as a stand-in to represent Russia as a fundamentally oppressive and dangerous society. The inadequacy of the narrator’s Western eyes
for the Russian story, then, is a function of Conrad’s obsessive distinction between Russia and “the West.”

The contrast between “their Eastern logic” and “my Western eyes” that the narrator insists upon is not necessarily convincing, but it complements Conrad’s project of mapping Poland as a Western country (314). The narrator’s construction of Russia and “the West” as irreconcilable spaces is a project closely connected to Conrad’s mapping of Poland and England as continuous spaces. The narrator warns the “Western reader” that the story of Razumov would “appear shocking, inappropriate, or even improper” because “this is not a story of the West of Europe” (28). The fundamental difference between Russia and “the West” in Under Western Eyes would be replayed as the incommensurability between Russia and Poland in Conrad’s later essays. For instance, Conrad writes, “between Polonism and Slavonism there is not so much hatred as a complete and ineradicable incompatibility” (“Note” 136). Conrad suggests that the Poles and the Russians have incompatible minds just as the narrator and the “Western reader” of Under Western Eyes find Razumov’s story incomprehensible. Despite Conrad’s self-conscious attempt to filter his antagonism against Russia through the narrator’s allegedly “impartial” “Western eyes,” the narrator’s Western perspective serves Conrad’s Polish identity, which is fashioned against “things Russian.”

The working of different narrative layers in Under Western Eyes further points to Conrad’s Polish nationality as a hidden motivation for the novel’s composition. Throughout the novel, the narrator reminds us that his narration is “based on a document,” that is, Razumov’s diary that records his betrayal of the revolutionary Haldin and its aftermath (11). The narrator proclaims that his role in the narrative is strictly that of a translator: “all I have brought to it is my knowledge of the Russian language, which is sufficient for what is attempted here” (11).
However, even a cursory examination tells us that the narrator does not simply translate but constantly interprets, re-arranges, questions, and appropriates the Russian story. The English narrator rewrites and overwrites Razumov’s Russian story, and in so doing, linguistically contains Russianness. Razumov thinks that “[a]ll this was a sort of sport for [the narrator]—the sport of revolution—a game to look at from the height of his superiority” or “a mere sensational story to amuse […] the superior contemptuous Europe (169, 160). As a character and eyewitness, he is a clueless outsider among Russian revolutionaries. In contrast, as a Westerner and narrator, the English teacher has a privileged vantage point from which he observes and rewrites the Russian story. The narrator has power over Razumov’s words because the Russian story ultimately depends on the narrator’s “Western eyes” for meaning.

The fact that the Russian story is subject to the narrator’s rewriting has to do with Conrad’s representation of Russia as a “passive land” where any agency is either menacing or ineffectual (11). In Under Western Eyes, Russia is imagined as “a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history” (35). Phyllis Toy notes that the description of Russia as a “blank page” resonates with the description of Africa in Heart of Darkness, which also appears in A Personal Record (44). In A Personal Record, Conrad recalls the time when he is about nine years old; “while looking at a map of Africa of the time and putting [his] finger on the blank space,” Conrad says to himself, “When I grow up I shall go there” (13, original emphasis). The “blank page” or “blank space” waits to be explored, and writing in this case is an alternative, safer way of conquest. In his later essay, “A Glance at Two Books” (1923), Conrad observes that the “national English novelist” sees writing “simply as an instinctive, often unreasoned, outpouring of his own emotions. He does not go about building up his book with a precise intention and a steady mind. It never occurs to him that a book is a deed, that the writing of it is
an enterprise as much as the conquest of a colony” (132, my emphasis). Conrad recognizes the
kinship of writing and conquest; both are deliberate actions that require controlled strategies to
produce “certain definite effects” (“Glance” 132). Besides, for Conrad, both are geographical
ventures.

However, the fact that Under Western Eyes deals with the nation that has colonized
Conrad’s homeland complicates the analogy of writing and conquest. As I have mentioned,
Conrad does not identify himself with the narrator. Instead, he employs the English teacher’s
“Western eyes” as a narrative device that allows him a “superior” vantage point in order to
counterattack Russia. In other words, Conrad uses the narrator’s Western identity as a route to
write for Poland. The English narrator’s colonizing “enterprise” of writing, then, can be read as
the Polish Conrad’s strategy to imaginarily decolonize his homeland from imperial Russia.
Najder explains that Conrad’s description of Russia as a “a monstrous blank page awaiting the
record of an inconceivable history” is a borrowing from Mickiewicz’s Forefathers’ Eve, the
Polish poetic drama from which Conrad’s name is also borrowed: “A land empty, white and
open—like a page prepared to be written on—by history” (qtd. in Najder 30). The similarity
between Conrad’s characterization of Africa and Mickiewicz’s representation of Russia
exemplifies how British imperialistic assumptions could be intermingled with Polish anti-
imperialistic nationalism in Conrad’s mind. Conrad has the narrator overwrite Razumov’s
Russian record and tries to contain “an immense, wintry Russia […] as if it were a map” (62). It
is no coincidence that the narrator is drawn to “the strongly lighted map of Russia” in a Russian
revolutionary’s room (273). When the narrator and Natalia visit the place where Russian
revolutionaries have a meeting, he notices that one of the revolutionaries is studying “the map,
the only brilliantly lit object in the room” (272). He says, “Even from my distant position by the
door I could make out, by the shape of the blue part representing the water, that it was a map of the Baltic provinces” (272). Unlike the obscure and incomprehensible Russians, “the strongly lighted map of Russia” is something that the narrator can immediately “make out.” The map gives him an Orientalistic sense of mastery, transforming the immense nation into a manageable marker. And sending the Russian exiles in Geneva back to Russia by the end of the novel “constitutes Conrad’s final tactic in his strategy of containment: his rout of the Russian invaders of the West, the fictional equivalent of the Russian invaders of his native Poland, back into the vast confines of Russia” (Kaplan 107). “Under Western eyes,” Russia is turned into “the blank space” in a map and the Russians are contained within its boundary.

The problematic part of the novel’s containment of Russia is that any counterattack on Russian imperialism mobilizes the narrator’s English imperialistic assumptions. That Conrad uses the English narrator as a proxy to combat Russia even as he exposes the limitation of the narrator’s Western perspective partly explains Conrad’s conflicted attitude towards British imperialism. As Said writes in Culture and Imperialism,

Conrad was both anti-imperialist and imperialist, progressive when it came to rendering fearlessly and pessimistically the self-confirming, self-deluding corruption of overseas domination, deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture, which the imperialists violently disturbed but by which they were ultimately defeated. (xviii)

While Conrad often provides pungent criticisms of British colonial operations, his hatred of Russia also led him to ignore certain aspects of imperialism. A rarely discussed example is his idealization of Japanese imperialism in “Autocracy and War.” In the essay written as a response to the Russo-Japanese war, warning against the danger of Russian imperialism, he completely ignores the threat of Japanese imperialism to Korea and China: “The Japanese army has for its base a reasoned conviction; it has behind it the profound belief in the right of a logical necessity
to be appeased at the cost of so much blood and treasure” (87). In this sense, Conrad’s complex attitude towards imperialism importantly suggests that location—from where does one speak?—matters in postcolonial studies. Conrad was not blind to the self-delusion of British imperialism. In *Heart of Darkness*, for example, we hear Marlow acknowledge that England “has been one of the dark places of the earth” (9). And yet, he did not seriously believe in civilization outside “the West.” As a victim of Russian imperialism, on the one hand, and an ambivalent participant in British colonialism, on the other, he saw Western powers as necessary allies of Poland against his archenemy, Russia, despite their own flaws. While his experience as a colonial subject made him aware of the absurdities of British colonialism, his hatred of Russian imperialism, in particular, also made him as acquiescent to British imperialism as he was to Japanese imperialism.

It is only logical, then, that Poland should belong to “the West” in Conrad’s mind. In fact, the use of “the West” in *Under Western Eyes* already registers his attempt to integrate an English identity and a Polish national cause. In *The Invention of the West*, GoGwilt explains that the contemporary English usage of “the West” emerged in the early twentieth century, identifying Europe as an inherent and coherent embodiment of culture “both distinct from and superior to other cultures” (224). In the nineteenth century, “the political force of the term ‘the West’ and its cognates remained diffuse and inconsistent” and did not have as much currency as Europe (GoGwilt 223). GoGwilt argues that the “shift from an idea of Europe to an idea of the West” reflects that weakening British imperialism around the turn of the century needed to ascertain Europe as *the* place of civilization and rearrange cultural and political associations accordingly (222). However, GoGwilt as well as Roberto Fernández Retamar mention the 1917 Bolshevik revolution as a defining moment in the development of the concept of “the West.”
contemporary associations of “the West” such as civilization, democracy, modernity, and capitalism were consolidated vis-à-vis what post-1917 Russia represented to Western Europe. (As Retamar’s study suggests, during the Cold War, the same associations mapped Western Europe and the U.S. as one Western culture in opposition to the Soviet Union.)

The German historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler clearly demarcates the boundary of “the West” in *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) written right after the Bolshevik revolution. In a lengthy footnote to “West-European,” Spengler writes,

> The word “Europe” ought to be struck out of history. […] There is historically no “European” type […]. It is thanks to the word “Europe” alone, and the complex of ideas resulting from it, that our historical consciousness has come to link Russia with the West in an utterly baseless unity—a mere abstraction derived from the reading of books—that has led to immense real consequences. […] “East” and “West” are notions that contain real history, whereas “Europe” is an empty sound (16).

Spengler’s explanation of his preference for “the West” over “Europe” as a historical term articulates two critical aspects of the construction of “the West.” First, “the West” with contemporary associations meant to dissociate Russia from Europe and crystallize the distinction as a historical fact. Second, Spengler’s dismissal of “Europe” as a historical misconception “derived from geography” that “assumes a Continent of Europe” and his favor of “the West” introduces the separation of the political and cultural map from the geographical map (16, original emphasis). The concept of “the West” evolved based upon its self-distinction from Russia, and Spengler makes the distinction by disengaging a superficial geographical boundary, or what he calls “an ideal frontier” that does not match “real history,” from another kind of boundary that delineates some deep cultural, mental, and political characteristics (16).

The language and the intent of Conrad’s 1905 “Autocracy and War”—“Considered historically, Russia’s influence in Europe seems the most baseless thing in the world” (92)—
strikingly resonate with those of Spengler’s footnote quoted above. In *Under Western Eyes*, written about a decade prior to the publication of *The Decline of the West*, Conrad anticipates and experiments with the two critical distinctions that Spengler would make. As I have argued, through the narrator’s obsessive distinction between “the West” and Russia, Conrad dissociates Russia from Europe and, by implication, associates Poland and “the West.” He does this based on the same assumption as Spengler’s—the idea that a cultural map that is more meaningful and historically accurate than a simple geographical map can be drawn. Conrad draws this map of “the West” that comprises England and Poland when he says that “[i]n temperament, in feeling, in mind, and even in unreason, they [the Poles] are Western” (“Note” 135). In *Under Western Eyes*, branding Russia as a society of cynicism that destroys everything it touches, Conrad aims to elicit from his Western readers the kind of response that the Bolshevik revolution would evoke: the fear that Russian “cynicism and cruelty,” “moral negation,” and “moral distress already silenced at our end of Europe” will debase “us Europeans of the West” unless it is contained outside “the West” (140, 97). Conrad mentions the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in the 1920 “Author’s Note,” hoping that the recent Russian affair does not make *Under Western Eyes* “a sort of historical novel dealing with the past” (7). Published before the revolution, *Under Western Eyes* is a cautionary tale from a Pole who lost his parents to Russian imperialism, especially when read against the backdrop of English writers’ fascination with Russian literature.

I have tried to demonstrate that Conrad’s idea of “home” is inevitably shaped by histories of imperialism—Russian as well as British—and it also involves artful appropriations and revisions of shifting geographical and cultural boundaries. Conrad has been received as deeply English and inexplicably foreign at the same time. He has been a “canonical” English writer while the image of the suffering, uprooted exile has never left him. As I suggested in the
discussion of *The English Review*, though elitist, British modernism was inclusive in such a way that foreign elements were embraced to enrich English culture. It is not a coincidence that many prominent English modernists such as James Joyce (1882–1941), Henry James (1843–1916), W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) were foreign-born or displaced writers. I do not mean to trivialize the pain of displacement and, in Conrad’s case, the struggle with the English language. Instead, I suggest that the experience of displacement and the image of the quintessential English modernist converged to a certain degree, and there was room in English modernist culture for Conrad’s project of conceptually mapping Poland and England as “the West.” Conrad fashioned himself by tactfully negotiating cultural and geographical realities of his time.

In the next chapter, I shall look at different histories of imperialism to explain Rhys’s ambivalent relationship to the West Indies in her late works. Like Conrad, Rhys was an important part of British modernism, depicting sexually, economically, and racially vulnerable women drifting around in cold European cities in her early novels. If many foreign-born writers contributed to, and indeed shaped, British modernism before World War I, West Indian writers, in particular, revitalized British modernism after the war. As Peter Kalliney posits in his recent study, “West Indian novelists—some of whom were outspoken critics of British imperialism—were among the most celebrated in metropolitan highbrow circles” in the 1950s (90). And yet, this did not make England a more inhabitable place for Rhys; neither did it make her homecoming to the West Indies easier. A white descendent of the British ruling class born in the West Indies, she could not negotiate her West Indian past and English authorship in the same way as Conrad claimed his Polish heritage as an integral part of his Englishness. Her race, sex, and class, as well as British imperial history in the West Indies and West Indian nationalism
located Rhys in-between the West Indies and England. The way in which she navigated this in-between space will be the focus of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3
JEAN RHYS’S HOME IN-BETWEEN

I said, “Do you consider yourself a West Indian?”
She shrugged. “It was such a long time ago when I left.”
“So you don’t think of yourself as a West Indian writer?”
Again, she shrugged, but said nothing.
“What about English? Do you consider yourself an English writer?”
“No! I’m not! I’m not! I’m not even English.”
— Plante in conversation with Rhys, Difficult Women 44

This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay.
— Wide Sargasso Sea 108

Introduction

The passivity and masochism of Jean Rhys’s (1890–1979) heroines have posed a difficulty to many readers. Homeless and impoverished, they are brutally victimized by exploitive men, European snobbism, and prejudices both racial and sexual. Unable to find a way out, they seem to have no effective agency and submit helplessly in a vicious circle of exploitation. Rhys repeatedly said that her stories are based on her own experience, she knew only about herself, and she was “nothing but a pen” (Smile 31). In depreciation of her creative power, she said: “I can’t make things up, I can’t invent. I have no imagination. I can’t invent character. I don’t think I know what character is. I just write about what happened” (qtd. in Plante, Difficult 52). Indeed, most of her stories evolved from personal records of tragic events that she wrote to make her unhappiness bearable. Combined with the qualities of her heroines, Rhys’s self-portrait as a mere “pen” with no ability to “invent” seems to suggest a lack of powerful authorship. The fact that her fictions are autobiographical, however, also indicates her desire to fashion her public self on her own terms.¹ If her writing process typically began with “autobiographical confession,” it also involved “tight editing through version after version” and

¹ According to Elaine Savory, in her will, Rhys included “an injunction against anyone writing her biography” (Jean 1).
self-censoring that often took decades (Savory, Jean 19). Rhys’s heroines are helpless and passive, but writing about them required a sustained exertion of control and gave her a great sense of agency that she felt lacked in her life. Rhys recognized the power of writing, if not her creativity: “I don’t believe in the individual Writer so much as in Writing” (Letters 103). Rhys’s proclamation of her inability to “invent” should not mislead us to equate her heroines’ passivity with Rhys’s own; as Rhys said, “the invention is [still] in [her] writing” (qtd. in Plante, Difficult 52). Rhys’s helpless heroines are not a transparent reflection of the writer’s own helplessness, but a result of her elaborate self-fashioning.  

Reading Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) and “The Imperial Road,” her unfinished manuscript, this chapter examines Rhys’s fashioning of the white Creole as a viable identity, which I argue is at the core of her writerly project. As my epigraph suggests, Rhys’s identity and authorship can be best characterized by in-between-ness. She could not culturally locate herself either in the West Indies or in England in an unproblematic way even as she wanted to place herself in the West Indies. She fashioned a white Creole identity out of this in-between-ness by exploiting the relative, locational nature of power. Rhys’s discursive process of self-fashioning prominently illustrates that the racial power of the white Creole, a uniquely ambivalent identity, is always defined in relation to another race. Rhys gave a strongly autobiographical account of her 1936 visit to the West Indies in “The Imperial Road,” but she also recalled the travel to depict Rochester in Wide Sargasso Sea. I read Wide Sargasso Sea and “The Imperial Road” together because, while they both thematize white Creoles’ place in the West Indies, they employ two fundamentally different strategies for representing white Creoles. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys positioned white Creole women against colonizing Englishmen and her text against a

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2 I agree with Veronica Marie Gregg that Rhys’s “apparently autobiographical pieces […] invite us to focus on their performative function rather than on a mimetic desire to authenticate a ‘life’ or a personality” (53–54).
canonical British text, *Jane Eyre*. In so doing, Rhys constructed the white Creole as a victim of British racial and sexual prejudices and herself as a postcolonial writer. In “The Imperial Road,” in contrast, she relied on neither of the strategies. Instead, she asserted a female white Creole perspective vis-à-vis other Caribbeans, which put her in the position of the lost white planter class hostile towards other Caribbeans. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is Rhys’s most renowned work that made her an important postcolonial writer. “The Imperial Road” was rejected by publishers because of its racist tone. Contrasting the two texts exposes that she constructed a viable white Creole identity and authorship by representing British imperial authority—Englishmen and English culture—as a common, oppressive “other” of Caribbeans. Rhys did not consider England as “home,” but it was via English discourses that she effectively returned to the West Indies. Englishness, in this sense, ironically serves as Rhys’s route “home.”

Although many Rhys scholars have focused on the therapeutic or mimetic function of her writing, “Rhys’s project is ultimately one of self-fashioning” (Rosenberg 12). As Leah Rosenberg argues in her study on Rhys’s “Black Exercise Book,” masochistic passivity in Rhys’s work is a “voluntary, individual strategy of self-representation” (22). In Rhys’s case, it is a site of agency, not a symptom of self-destruction, because it enabled the white Creole woman in Europe, who was relegated to the position of the social inferior, to imaginatively identify with Afro-Caribbeans and thus to “‘home’ her identity as a creole” (Rosenberg 12). Rhys’s cultural belonging to the West Indies was tenuous not only because she left the West Indies for England at the age of sixteen and never returned except a brief visit, but also because she was a member of the colonial white planter class. Though the white plantocracy was already in decline when Rhys was born in 1890, and the white Creole was always a minority in Dominica, the planter class was an avatar of British colonialism and had sustained slavery until the 1834 Emancipation
Act. Rhys felt guilty and defensive about her whiteness and her family’s participation in slavery. And she envied Afro-Caribbeans for their culture and sense of belonging to the place.

If Rhys was too white to belong to the West Indies, she was not white enough to belong to England, which made her inhabit the ambivalent place of the in-between. Her migration to England dramatically changed her social and racial status. In the West Indies, Rhys was a member of the weakening yet still privileged class, but in England, she was an impoverished chorus girl, mistress, and obscure writer from a tropical island. While in England, she noticed that the white Creole was culturally coded as “black”: “I have had lots of people here who are utterly astonished that I am not as black as coal—in fact they don’t believe it” (qtd. in Paravisini-Gebert 14). European ethnographers subscribed to the idea of “white tropical degeneracy,” the idea that contagious tropical climate contaminated white settlers (Thomas, “Tropical” 3). Thus, the white Creole was constructed as a moral, sexual, and racial anomaly—“dark,” “violent,” “promiscuous,” and bestial like Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (Rosenberg 6). If European ethnography constructed the Creole in general as “black,” Rhys herself was often unsure about her racial identity as well, most likely out of wishful thinking. She said to Plante: “Maybe I do have black blood in me. I think my great-grandmother was coloured, the Cuban” (qtd. in Plante, Difficult 17).³ Rhys’s depiction of white Creole women as victims of European men was a necessary part of fashioning a white Creole identity because it helped her feel like she was “black,” exonerating her racial guilt and allowing her to feel closer to the West Indies.

In order to contrast Rhys’s writing strategies in Wide Sargasso Sea and “The Imperial Road,” I place the writing of the two texts in the complex historical context. The publication of

³ Rhys’s white Creole heroines’ cross-racial identification is always with black Afro-Caribbean women, not “coloured” or “brown” Afro-Caribbeans. As I will argue later in detail, Antoinette Cosway in Wide Sargasso Sea wants to be like Christophine, a black Afro-Caribbean woman. Likewise, Anna Morgan in Voyage in the Dark identifies with the black Afro-Caribbean, Francine.
Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966 dramatically changed Rhys’s status as a writer, creating debates among West Indian intellectuals over her place in West Indian literature. In the 1920s and 1930s, during Rhys’s early literary career before what Carole Angier called “the lost years,” there were few Caribbean writers actively publishing in England. C. L. R. James (1901–1989) came to England from Trinidad in 1932 and published books until he moved to the U.S. in 1938, but the presence of Caribbean writers as a group was not yet visible in England. However, the situation had profoundly changed by the time when Rhys was rediscovered. Many prominent West Indies writers, including George Lamming (1927–), Kamau Brathwaite (1930–), Samuel Selvon (1923–1994), V. S. Naipaul (1932–), and Wilson Harris (1921–), came to England in the 1950s either as writers or as students. Also, C. L. R. James was in England again between 1953 and 1958 before he finally returned to Trinidad. By the mid-1960s, these writers had made themselves well-known to readers both in England and in the West Indies, through their books as well as appearances on BBC’s Caribbean Voices. The Caribbean Artists Movement, which Brathwaite co-founded, was launched in London in 1966. These writers were more involved in Caribbean politics and better connected to fellow Caribbean writers in exile than Rhys was.

Trinidad, Barbados, and Guyana all gained independence from England in the 1960s. Having grown up in the West Indian milieu of political activism towards the end of political colonization, they had formative years as writers at the historical juncture when their nations were about to form. They were generally vocal about political and racial issues, and some were involved in the Pan-African movement.

In contrast, Rhys was not an overtly political writer. Her connection to the West Indies was also questionable. Although she was first introduced and marketed as a West Indian writer to British readers, her early novels are mostly set in Europe, and in the “continental novels,” West
Indian contexts are not always obvious—although the West Indian contexts work in important ways. Besides, she was a descendant of white European settlers. Being a white Creole, Rhys was less than a respectable British lady, but at the same time, she was less than an “authentic” West Indian writer. More importantly, it was the leading West Indian writer and critic, Brathwaite, who questioned her “authenticity” and her belonging to the West Indies. Brathwaite published *Rights of Passage* in 1967, a year after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Contradictory Omens* in 1974, when Rhys was still writing “The Imperial Road.” In *Contradictory Omens*, after discussing *Wide Sargasso Sea*, he stated in a much-cited passage: “White creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally, as a group, to give credence to the notion that they can, given the present structure, meaningfully identify or to be identified, with the spiritual world on this side of the Sargasso Sea” (38). In his 1995 essay, “A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars,” Brathwaite clarified that his reading of Rhys in *Contradictory Omens* was a response to what some perceived as a “culture war” among West Indian intellectuals of different ethnicities (70).

Before *Contradictory Omens*, Wally Look Lai, a Jamaican critic of Chinese descent, and Kenneth Ramchand, an Indo-Trinidadian critic, read *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a West Indian novel in 1968 and in 1970, respectively. Brathwaite charged these West Indian critics of “using Rhys to attack what they didn’t like about BLK POWER” and to belittle what *Rights of Passage* represented, adding that “Jean Rhys has become the Helen of the wars” (“Post-Cautionary” 70, 77). It is not clear whether Rhys read *Contradictory Omens*.4 However, it is clear from

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4 Even though she did not mention Brathwaite, Rhys said in an interview with Ned Thomas that she was familiar with works by West Indian writers: “I don’t belong to anywhere but I get very worked up about the West Indies. I still care. I read [Derek] Walcott, [V. S.] Naipaul, [Alfred] Mendes” (qtd. in Gregg 2).
Brathwaite’s 1995 explanation of the West Indian intellectual milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s that Rhys’s status as a West Indian writer was being highly contested.

The West Indian political and cultural milieu as well as the reception of Wide Sargasso Sea made it important for Rhys to assert the white Creole’s place in the West Indies in the 1970s. Although Rhys’s last years after Wide Sargasso Sea have been relatively neglected, the early 1970s when Rhys was writing “The Imperial Road” was a crucial period for Rhys’s fashioning of a white Creole identity. Furthermore, in 1973, Rhys resumed correspondence with Phyllis Shand Allfrey (1908–1986), a fellow Dominican friend, writer, and politician, who informed Rhys about what was happening in the West Indies. Because many West Indian islands, including Dominica, became politically independent in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a particularly significant period for self-definition of Creoles at home and abroad. The process of Dominican independence radically altered Rhys’s strategy of self-fashioning. Previously, she constructed a cross-racial identification between her white Creole heroines and black Afro-Caribbeans. The process of official independence in Dominica, however, placed the white planter class in an antagonistic relationship with Afro-Caribbeans with no English authority that Rhys might use to create the cross-racial identification. Despite the dominant view regarding “The Imperial Road” as a minor work in Rhys’s œuvre, that work reveals a critical aspect of Rhys’s authorship that she consciously built in the context of the 1970s.

Rhys’s family history also serves as an important subtext both in Wide Sargasso Sea and in “The Imperial Road.” The Lockharts, Rhys’s maternal family, were among the most prominent slave-owning planters in Dominica, playing significant roles in the history of the island’s racial tensions. As Rhys wrote in her autobiography, “the Lockharts, even in [her] day,

5 Allfrey published poems, In Circles (1940) and Palm and Oak (1950), and most successfully, a novel, The Orchid House (1953). A collection of short stories, It Falls into Place, was published posthumously in 2004.
were never very popular. That’s putting it mildly” (Smile 25). Rhys’s maternal great-grandfather, James Lockhart, was a Scot and came to Dominica at the end of the eighteenth century to become a sugar plantation owner. In 1824, he bought Geneva, one of the largest estates on the island, “an estate of 1,200 acres and 258 slaves” (Angier 7). His second son and Rhys’s grandfather, Edward Lockhart, was a magistrate. The Emancipation Act was passed during Edward Lockhart’s life, and Geneva estate was allegedly burned down by newly freed Afro-Caribbeans during the 1844 Census Riots.

In June 1844, when a census was taken, there had been the rumor that the census was a preliminary step towards the reintroduction of slavery. The rumor soon escalated into the Census Riots, or “La Guerre Negre,” by freed Afro-Caribbeans who believed that they were being enslaved again. The “most active area in the uprising” was Grand Bay where Geneva estate was located (Honychurch 135). Rhys’s family history has it that the estate was burned down during the uprising. Not only did Rhys mention the burning down of the Geneva house in the “Geneva” chapter of her autobiography, but she also rendered it into the burning down of Coulibri in Wide Sargasso Sea. While most Rhys critics and even the Dominican historian, Lennox Honychurch, have treated the arson as a historical fact, Peter Hulme argues that “there was no fire at Geneva” during the Census Riots (“Locked” 81). According to him, “none of the reports, either those sent to the Colonial Office or those kept in the local Minute Books, mentions that the house was burned down” although they do record that it was looted (“Locked” 81–82). In fact, in Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys hints at the possible conflation of fact and fiction by having Rochester doubt the historical validity of the burning of Coulibri: “I began to wonder how much of all this was true, how much imagined, distorted. Certainly many of the old estate houses were burned. You saw ruins all over the place” (133). Rhys describes her grandfather, Edward Lockhart, as “a mild
man who didn’t like the situation at all” (Smile 25). However, archival evidence suggests otherwise. Edward Lockhart was reprimanded by FitzRoy, Governor of the Leeward Islands, and Lord Stanley, the Colonial Secretary, for being “highly indiscreet” when laborers at Geneva charged that, during the census, he had “wantonly broken into several of their cottages on finding them deserted by their owners” (qtd. in Hulme, “Locked” 82–83). These discrepancies—whether the Geneva house was actually burned down or just damaged, and whether Edward Lockhart was “mild” or aggressive—suggest the complex inter-workings of Rhys’s family history and her self-fashioning.

The very fact that Rhys was confused about the 1844 burning down of Geneva is significant because it connects the 1840s (the post-slavery period in which Wide Sargasso Sea is set) with two other critical periods—the 1930s when Rhys returned to Dominica and the events described in “The Imperial Road” took place and the 1970s when Rhys wrote “The Imperial Road” (not many years after publishing Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966). Although she did not mention Geneva in “The Imperial Road,” Rhys visited the estate during her return trip to Dominica in 1936. She later recalled the 1936 visit to Geneva in her autobiography: “the Geneva house was burnt down two, or was it three, times. I stared at it trying to remember the house, the garden, the honeysuckle and the jasmine and the tall fern trees. But there was nothing, nothing. Nothing to look at. Nothing to say. Even the mounting stone had gone” (Smile 29, my emphasis). Excluding the unsubstantiated 1844 “fire,” Geneva was burned down twice. In the early 1930s, a fire was set at Geneva, leaving “nothing” when Rhys visited the estate in 1936 (Angier 357). During the 1930s and 1940s, like other large estates in Dominica, Geneva was idle due to the world economic depression and the Dominican agriculture crisis (Honychurch 214). It was finally sold in 1949 to Elias Nassief, a merchant of Arab extraction, who then developed the
neglected Geneva for coconuts (Honychurch 218). Nassief became very unpopular for evictions of villagers who, under Lockhart’s ownership, had been allowed to freely squat in the unemployed Geneva estate (Honychurch 218). During Carnival 1974, in the aftermath of growing demands for small farms, heightened political awareness, and intense racial conflicts, Geneva was burned down once again (Honychurch 218–19). Rhys’s uncertain recollection in her autobiography (“two, or was it three, times”) indicates that, in her mind, the three fires—whether imaginary or actual—coalesced into one burning image. The 1840s, 1930s, and 1970s formed a parallel because they were especially tumultuous periods in Dominica and had deep personal effects on Rhys. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “The Imperial Road,” Rhys places the white Creole in those critical periods of West Indian history, but with very different writing strategies and very different consequences.

**Crossing the Racial Line in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

Rhys’s status as a postcolonial writer depends primarily on her rewriting of the life of Brontë’s mad white Creole woman, Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, Rhys places Bertha / Antoinette’s madness in the historical context to make the white Creole woman “plausible with a past” (*Letters* 156). By rewriting the white Creole’s life, however, Rhys does not undo Bertha / Antoinette’s victimization by the Englishman, Rochester. As Joya Uraizee observes, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “there is no attempt to dislodge Antoinette / Bertha from her role as scapegoat, and the narrative of *Jane Eyre* is not reversed” (264). Instead, Rhys describes in detail the process of Antoinette Cosway’s victimization, explaining how and why the white Creole woman ends up setting fire to Thornfield Hall and throwing herself from its battlements—the ending pre-scribed by Brontë. In contextualizing the pre-scribed ending

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6 *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written before the 1974 fire. Through the parallel among the three fires, I stress that *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “The Imperial Road” are closely connected texts.
without substantially deviating from it, Rhys does humanize Brontë’s bestial Bertha, but Rhys’s Antoinette is hardly allowed a stronger agency than Bertha. Rhys’s project in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not to create a white Creole woman with powerful subjectivity; on the contrary, it is to render Bertha’s victimization convincing in order to facilitate a white Creole woman’s imaginary identification with Afro-Caribbeans. Englishmen are instrumental in Rhys’s fashioning of white Creole women as victims, and the most prominent example of this is the Rochester figure (unnamed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* but inferred from *Jane Eyre*). The presence of Englishmen helps Antoinette mitigate her racial guilt as a white Creole and thus reconcile her family’s participation in slavery and her desire to culturally connect with Afro-Caribbeans. Rhys’s core ideological project in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the creation of a cross-racial identification. Rhys effaces the racial line between whiteness and blackness by shifting the binary to a dichotomy of Englishness and Caribbeanness. As Rochester becomes a convincing oppressor, the historical difference between white Creoles and Afro-Caribbeans is obliterated. By the end of the novel, Antoinette literally dreams a West Indies that accommodates her white Creole identity better than the West Indies where she grew up. Rhys’s white Creole heroine dreams that she has become embraced by black Caribbean women. But her blurring of the racial line entails the desire to silence a certain racial history of the region. Rhys self-consciously intimates the dreamlike quality of the racial crossing by presenting the cross-racial identification as Antoinette’s dream work.

“New Ones Worse Than Old Ones”

*Wide Sargasso Sea* is not only a revision of Brontë’s novel but also a complex, ideological reworking of Rhys’s West Indian childhood and family history. As such, it shares with “The Imperial Road” some motifs and themes. A particularly uncanny repetition of “The Imperial Road” takes place in Part II of *Wide Sargasso Sea*—shortly after Rochester receives Daniel’s first letter exposing Antoinette’s family history, and Christophine leaves the
honeymoon house, Granbois. Disturbed by the letter, Rochester goes out and follows the “overgrown” path through a forest (104). He nearly falls, tripping on a stone, which he believes “part of a paved road” (104). “There had been a paved road through this forest,” Rochester says (104). But he soon finds himself caught by “the undergrowth and creepers,” “lost and afraid among these enemy trees” (105). Finally, Baptiste, a servant at Granbois, finds Rochester and guides him, clearing the way with a machete. Rochester asks, “There was a road here once, where did it lead to?”; Baptiste answers, “No road” (105). On their way back to Granbois, Rochester persists that “there was a road here sometime” only to hear Baptiste “obstinately” repeat “No road” (106). This scene provides a condensed version of “The Imperial Road” with some obvious parallels—being lost in a forest, the stumbling, the insistence on the existence of a road, the local guide clearing the way, and his stubborn denial of the road.

In this particular scene, if not in the entire novel, Rochester mirrors the white Creole narrator of “The Imperial Road.” The fact that Rhys used part of her 1936 visit to the West Indies for the creation of the white Creole narrator in “The Imperial Road” as well as the Englishman Rochester in Wide Sargasso Sea betrays Rhys’s racial anxiety as a white Creole and descendant of slave owners. White Creoles share with Rochester whiteness and complicity in imperialism, which compromises white Creoles’ sense of belonging to the West Indies. Christophine, Antoinette’s Afro-Caribbean surrogate mother, says to Rochester: Antoinette “is not béké like you, but she is béké, and not like us either” (155). In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys tries to process this racial ambiguity and guilt of white Creoles by deliberately comparing them with Englishmen and ultimately opposing the two. Even though Rochester’s search for the road strikingly echoes the narrator’s major action in “The Imperial Road” in terms of description, the two actions actually signify quite opposite relationships to the West Indies.
The narrator in “The Imperial Road” traces the road to reconnect her to the island. Her search for the road is an attempt to place her in the West Indies, if in a nostalgic and anachronistic way. Rochester, on the other hand, traces the road to further distance him from the West Indies that he already perceives as a “wild,” “menacing,” “alien,” and “disturbing” place with “its secret” (69, 87). To Rochester, the road is linked to the West Indies’ “secret” that is hidden from him, and therefore, is dangerous to him—the “secret” behind his marriage to Antoinette, the “truth” about Antoinette’s family, and obeah (104). Upset by Daniel’s letter, Rochester gets lost in the forest while wondering how he could “discover truth” about Antoinette’s family history (104). He comes across the “ruins of a stone house” where a priest used to live and a “frightened” girl who runs away upon seeing Rochester (104–5). Rochester suspects that a “zombi” haunts the place and that Baptiste lies about the road to hide the island’s “secret” from him (105). On returning to Granbois, he reads the ‘Obeah’ chapter of a book, which reads: “A zombi is a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead. A zombi can also be the spirit of a place [...] negroes as a rule refuse to discuss the black magic [...] Cases of sudden death or mysterious death are attributed to a poison known to the negroes which cannot be traced” (107). Not only does this description of obeah confirm Rochester’s suspicion about Baptiste’s denial of the road, but it also explains why Rochester later mistakes Christophine’s love potion for a poison. Associated with Antoinette’s family history and obeah in Rochester’s mind, the road symbolizes “what [the island] hides,” which he thinks “is not nothing” (87, original emphasis). Rochester has only questionable clues—a letter written to blackmail him by Antoinette’s alleged half brother, a trace of what appears to have been a road, and a hearsay description of obeah (The author of the book confesses after explaining obeah, “So I was told” [107]). The clues do not help Rochester “discover truth” about the West Indies. Even
more fearful of the place that is incomprehensible to him, Rochester drives away Christophine and destroys Antoinette, thus becoming a common oppressor of the black and white Creole women.

Whereas *Jane Eyre* places Rochester and Bertha before the Emancipation Act of 1834, Rhys deliberately set *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the 1830s and 1840s immediately following the Emancipation Act in order to contrast weakening former slave owners and rich white newcomers. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys separates former slave owners from white newcomers, and the temporal setting of the novel is adjusted to serve that purpose. Based on allusions to Jamaican history in *Jane Eyre*, Sue Thomas dates “the marriage of Rochester and Bertha as having taken place in 1819, with Bertha’s incarceration in England commencing in 1823–1824” in *Jane Eyre* (*Worlding* 155–56). This “temporal shift places ‘Bertha’ Mason’s life in a starkly transitional phase of Jamaican and Dominican history” (Thomas, *Worlding* 156). To former slave-owning white Creoles, the transition meant a considerable loss of labor, and with it, of economic power. From early on in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys emphasizes the Cosway family’s poverty that makes them “white nigger” unlike “[r]eal white people” with “gold money” (24). Mr. Luttrell who, like the Cosways, was “waiting for this compensation the English promised when the Emancipation Act was passed” gives up the hope and kills himself (17). When his relatives come from England to look after his property, Christophine observes that they are “not like old Mr Luttrell,” differentiating the old plantocracy from white newcomers (26). Impoverished and “marooned,” Annette, Antoinette’s mother and widow of an ex-slave owner, hastily marries Mason, a newcomer from England, to secure economic protection (18).

Annette’s second marriage brings into the family the divide between “the Cosways becoming the old planter family destroyed by Emancipation” and “the Masons representing new
capital from England, scornful of slavery but ignorant of the West Indies; a division entirely absent from *Jane Eyre*” (Hulme, “Locked” 79–80). ⁷ Shifting the temporal setting to the post-slavery period, Rhys not only constructs white Creoles as a vulnerable class but she also diversifies the white community in the West Indies. Rhys further diversifies the white Creole society by characterizing Annette as a white Creole from Martinique, a French Caribbean colony. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in Jamaica (Part I), Dominica (unnamed in the novel but identified by references; Part II), and England (Part III). Annette is isolated from other white Creoles partly because she is from the French Caribbean, not the British West Indies like Jamaica and Dominica. Their poverty as well as their French connection twice distance Annette and Antoinette from the white Creole society in Dominica. This constitutes a double act of distancing of Annette and Antoinette—distancing them from other white Creoles and dissociating white Creoles as a whole from English people, especially Englishmen like Mason and Rochester.

The presence of white newcomers in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is important in Rhys’s fashioning of a white Creole identity because it allows her to discursively mitigate the antagonism between white Creoles and ex-slaves. Antoinette knows that Afro-Caribbeans hate the Cosways and call them “white cockroaches” (23). But she also knows that once white Creoles are not threatening anymore, they are more derided than hated by Afro-Caribbeans: “The black people did not hate us quite so much when we were poor. We were white but we had not escaped and soon we would be dead for we had no money left. What was there to hate?” (34) By comparison, newcomers from England represent imperialism that outlives the Emancipation Act: “No more slavery! [Christophine] had to laugh! ‘These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same

⁷ In *Jane Eyre*, the mad white Creole woman is referred to as Bertha Mason, indicating that Mason is her biological father.
thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread
machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones—more cunning, that’s all”” (26). If Mason does not treat Afro-Caribbeans as slaves, he treats them as “children” who are
“too damn lazy to be dangerous” (35, 32). As Jessica Harland-Jacobs forcefully illustrates, in the
nineteenth century, the relationship between the British Empire and its colonies depended on
“the consistent appropriation of the language and idioms of families” (450). Mason’s conception
of Afro-Caribbeans as “childlike natives” exemplifies the imperialistic ideology that the
colonized are in eternal childhood, and therefore, they need imperial governance for their well-
being just as children need parental guidance. Rochester despises slavery, but he threatens the
obeah woman, Christophine, with “Letter of the Law” and successfully drives her away. Early in
the novel, the major tension of the text clearly lies in the old plantocracy–ex-slave relationship.
After Mason, and more significantly, Rochester are introduced in the text, the antagonism
between West Indians and Englishmen becomes more prominent than the old plantocracy–ex-
slave relationship. As Rochester becomes a new “master,” Antoinette is not more powerful than
her Afro-Caribbean servants. Being relegated to the position of a powerless victim and enslaved
by the new “master,” Antoinette feels closer to ex-slaves and turns to them for help.

Fashioning white Creoles as victims involves not only positioning them vis-à-vis
oppressive Englishmen but also reworking the history of slavery. Lee Erwin asserts that “[a]ny
memory of slavery and, for that matter, any memory of her father—avatar of that history—[…]
is excised from Antoinette’s narrative” (145). Despite Antoinette’s obvious reluctance to address
slavery in any direct way, the history of slavery and the memory of old Cosway are not
completely suppressed in the novel. In childhood, Antoinette asks Annette about ex-slaves (or
“apprentices” as they were then called) who stayed with her family after Emancipation. Annette

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would rather not bother herself with the memory of slavery: “Why do you pester and bother me about all these things that happened long ago?” (21) Erwin reads Annette’s reluctance to discuss slavery as a duplication of the “excision” of slavery from Antoinette’s narrative (145). But, unlike her mother, Antoinette cannot simply dismiss slavery and her father as bygones because that history forecloses her desired identity—the one that anchors her in the West Indies. Antoinette (or Rhys) can neither completely ignore the history of slavery nor directly address it without undermining her desired identity. The history of slavery haunts her consciousness as a source of guilt as well as a critical obstacle to the construction of her identity.

A major confrontation scene in Part II, marking the denouement to Antoinette and Rochester’s honeymoon, reveals the discursive process through which Rhys fashions Antoinette as a victim and prepares for her identification with Afro-Caribbeans. Rochester loathes the former slave-owners’ promiscuity and miscegenation and finds the outcome—Antoinette’s “colored” relatives and “illegitimate” brothers—abominable. And yet, he follows in the old planters’ footsteps by having sex with “a little half-caste servant,” Amélie, and arranges for Antoinette to hear them “behind the thin partition” (65, 140). Confronting Rochester, Antoinette compares him to former slave-owners: “You abused the planters and made up stories about them, but you do the same thing. You send the girl away quicker, and with no money or less money, and that’s all the difference” (146). In response, Rochester avoids discussing his promiscuity and instead criticizes slavery for its injustice; he insists that his “liking” or “disliking” of black people is irrelevant because “[s]lavery was not a matter of liking or disliking” but “[i]t was a question of justice” (146). To Antoinette, however, “justice” is an empty concept or “a damn cold lie” (146). She asks, “My mother whom you all talk about, what justice did she have?” (146–47) This exchange between Antoinette and Rochester consists of a series of evasions on
both parts. If Rochester dodges Antoinette’s accusation by criticizing slavery, Antoinette evades addressing the injustice of slavery. Instead, she redirects the conversation to emphasize the injustice done to Annette, thus constructing her white Creole mother, not ex-slaves, as a victim. Only then does Christophine enter the scene to fight for Antoinette and against Rochester.

Amid this heated confrontation, Antoinette mentions in passing that old Cosway would have protected her if he were alive: “If my father, my real father, was alive you wouldn’t come back here in a hurry after he’d finished with you” (147). This brief passage appears insignificant (and it even sounds out of context) until it is put together with Rhys’s poem, “Obeah Night.” Rhys enclosed “Obeah Night” in a 1964 letter to Francis Wyndham, explaining that “Obeah Night” gave her the “clue” to Wide Sargasso Sea: “Even when I knew I had to write the book—still it did not click into place […]. Only when I wrote this poem—then it clicked—and all was there and always had been” (Letters 262, original emphasis). In the poem—signed by “Edward Rochester or Raworth” as “Written in Spring 1842”—Rochester recalls the night when he made love to Antoinette under the influence of Christophine’s love potion and then revengefully slept with Amélie (Letters 266, 264). Stanzas quoted below from “Obeah Night” chronologically and thematically correspond to the confrontation scene in Wide Sargasso Sea:

Where did you hide yourself

After that shameless, shameful night?
And why come back? Hating and hated?
[…]

No. I’ll lock that door
Forget it. —
The motto was “Locked Hearts I open
I have the heavy key”
Written in black letters

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8 In 1964, Rhys was considering Raworth for the Rochester figure’s name to make her novel’s connection with Jane Eyre less obvious: “Mr R’s name ought to be changed. Raworth? A Yorkshire name isn’t it? The sound is right” (Letters 263).
Under a Royal Palm Tree
On a slave owner’s gravestone
“Look! And look again, hypocrite” he says
“Before you judge me”

I’m no damn slave owner
I have no slave
Didn’t she (forgiven) betray me
Once more—and then again
Unrepentant—laughing?
[...] (Letters 265–66, original emphasis)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette flees to Christophine after Rochester’s affair with Amélie. When Antoinette returns to Granbois with Christophine, they take turns confronting Rochester. In the poem, Rochester says that he would “lock that door” to keep Antoinette from returning to the honeymoon house and symbolically to his heart. The image of the locked door / heart reminds him of a motto about “Locked Hearts” engraved on a slave-owner’s gravestone. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Daniel mentions old Cosway’s “white marble tablet in the English church at Spanish Town” with “a crest on it and a motto in Latin and words in big black letters” (122). The “motto” Daniel describes is probably the same one as the “motto” Rochester refers to in the poem, which identifies the slave-owner in the poem as Antoinette’s “real father,” old Cosway.9 Invoked from his grave, old Cosway calls Rochester a “hypocrite” who judges former slave-owners with no moral right. “Obeah Night” thus depicts the encounter between Rochester and old Cosway that Antoinette only imagines in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

But why does Rhys insert old Cosway into this scene of romantic crisis? Old Cosway does not reproach his son-in-law’s infidelity but instead virtually reiterates Christophine’s words that newcomers are “worse than old ones—more cunning.” In the poem, Rochester defends himself by insisting that he is not enslaving Antoinette, which of course would not sound

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9 According to Hulme, “‘Corda serrata pando,’ ‘locked hearts I open,’ was the motto of Rhys’s mother’s family, the Lockharts” (“Locked” 77). Both in the Lockharts and the Cosways, the motto is tied to a patriarchal slave-owner.
convincing to the reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. After all, at stake in the confrontation scene is not a questioning of Rochester’s fidelity. Rather, it is the replacement of the former slave-owner versus ex-slave antagonism with the Englishman versus Creole opposition. Rhys carefully foregrounds racial and sexual power relations in which Rochester is a “more cunning” oppressor than former slaveholders and Antoinette is his slave. On the surface, “Obeah Night” describes Rochester’s love-hate feeling towards Antoinette. On a deeper level, however, it pictures Rochester as a slave-owning patriarch in denial, which is a major point that Rhys tries to establish in Part II of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Rhys made a very conscious stylistic choice to fashion Antoinette’s white Creole identity. Her 1959 letter indicates that she contemplated three options for *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s narrative point of view—Antoinette’s first-person narrative throughout the novel, Rochester’s and Antoinette’s alternating first-person narratives, and third-person narrative (*Letters* 162). In another letter written in the same year, Rhys emphasized that Antoinette “must be ‘placed’” and suggested that “a monologue of Mrs Rochester à la Charlotte Brontë” would not do it (*Letters* 161). “Another ‘I’ must talk,” she wrote, “[t]hen the Creole’s ‘I’ will come to life” (*Letters* 157). By 1962, Rhys “felt the man must tell the story of their ‘honeymoon.’ Not the girl” (*Letters* 215). Whereas Antoinette’s childhood in Part I and incarceration in England in Part III are narrated by Antoinette, Rhys has Rochester recount the honeymoon in Part II (except Antoinette’s brief interruption to describe her visit to Christophine’s house where Rochester is absent). As soon as Rochester takes over narration, he notes how “alien” Antoinette is: “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (67). He notices that Antoinette talks and acts like Afro-Caribbeans. As Rochester cannot see Antoinette as a “legitimate” white woman, he codes Antoinette as almost “black.” He says that Antoinette “look[s] very much like
Amélie,” suspecting that “[p]erhaps they are related,” not only because he knows about old Cosway’s miscegenation but also because he perceives all Creoles, regardless of their skin colors, as one related race that is foreign to him and conspiring against him (127). Having Rochester narrate about a half of the entire novel, Rhys puts Antoinette and Afro-Caribbeans equally under Rochester’s masculine colonial eyes. To him, Antoinette is connected to the menacing West Indian landscape as much as Afro-Caribbeans are and their historical difference is obliterated.

Erwin has made a similar point, arguing that in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “the gaze of England” acts as “a third term” to “dissolve the bar between the two terms [of whiteness and blackness] and enables their at least partial merging by investing them with common features” (155). What drives Antoinette’s narrative is the desire “to occupy a racial position not open to her,” but “the impossible desire evident in Antoinette’s narrative” can be more readily realized from Rochester’s outsider perspective (Erwin 155). Rhys fashions her white Creole heroine as a victim through Rochester’s indiscriminately oppressive eyes. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester loses his sight in the fire Bertha sets to Thornfield Hall. *Wide Sargasso Sea* foreshadows that this will happen, as many critics have observed, probably as a result of Christophine’s curse; when Rochester says, “I would give my eyes never to have seen this abominable place,” Christophine answers, “You choose what you give, eh? Then you choose” (161). But *Wide Sargasso Sea* ends before Rochester actually loses his eyes and Rhys leaves that incident outside of her narrative. If Bertha takes Rochester’s eyes in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys uses them to construct Antoinette’s West Indian identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rochester’s blindness completes Jane’s female *bildung* in Brontë’s novel. But it is not his blindness but his point of view that Rhys needed in order to place Antoinette in the West Indies.
“This Book Should Have Been a Dream”

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys consciously fashions white Creoles as victims to build the cross-racial identification between Antoinette and Afro-Caribbeans. She envisions the cross-racial identification as the only available way of constructing a viable identity for white Creoles who are located in in-between space. In order to place white Creoles in the West Indies, Rhys sets up parallels between Rochester and former slave owners, on the one hand, and between Antoinette and ex-slaves, on the other. While Rhys focuses on the first parallel in Rochester’s narrative (Part II), she constantly envisions Antoinette in the position of the enslaved in Parts I and III, most significantly through Antoinette’s tripartite dream.

In the first part of Antoinette’s serial dream, Antoinette in childhood is “in the forest” with “[s]omeone who hate[s] [her],” still “out of sight” but “coming closer” (26–27). She senses imminent danger but cannot avoid it: “though I struggled and screamed I could not move. I woke crying” (27). Years later in the convent, Antoinette has her second dream, which is more fully developed and symbolically charged. In the second dream, Antoinette is “walking towards the forest” (59). This time, she follows an unnamed man, instead of being followed by him, “sick of fear” but making “no effort to save [herself]” (59). She is “holding up” her “white and beautiful dress” to keep it from getting soiled (59). After they reach the forest, the man still postpones enacting what he has been planning to do: “Not here, not yet” (60). Now Antoinette does not “try to hold up [her] dress” anymore and lets it “[trail] in the dirt” (60). Then, she realizes that the surroundings have changed; Antoinette and the man are “in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall” and unfamiliar trees, not in the forest (60). Even in the dark, she knows that “[t]here are steps leading upwards”; she thinks, “[i]t will be when I go up these steps. At the top” (60). The (English) garden and the steps leading to the attic where Antoinette will be incarcerated suggest that, in the dream, Antoinette and the man have been transported from the West Indian
forest to Rochester’s Thornfield estate. After waking up from the second dream, Antoinette reports that the dream is “mixed up” with the “thought” of Annette who became mad in the aftermath of the fire at Coulibri and subsequently incarcerated (61). Antoinette’s first two dreams, then, serve as a premonition of Rochester’s sexual exploitation of Antoinette as well as Antoinette’s displacement and incarceration.

A composite of complex cultural and personal associations, Antoinette’s dreams are significant on multiple levels. It has been noted that the two dreams are a reworking of Rhys’s own traumatic sexual relationship with an old English gentleman, Mr. Howard, that Rhys describes in her unpublished autobiographical text, “Black Exercise Book.” Thomas sees in the Mr. Howard narrative a “sexual rite of passage from naïve girlhood to ‘doomed’ womanhood” (Worlding 27). In the Mr. Howard narrative as well as in Antoinette’s dreams, the “sexual rite of passage” overlaps with a racial rite of passage. In her study on the “Black Exercise Book,” Rosenberg reads the young Rhys’s white dress as her “sexual honor—her ticket to marriage—as well as a sign of her racial whiteness”; by relinquishing the attempt to keep the bridal dress clean, she “stops trying to keep herself white and accepts the position of mistress and her exclusion from marriage” (13). In the “Black Exercise Book,” as Rosenberg and Thomas suggest, the young Rhys is constructed as a “black” mistress / sexual servant by Mr. Howard’s sexual and racial fantasy, in which she is lured to participate. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Rhys makes a more positive connection between Antoinette’s renunciation of white womanhood and her adoption of blackness. Later in the novel, Rochester comments that Christophine “might hold her dress up” because “[i]t must get very dirty” and “it is not a clean habit” (85). Antoinette explains that a soiled dress represents respectability for Afro-Caribbean women; “[w]hen they don’t hold

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10 In the “Black Exercise Book,” Rhys recalls with much difficulty that, at the age of fourteen, she submitted herself to the “mental” seduction and physical advances by Mr. Howard, aged around seventy. For extensive discussions on the “Black Exercise Book,” see Rosenberg; and Thomas, Worlding, chapter 2.
their dress up it’s for respect” or “for feast days or going to Mass” because it means that they are rich enough not to “care about getting a dress dirty” (85). She suggests that, in West Indian cultural context, a soiled dress signifies black female pride through its cool dismissal of the sanitary standard of white femininity. Antoinette’s act of letting her white dress be soiled in the dream, then, constitutes not only a moment of abandonment of white feminine ideals and racial whiteness, but also that of an active cross-racial gesture. By having Antoinette give up her white dress and the white femininity that it symbolizes, Rhys literally and figuratively fashions Antoinette as a “black” woman like Christophine.

Rhys makes a link between Antoinette’s submission to Rochester’s exploitation and the fashioning of her as a “black” woman. It is significant that Antoinette dreams the first dream on the day when she is forced to exchange clothes with her black playmate, Tia. Coming home in Tia’s dress, Antoinette is seen and laughed at by “real” English people, the Luttrells. Embarrassed and ashamed, Annette tells Christophine to “[t]hrow away” and “burn” Tia’s dress and sells her ring to dress Antoinette properly (25). This incident of racial cross-dressing is a forced and negative experience for Antoinette, making her realize that she is economically and emotionally insecure and that she is a source of shame to her mother. The feeling of insecurity is manifested and intensified by the first dream in which she is helplessly chased by a stalker despite her effort to escape. In the second dream, however, though fearful, she chooses to accept the role of a victim. Not only does she follow the man but she refuses to be saved: “if anyone were to try to save me, I would refuse. This must happen” (59–60). In the second dream, Antoinette also appropriates racial cross-dressing as a necessary strategy for cultural

11 I do not deny that Antoinette’s soiled dress (and her dream as a whole) can be seen as a defeat. Rather, I mean to bring into focus the function of the description of such a defeat in Rhys’s self-fashioning by arguing that her representation of passivity has to do with her desire to fashion herself as “black.”
identification. By dressing Antoinette like a “black” woman right before alluding to Thornfield Hall, Rhys prepares Antoinette for the incarceration at Rochester’s house.

In Antoinette’s third and final dream, which centers on her torching of Thornfield Hall, Rhys most strongly and controversially suggests Antoinette’s identification with Afro-Caribbeans. Critics have read Antoinette’s burning of Thornfield Hall in Part III as a repetition of ex-slaves’ burning of Coulibri in Part I (Barnes 152; Erwin 143). Similarly, Moira Ferguson asserts that Antoinette’s incarceration in the attic of Rochester’s estate “recapitulates the lives of slaves who were locked in cellars, victims of systematic abuse” (14). In fact, Rhys once titled the novel Before I Was Set Free. It “is my name for it,” she wrote, “whatever its other name may be” (Letters 215). The tentative title indicates that, in Rhys’s mind, Antoinette’s captivity by Rochester was associated with slavery. Juxtaposing the two situations of captivity as well as the two acts of burning a master’s house, Wide Sargasso Sea suggests a strong parallel between ex-slaves and Antoinette. Furthermore, in her third dream, Antoinette is guided to her final act by Christophine and Tia; Antoinette invokes Christophine for help when setting fire to Thornfield Hall, and Tia dares Antoinette to jump from the battlements to join her. Antoinette’s “final leap represents a celebration of or fantasized union with a blackness finally seen to have been the desire of her narrative all along” (Erwin 154). Even though Antoinette’s final act in the dream is suicidal, Rhys thought it “in a way triumphant”; “She burns the house and kills herself (bravo!)” (Letters 157, 297). Antoinette’s final act is “triumphant” because, through it, Antoinette finally achieves her desired identity even though it is only in her dream.

Brathwaite warns that Antoinette’s relationship with Afro-Caribbean women in Wide Sargasso Sea is not to be taken as a historically accurate depiction of West Indian racial relations of the time. Particularly, he points out that the Antoinette–Tia relationship, the cross-racial
identification on Antoinette’s part, is a “figment” unsupported by history and a projection of Rhys’s racial “guilt or wishful thinking” (“Post-Cautionary” 73). In fact, Wide Sargasso Sea is a self-conscious text that acknowledges the dreamlike quality of Antoinette’s identification with Afro-Caribbeans. It is no coincidence that the cross-racial identification takes place in Antoinette’s dreams. Neither is it an accident that Antoinette’s burning down of Thornfield Hall and her final jump are presented as her dream and that the novel closes before she actually enacts it. The novel ends with Antoinette in the hallway holding a candle, implying that she will probably burn down the house and jump as she does in the last dream and in Jane Eyre. But whether the final act will enable the cross-racial identification remains uncertain because when she is about to join her childhood playmate, Antoinette is brought back to reality from her dream: “I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke” (190). As Mary Lou Emery writes, “[w]e can begin to answer the question of Antoinette’s location by observing that she inhabits a dream” (37). Antoinette “inhabits a dream” because it is dream space that allows her desired identity, while in reality she is located in in-between space. Antoinette finds the in-between space uninhabitable: “So between [Afro-Caribbeans and English people] I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all” (102). By framing Antoinette’s identification with Afro-Caribbeans within a series of dreams, Rhys allows her white Creole heroine a fantasized and yet probably the only available identity.

Rhys was aware that the fashioning of a white Creole identity in Wide Sargasso Sea consists of the combination of an unconventional gothic melodrama (the Antoinette–Rochester relationship) and a dream (Antoinette’s identification with Afro-Caribbeans). Rhys conceived the novel as a “reactionary 19th century romance” written against Brontë’s romance novel (Letters 157). In 1962, however, Rhys realized with some uneasiness the dreamlike quality of her project:
“This book should have been a dream—not a drama—I know. Still I want to make the drama possible, convincing” (Letters 216, original emphasis). However, there is no real tension between an anti-romance gothic drama and a dream in Wide Sargasso Sea. On the contrary, they complement and fortify each other to place the white Creole Antoinette in the West Indies. The two aspects of the novel are entwined because Rhys constructed Antoinette as a victim of an exploitive man through the unconventional melodrama of Antoinette and Rochester, while she created a cross-racial identification through Antoinette’s dreams. By revising Brontë’s romance novel into a West Indian gothic drama haunted by obeah, zombies, gravestones, and ruins, Rhys returned to the West Indies, her unhomely/uncanny “home.” The novel also placed Rhys in West Indian literature. In “The Imperial Road,” she makes another return trip to the West Indies, differently fashioning a white Creole identity.

“I Was at Home And Not at Home”: “The Imperial Road”

Rhys’s unfinished manuscript, “The Imperial Road”—alternatively titled “Return of the Native” and “Mother Mount Calvary”—is a first-person narrative that describes her 1936 visit to Dominica with her British husband, Leslie Tilden-Smith. Rhys wanted to include the piece in her collection of short stories, Sleep It Off, Lady (1976), but it was rejected by publishers because, according to a bookseller’s notation, it was “too anti-negro in tone” (qtd. in O’Connor 404). The circumstances of its rejection were so fascinating to Paul Theroux that he wrote two stories related to “The Imperial Road”—“Zombies” and “The Imperial Ice House.”12 Diana Athill, Rhys’s editor, said that it was the “querulous tone” of “The Imperial Road” that made her object to its publication (qtd. in O’Connor 406). In a correspondence with a Rhys scholar, Teresa F.

12 “Zombies” portrays a female writer obviously modeled after Rhys and the rejection of her story for its racial content, and “The Imperial Ice House” is a variation of “The Imperial Road.” Theroux wrote to O’Connor: “I never saw ‘The Imperial Road’ but of course knew about its rejection, and that fascinated me—I mean, the reasons” (qtd. in O’Connor 406).
O’Connor, Athill viewed the “querulous tone” as a stylistic failure and attributed it to Rhys’s “ordinary, non-writing self.” What Athill heard in the narrative was the voice of an “old exiled member of the Caribbean plantocracy” who “often used to talk querulously, or indignantly, about black people,” and it indicated to her that Rhys’s artistic “strength had ebbed” (qtd. in O’Connor 406).

As Athill and critics agree, “The Imperial Road” is stylistically less polished than Rhys’s other works primarily because it has never been finished. But the narrator’s racial stance in “The Imperial Road” is something more complicated than a revelation of Rhys’s “true racism” or failing artistry. I read the narrator’s hostility against other Creoles in the manuscript not as a transparent recollection of Rhys’s 1936 visit but as an ideologically invested recreation informed by racial dynamics of the 1970s when Rhys wrote the story. One of the challenges that “The Imperial Road” poses to readers is that it presents Rhys’s relationship to the West Indies in completely different terms than her other works, especially Wide Sargasso Sea. It resulted in the critical neglect of “The Imperial Road.” This section discusses this under-examined inconsistency in Rhys’s racial identification by situating the composition of “The Imperial Road” in the context of the racial tensions in the 1970s.

**Mourning the White Creole**

In “The Imperial Road,” Rhys constructs an autobiographical persona that directly engages with the West Indies. Hulme has identified “The Imperial Road” as “an autobiographical fragment which could as easily have ended up in her memoirs as in a collection of stories” (Hulme, “Islands” 37). On the other hand, Savory defines the manuscript as “the personal essay” or “creative non-fiction rather than short fiction” (“Text” 4). O’Connor similarly describes it as “an essay in memory and recollection” (407). I read “The Imperial Road” as an autobiography in fiction and suggest that the interworking of autobiography and fiction, or history and memory, is
the central problem that the manuscript addresses both thematically and formally. Rhys always started with what happened to her and then developed and fictionalized it over time. When she was writing stories for *Sleep It Off, Lady*, which was supposed to include “The Imperial Road,” Rhys became particularly interested in writing an autobiography—a project she started after finishing the collection of stories. In late 1975, Rhys told David Plante, who helped Rhys write her posthumously published, unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979):

> I’ve wasted two and a half years on [*Sleep It Off, Lady*]. I wanted to write about my life. I wanted to write my autobiography, because everything they say about me is wrong. I want to tell the truth. I want to tell the truth, too, about Dominica. No, it’s not true we treated the black people badly. We didn’t, we didn’t. Now they say we did. No, no. I’m becoming a fascist. They won’t listen. No one listens. (qtd. in Plante, “Jean” 244–45)

During her last years, weak and fragile Rhys felt that she and white Creoles in general were misunderstood and wanted to set the record straight. In the late 1960s and 1970s, after *Wide Sargasso Sea*, not only did Rhys use her life as writing material but she also adopted an autobiographical voice through which she could write about herself in an unmediated and direct way, hoping that it would help rectify public misunderstandings about her life.

Although “The Imperial Road” assumes an autobiographical voice and describes Rhys’s actual travel, the narrator’s recollection is complexly filtered—just as Conrad’s *Personal Record* is not a faithful description but a careful reconstruction of his life. The narrator of “The Imperial Road” saliently thematizes the difficulty of clearly distinguishing factual events from fabricated memory when she is unsure about whether the Imperial Road actually existed or she imagined its existence. The lack of a sharp distinction between fact and fiction that puzzles the narrator also characterizes the composition of “The Imperial Road.” The parallel between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “The Imperial Road” that I discussed earlier—Rochester’s insistence on the existence of a road in Part II of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the narrator’s search for the Imperial Road in “The
Imperial Road—exemplifies the ways in which fact and fiction infiltrate each other. It is possible that Rhys’s recollection of the 1936 visit was informed by her fictional description in Wide Sargasso Sea, while “the reverse flow of influence” is also possible (Savory, “Text” 11). The problem is further heightened by the time span of almost four decades between Rhys’s visit to the West Indies and the writing of “The Imperial Road” as well as her constant revision of the manuscript.

A comparison of “The Imperial Road” with Rhys’s other references to the same trip suggests that the context of writing is as important as the actual visit in understanding the manuscript. She was insistent on finding out what became of the road even after her return from Dominica. When Alec Waugh (1898–1981), travel writer and brother of Evelyn Waugh, wrote about the Imperial Road in “Typical Dominica,” Rhys wrote a long letter to him asking about the road:\footnote{13 “Typical Dominica” is included in the British edition of Where the Clocks Chime Twice (1952), but not in its U.S. edition, When the Clocks Strike Twice (1951). The essay is also included in Waugh’s collection, The Sugar Islands (1958). In her letter, Rhys refers to the British edition, Where the Clocks Chime Twice.}

What happened, I wonder, to the 1\textsuperscript{st} Imperial Road. That was nearly finished when I was a small child or supposed to be nearly finished. I can remember the opening ceremony. The administrator, whose name was Hasketh \textit{sic} Bell, wore a cocked hat and cut a ribbon with silver scissors \textit{I think}. Perhaps the next man disliked Dominica or the money dried up. […]

But about the Imperial Road. We tried the walk from Hampstead. […] We did manage it and arrived at the Paz late at night and utterly exhausted. Certainly I was. Violet whom you thought slow and lazy but I doubt if she is—had two bottles of champagne on ice waiting for us. It was a lovely feeling then. So triumphant.

However it was an awful walk. It rained all the time. A kind woman lent me a mule half way, and I fell off the first time there. Was a steep downwards bit of road. (qtd. in Campbell 59, original emphasis)\footnote{14 This letter that Elaine Campbell published in her essay is in the Contemporary Collections in the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University. Although neither Rhys nor Waugh could positively date the letter, following Waugh’s suggestion, Campbell estimates that it was written in the early 1950s (61–62).}
Rhys’s walk recalled in this letter exactly corresponds to the narrator’s travel in “The Imperial Road.” Although Rhys mentioned the same West Indian characters in “The Imperial Road” and her letters, she pictured them more positively in the latter. The “decidedly unfriendly” mule owner in “The Imperial Road” is described as “a kind woman” in the letter to Waugh written probably in the early 1950s (20). Also, whereas Dora, the daughter of the overseer of the holiday estate, is a secretly malicious black girl in “The Imperial Road,” Rhys depicted her briefly yet favorably in a letter to a friend and writer, Evelyn Scott, written during her stay in Dominica: “a nice girl to look after us, Dora is her name” (Letters 28). Given the nuanced differences in Rhys’s descriptions of the same Afro-Caribbeans over time, the circumstance of the composition of “The Imperial Road” should be taken into account as a critical factor of the narrator’s racial tone.

The fact that “The Imperial Road” exists in seven manuscript versions makes it an even more layered text. Versions 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 are incomplete and fragmentary to different degrees. Version 2, the only handwritten draft, is a 5-page fragment that describes the first part of the travel and appears to precede all the other extant versions. Version 1, dated September 19 (no year), resumes the story at the point where version 2 leaves off. Version 3 has “Sepr 20, ‘73” handwritten (not in Rhys’s handwriting) and is a typewritten revision of version 2. Thus, it appears that versions 2, 1, and 3, probably written in that order, are complementary drafts. Version 7, dated 24 March 1974, is fairly complete though still unfinished. This is what Hulme considers as “the final version of the seven held in the Jean Rhys Papers” and uses in his study (“Islands” 44). O’Connor also refers to version 7, mentioning that it is “longer” than the other versions.

15 All quotations from “The Imperial Road” in this study refer to version 4 because it is the only published version and appears to be most finished. Version 4 was published in 2001 in Jean Rhys Review, and the other versions remain unpublished. All seven versions are archived in the Jean Rhys Papers, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.
complete typescript, version 4 (414). On the other hand, Savory, who published version 4, estimates that it is most finished among the extant drafts. I agree with her that the chronological order of composition seems to be versions 7, 6, 5, and then 4. Versions 6, 5, and 4 are not dated, but small changes in details and varying degrees of stylistic refinement support this ordering. For example, in versions 7 and 6, as in version 1, the overseer of the estate is named Theodore; in version 5, Theodore is crossed out and Christophe is handwritten instead, and the latter name stays in version 4. The first 11 pages of version 6 are missing, but the version reflects revisions made in version 7, including the placement of a thematically crucial sentence, “I was at home and not at home” (19). Version 5 consists of two fragments combined, the second being a revision of pages 13–22 of version 6. In short, it appears that the drafts were written in this order: 2–1–3–7–6–5–4.

The two relatively complete versions, 7 and 4, warrant further comparison. Although the major plot remains the same, version 4 contains fewer racial remarks that border on postcolonial nostalgia. Also, it is stylistically more condensed than the earlier version, thus more illustrative of Rhys’s usual, refined style. (Version 7 is 18 pages, whereas version 4 is only 10 pages.) In both versions, the major plot involves an attempt to travel across Dominica on the Imperial Road. The narrator and her husband, Lee, arrive in Roseau, located on the Caribbean side of the island, and stay at the La Paz hotel. Version 7 describes the narrator’s visit to the convent, where she was a boarder in her girlhood, her father’s photograph hanging in a convent room, and her visit to the father’s nearby grave. However, the visits to the convent and the grave do not appear in version 4.16 In both versions, there is a contrast between Dominica as the narrator remembers it and Dominica as it is, which is symbolized by her vivid memory of the Imperial Road and its

16 Rhys developed the story of the visit to the convent into a separate story, “The Bishop’s Feast,” which was included in Sleep It Off, Lady.
disappearance. In version 7, this contrast is more extended due to the disappearance of the old convent and the reminders of the narrator’s father. The father’s photograph frozen in time, his neglected grave, and the disappearance of the old British convent all contribute to the image of loss. In version 4, Rhys again presents Dominica as fundamentally transformed but her narrator cannot identify that change. She states merely: “I couldn’t recognize Roseau. […] It was a change that I couldn’t put my finger on but which made the place quite unrecognizable” (18). Overall, version 4 presents the narrator’s mourning in a less direct form compared to the earlier version.

The travel on the Imperial Road dramatizes the change that makes the white Creole narrator feel “at home and not at home.” Her mother’s old friend offers the narrator and her husband, Lee, an estate on the other side of the island at a nominal rent. They travel to the south Atlantic side by launch, and after about six weeks when the time comes to travel back to Roseau, the narrator insists, against everybody’s advice, that they walk back to Roseau on the Imperial Road across the island. They hire two guides, a Martinique man, “the grimmest Negro [she] had ever seen” and a Dominican whom the narrator finds “quite pleasant” but “a bit weak-willed” (20). The travel starts “splendidly” in good weather and the narrator feels “as if [she] were back in [her] girlhood, setting out on some wonderful adventure which would certainly end happily” (20). But the road soon comes to an end and becomes “a steep, uphill track” (20). She stumbles and hurts herself and continues the travel on a borrowed mule in the downpour. After they finally arrive at the La Paz hotel, she still cannot believe that the Imperial Road has completely disappeared when she vividly remembers the opening ceremony of the road. Unable to accept its disappearance, she wonders whether it is her memory or the guides that tricked her:

“It’s quite impossible it should have disappeared without leaving any trace. Those men must have taken us wrong.” […]
I lay awake for a long time asking myself if I could conceivably have imagined the whole thing; the ceremony with the administrator in this uniform trimmed with gold lace, wearing a cocked hat and a sword (No, I’m not sure about the sword but I am about the cocked hat and uniform), the band playing, the crowd cheering as he declared the Imperial Road across the island open to all traffic. Now no trace of it. Just darkness, gloom, dripping trees, that hostile guide cutting away undergrowth and branches. Nothing left of the Imperial Road? Nothing? It just wasn’t possible. (22)

This ending to “The Imperial Road” portrays the narrator as a troubled white Creole who is unable to make sense of the sweeping force that has overgrown and obliterated the Imperial Road. She is puzzled not only by the disappearance of the road but also by the absence of its “trace.” In this sense, “The Imperial Road” raises questions of memory, mourning, and colonial historiography.

Dominica in fact had an Imperial Road; it is an emblem of white planters on the island who were as ill-fated as the narrator’s walk on the road. The Imperial Road was planned in the 1890s by P. A. Templer, Dominica’s first Administrator under Crown Colony rule, as a good use of an imperial grant.17 But it was his successor, H. Hesketh Bell, who put into action this plan of building a road inland. During his tenure from 1899 to 1905, ambitious and energetic Bell set up telephone and coastal steamer services, built libraries, initiated the electricity service, pioneered hurricane insurance, and opened a new jetty (Honychurch 148–52). Most importantly, he constructed the sixteen miles of the Imperial Road starting from Canefield (on the southwest coast of Dominica) until the money ran out at the center of the island, called Bassinville or Bells. The major function of the Imperial Road as the colonial administrators intended was not simply to facilitate trans-insular communications but to open up Crown lands in the interior to British

17 The Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, saw Dominica as a promising “undeveloped estate.” In 1896, Chamberlain persuaded the British House of Commons to grant the colony £30,000 for imperial aid—but only on condition of Crown Colony rule. Dominica unwillingly accepted the condition after much opposition, and Crown Colony rule was imposed in 1898. Subsequently, £15,000 was given to pay off the island’s debts and the other £15,000 to build roads to Crown lands in the interior. See Honychurch 147–48 and Hulme, “Islands” 28.
planters. Bell utilized his fine public relations skills to attract new settlers and foreign investors. In September 1900, Bell wrote to *The Times* to recruit “young men possessed of energy and a moderate capital, who are inclined to become planters in a tropical island,” advertising that “the magnificent highlands and valleys of the interior are now being made accessible” thanks to the Imperial grant (8). On 25 September 1900, *The Times* published a letter by Robert Thomson, head of the Jamaica Botanical Department, who endorsed Bell’s rosy prospect for planting in Dominica: “it would be impossible to render a greater service to hundreds of young well-to-do Englishmen than to recommend them to turn their energies to this most interesting feature of colonial life” (11). In January 1903, placing another recruitment letter in *The Times*, Bell reported that over 100 qualified candidates responded to his 1900 advertisement, and “a good number of young men [had] since gone out to Dominica, and [had] become planters there” (14). Indeed, the number of Europeans on Dominica dramatically increased from 44 to 399 between 1891 and 1911 (Trouillot 121). It was not long, however, before Bell’s rosy prospect turned into a gray reality. Most of the English planters soon sold out or abandoned their estates because, among other things, World War I, the 1916 hurricane, and the 1918 U.S. embargo on Dominican limes effectively soured their prospects (Honychurch 152; Trouillot 121). When the narrator is obsessed with the Imperial Road, she implicitly asks what happened to the white planters the road brought to the island and the white population in the island more generally. This question was important to Rhys because it helped her picture the white planter class as yet another victim of misconceived British colonial operations more than as an imperial agent.

Rhys’s short story, “Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers” in *Sleep It Off, Lady*—for which “The Imperial Road” was also intended—could be read as a complement to “The Imperial Road.” Set in late 1899, “Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers” portrays a white planter, Mr. Ramage, who comes to
Dominica “with the intention of buying an estate,” having heard that “there were several places going along this new Imperial Road” (“Pioneers” 277). Dr. Cox recalls two other Englishmen who bought estates along with the road but soon sold them and went back to England. From the beginning, what Mr. Ramage is seeking on the island is not economic gain but “peace” (“Pioneers” 277). He buys an estate, but instead of carrying out the imperial mission of cultivating the “undeveloped estate,” he marries a “colored” woman of questionable respectability and wanders around virtually naked. Rumors about his eccentricities spread, and when his wife disappears (she visits Guadeloupe, as it turns out later), he is suspected of murder.

The Gazette publishes an article:

The so-called “Imperial Road” was meant to attract young Englishmen with capital who would buy and develop properties in the interior. This costly experiment has not been a success, and one of the last of these gentlemen planters has seen himself as the king of the cannibal islands since he landed. […] Black people bear much; must they also bear beastly murder and nothing be done about it? (“Pioneers” 282)

People stone his house, calling him “white zombie,” and plan to burn down his house (“Pioneers” 283). Dr. Cox and policemen finally visit the house only to find that Mr. Ramage has killed himself. Dr. Cox’s nine-year-old daughter, Rosalie, who was fond of Mr. Ramage, starts to write a letter for his undecorated Anglican grave but cannot finish it because of overwhelming sadness. Mrs. Cox finds the unfinished letter and throws it away. Rosalie is a thinly disguised Rhys; Rhys was nine years old in 1899 and her father, William Rees Williams, was also a doctor. Symbolically, Rosalie’s unfinished letter parallels Rhys’s unfinished “The Imperial Road”; if Rosalie’s letter is written for a dead white planter, “The Imperial Road” is for the white planter class that has already lost its place in Dominica.

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18 “Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers” is an “only slightly fictionalised story” based on the real Ramage, who was famous in Dominica for his eccentricity; the real Ramage occupied himself in digging a hole to reach China through the earth (Hulme, “Islands” 31–32).
The 1970s, when both “The Imperial Road” and “Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers” were written, was a critical period in the racial and political history of Dominica. Dominica achieved Associated Statehood in 1967 and full independence in 1978. In the 1960s and 1970s, moving towards statehood, Dominica experienced intense social revolts and racial conflicts. Influenced by the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Black Power movement on other West Indian islands, and the African Diaspora in other parts of the world, the Black Power movement in Dominica brought to the boiling point the island’s class, racial, and cultural conflicts that had been simmering in earlier decades. With the long history of slavery and colonialism, Dominica was under heavy foreign influence, both economically and culturally. The Black Power movement gave expression to Dominicans’ desire for control of their own economy, definition of national culture, and recovery of racial pride. In the early 1970s, the educated urban youth—commonly called “the Black Power boys”—published newspapers and gathered to march on foreign establishments (Christian 15–17; Honychurch 243).19 A series of racially charged events followed. In 1972, a dispute over a student’s Afro hairstyle at St. Mary’s Academy (operated by foreign Christian Brothers) turned into a big protest; in 1973, a strike by civil servants resulted in a proclamation of a State of Emergency; in the same year, defying the Colonial Development Corporation’s directive to lay off 53 workers, the Cornell-educated manager of Castle Bruce estate, Atherton Martin, led protests against the multinational corporation (Christian 21–24; Honychurch 244, 216–18). By Carnival 1974, the tension had heightened, and carnival goers would chant in the street of Roseau: “Black man time is come! / White man had his fun!” (qtd. in

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19 Some of Black Power leaders were actually “mulatto.” Unlike on other West Indian islands, “mulatto” was “the Dominican ‘aristocracy,’ as far as it was perceived” (Christian 11). The Dominica Labour Party did not trust “the Black Power boys” and argued that the position of black people in Dominica was different than that of black people in America. The Dominica Labour Party’s newspaper, The Educator, accused “the Black Power boys” of using the Black Power movement for their own political interest: “their Black Power is really Mulatto Power, a sinister plot … to return the mulatto to political power” (qtd. in Honychurch 243).
During the Carnival, Geneva estate—long-time family house of the Lockharts, now under Nassief’s ownership—was burned down, and a white American tourist, John Jirasek, was shot dead in the street of Roseau. Desmond Trotter, a Black Power leader from a Roseau elite mulatto family, was found guilty of the murder. His supporters believed that he was framed by the police. After “over five years of legal battles, appeals, protests, public meetings, political radio statements and lobby campaigns in Britain and North America,” Trotter was eventually released in 1979 (Honychurch 245). These racially charged political and cultural struggles in the West Indies had a strong influence on Rhys’s writing of “The Imperial Road.”

In the 1970s, Rhys was well informed about Dominican politics despite her relative isolation in Devon. She was connected to Dominica, most importantly, through Allfrey. Like Rhys, Allfrey was a Dominica-born white Creole woman, came to England, and became a writer. Unlike Rhys, however, Allfrey returned to Dominica in 1953 and became deeply involved in West Indian politics; she co-founded the first political party in Dominica, the Dominica Labour Party, and became minister of the West Indies Federation as “the only woman and the only white in the Cabinet” (Honychurch 230–31; Paravisini-Gebert 10). After “her controversial expulsion from the party” that she co-founded, “an expulsion widely believed to have been racially motivated,” she and her husband, Robert Allfrey, began to publish and edit a newspaper, *The Star*, in 1965 (Paravisini-Gebert 11). Rhys and Allfrey first met in England in 1936—right after Rhys’s visit to Dominica described in “The Imperial Road”—and maintained a friendship until roughly the time of Allfrey’s return to Dominica, and then “renewed their correspondence in 1973” (Paravisini-Gebert 4, 9). Along with correspondence that continued until Rhys’s death in 1979, Allfrey sent Rhys *The Star*, for which Rhys would anxiously wait (Paravisini-Gebert 13).

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20 Even during the silence, Allfrey reviewed *Wide Sargasso Sea* in a May 1967 issue of *The Star* and “lost few opportunities to remind her readers that in Rhys they had a Dominican of whom to be proud” when Rhys’s books were not available in Dominica (Paravisini-Gebert 11–12).
While writing her essay, Rhys was being informed of the current events in Dominica by someone at the very heart of the turmoil.

Responding to the current events of the 1970s, unable to identify with other Caribbeans against Englishmen as she does in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys tried to present a white Creole’s perspective as distinct from an Afro-Caribbean perspective. In this sense, “The Imperial Road” is an attempt to reinsert the white Creole into the island’s history. The outcome is an anachronistic and vexed attempt to commemorate the white plantocracy. Rhys’s racial positioning in “The Imperial Road,” however, also points to her fundamentally vulnerable status as a white Caribbean writer that I examined earlier. To West Indian intellectuals, the debate after the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* over Rhys’s belonging to West Indian literature was a part of struggle to define West Indian culture at the wake of independence. To Rhys, it raised a critical question about her authorship because it could undermine the credibility of her West Indian accounts, especially in the light of the new influx of Afro-Caribbean writers to England.

In the context of Black Power and of the contestation of Rhys’s identity as a Caribbean writer, the existence of the road was important to Rhys because it would validate her memory of Dominica, thus giving authority to her representation of the island that she had left long before. Her conversation with Plante quoted earlier suggests that Rhys was troubled by the sense of being disbelieved and that it motivated her to directly engage with her West Indian past with an autobiographical voice. It is not surprising, then, that the narrator’s insistence on finding the road is driven not only by the desire to recuperate the white Creole’s place in Dominica, but also by the need to dispel Dominicans’ disbelief in her memory of the island. Early in “The Imperial Road,” the narrator wants to take her English husband to the road to “show off the beauties of the island” to the Western visitor (18). But every time she suggests the road, the driver repeats,
“there [is] no road there” (18). She realizes that “any reference to the island when it was
governed by the English [is] met with silence and a pained, annoyed expression” (18). Palpable
throughout “The Imperial Road” is the narrator’s sense not only that Dominica as she remembers
it does not exist anymore but also that her memory is discredited by other Caribbeans. The
narrator mourns the former and resents the latter.

The Return of the Native

As a returning white Creole, the narrator finds herself hated, disdained, and rejected by
“colored” and black locals. In the opening passage, assuming that the narrator is a tourist, “a
young coloured man” asks if it is her first visit to Dominica (17). When he learns that she was
born in Dominica, however, “his expression [changes] at once” and gives her “a hostile look
[and] then [walks] away” (17). Even though the narrator quickly adds that she is “far too excited
to worry about this,” it is significant that the essay begins with a scene of rejection, which recurs
in variations throughout the essay (17). For instance, when stung by a centipede, the narrator
catches Dora’s “broad grin of delight” (19).21 After the narrator hurts her foot on the way back to
Roseau, the guides suggest that they stop by a woman’s house to borrow a mule. The mule
owner bathes the narrator’s foot, saying: “I don’t do this for you, for I know who you are and for
one of your family I would do nothing. I do it for your husband for I hear that he’s a good man
and kind to all” (20, original emphasis). The figure of the rejected woman is hardly new to
readers of Rhys’s works; Rhys’s heroines in her “continental novels” are rejected by selfish
European men and, more reminiscent of the narrator of “The Imperial Road,” white Creole
women in Wide Sargasso Sea are hated and rejected by Afro-Caribbeans just as Anna Morgan in

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21 Angier suggests that Dora in “The Imperial Road” and Myra in Wide Sargasso Sea might be related, both
representing the “treacherous servant” (355). In “Temps Perdi,” another story by Rhys that describes the 1936 trip to
Dominica, Dora is named Myra. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Myra is the servant who abandons Antoinette’s idiot brother,
Pierre, to die when Coulibri is set ablaze.
*Voyage in the Dark* is rejected by her black servant, Francine. Since Rhys’s heroines have a strong desire for belonging but do not really belong anywhere, rejection is a recurrent theme in Rhys’s writings. In “The Imperial Road,” Rhys has a different response to racial rejection and this is what led to the rejection of the story by publishers.

In contrast to her earlier works, the voice of the narrator in “The Imperial Road” is quite openly that of a bitter white Creole who uncritically subscribes to the racial stereotype of the treacherous “colored” servant and leaves little room for identification with other Caribbeans. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* or *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys’s white Creole heroines are hated by black Caribbeans but they still turn to black Caribbeans for their identities and comfort. Anna, for example, knows that Francine “disliked [her] too because [she] was white,” but this only makes her “[hate] being white” (*Voyage* 44). Anna says, “I wanted to be black,” which is repeated by Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as well as Rhys herself in her letters and autobiography (*Voyage* 32). In “The Imperial Road,” however, the narrator is decidedly positioned against other Caribbean people.

The narrator’s hostility towards other Creoles needs to be examined within a larger racial dynamics. The incident at the La Paz bar reveals the important racial dynamics at work in “The Imperial Road.” Violet, the bar tender, who is black, refuses to serve Ken, a local “coloured” man, for his rudeness. After people hear that Violet defended the narrator and Lee at the bar, there is “no more rudeness” to the narrator and Lee (18). It is obvious throughout “The Imperial Road” that although the narrator identifies herself as a native, Dominicans do not consider her as an insider; nor does she have the power to protect Lee from the local man’s rudeness. It is the black girl, Violet, who protects Lee and the narrator. Violet embodies the “good” black woman, the protector of the white Creole woman, a figure which Christophine represents in *Wide
**Sargasso Sea.** 22 Significant in this racial dynamics is that, unlike Rochester, **against** whom Christophine protects Antoinette, Lee is the person protected by Violet. Even though he is an Englishman and Dominica was still colonized by England in 1936, Lee is treated by Dominicans as a neutral visitor, a charming personality, existing outside racial relations. The narrator notes: “They all liked him and I felt that when they were nice to me it was only because of him” (19). As I mentioned before, the mule owner who bathes the narrator’s foot “would do **nothing**” for the narrator but tolerates her only because “he’s a good man and kind to all.” This characterization of Lee as a neutral and likeable person significantly affects Rhys’s racial positioning of the narrator in relation to other Creoles.

The racial positioning of the white Creole narrator in “The Imperial Road” also signifies a critical shift from Rhys’s “continental novels,” in which heroines are social underdogs who are victimized by snobbish and dominating European men. During the 1920s and 1930s when her “continental novels” were published, Rhys was a young female writer from the West Indies under the patronage of the modernist patriarch, Ford Madox Ford. Rhys’s heroines depend on European men in those novels, and Rhys depended on Ford to publish the novels. Rhys saw herself as a victim and fashioned her heroines as victims in her novels. In “The Imperial Road,” however, the white Creole narrator is positioned vis-à-vis other Caribbeans with no imperialistic man present in relation to whom she can be defined as colonized. In relation to the black and “colored” people, she is a member of the imperial class, though in Dominica that class did not

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22 Gregg argues that Rhys’s description of black servants are polarized; they are “either very ‘good’ (that is, loyal, loving, selfless, black mammy types) or very ‘bad’ (indifferent, resentful, or hostile to the [white] Creole” (37). As Gregg suggests, these two types of black servants / caretakers can be traced back to Rhys’s childhood nurses—Meta and Francine. In her autobiography, Rhys described Meta as a terrifying, hating, and cruel nurse who did an irreparable psychological damage to her: “Meta had shown me a world of fear and distrust, and I am still in that world” (24). In contrast, Rhys portrayed Francine as someone who showed the bright side of life, telling her stories “full of jokes and laughter, descriptions of beautiful dresses and good things to eat” (*Smile* 23).
enjoy as much power as in other West Indian islands. This positioning made it difficult for Rhys to convincingly fashion the narrator as a victim as she did in her “continental novels” or in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Rhys’s white Creole heroines identify with other Caribbeans by being victims themselves in relation to exploitive men who see both white Creole women and Afro-Caribbeans as dangerous, treacherous, and exotic. In this paradoxical way, domineering men in Rhys’s novels function as a route “home” for white Creole women in Europe. In contrast, with no imperial white male in the narrative, the white Creole narrator is not a victim but a descendent of white plantocracy, which puts her in an antagonistic relationship with other Creoles. This indicates that Rhys’s shifting racial relation to the West Indies also caused her to change strategies for representing white Creole womanhood. In her early works, she conceived racial politics and gender politics as inseparably interwoven. She viewed Afro-Caribbeans as “authentic” Caribbeans and victims of British colonialism, while considering herself as a victim of patriarchy. White Englishmen (usually upper-class ones) embodied the evils of patriarchy as well as of empire. In “The Imperial Road,” however, the white Englishman, Lee, is not a symbol of empire and he does not represent patriarchy, either. This might explain the reason why the white Creole narrator in “The Imperial Road” is an exception to Rhys’s victimized heroines that I examined in the beginning of this chapter.

In a 1975 letter, alluding to the racial content of “The Imperial Road,” Rhys acknowledged that, despite her envy of Afro-Caribbean culture, her perspective was one of a white Creole. At the same time, she emphasized the need to complement or counter Afro-Caribbean representations of the West Indies with a white Creole perspective. She wrote:

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23 According to Honychurch, “Dominica was the only island in the British West Indies where white rule was successfully challenged. The group of coloured families, the Mulatto Ascendancy, kept control of the legislature for two generations until they were finally defeated by the introduction of Crown Colony rule” (128).
Am I prejudiced? I don’t know. I certainly wasn’t. I really longed to be black & prayed for the miracle that would do the trick. … But I’m sure that I didn’t notice or took for granted a lot that was unjust. Or worse. Of course a reaction was to be expected. All the same a great deal that is written & said about the West Indies is terribly one sided & some is simply untrue. (qtd. in Hulme, “Islands” 37)

Here Rhys offers interesting clues to some reasons behind the shift from *Wide Sargasso Sea* to “The Imperial Road.” In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her heroine “really longed to be black” and “prayed for the miracle that would do the trick.” In the novel, Rhys fashioned the white Creole woman against Englishmen and created identification with Afro-Caribbeans through dreams, while building her authorship against the British discourse of the white Creole in *Jane Eyre*. But in the political and literary landscape of the early 1970s, the same strategy would not be an effective way of fashioning a white Creole identity. Thus, in “The Imperial Road,” she constructs her authorship against Afro-Caribbeans with no Englishman in the narrative.

This distinction is significant because it explains, at least partially, why “The Imperial Road” was rejected by publishers and accepted only as a failed work by critics. It is telling that Athill connected Rhys’s racial tone in “The Imperial Road” to the failure of her artistic “strength.” Even though Rhys was not explicitly political as a person or a writer, her authorship was inevitably political in nature because it critically depended on her ability to fashion herself as another victim of British colonialism. As Veronica Marie Gregg contends, “Rhys’s locational identity, a West Indian Creole, which made possible her subjective identity as colonial, woman, and Outsider in the metropolitan context, drew its meaning from the political fact of colonialism” (33). When the process of independence in the West Indies put her in an antagonistic relation with other Creoles, Rhys could not construct a white Creole identity by fashioning herself as a victim. “The Imperial Road” has neither an Englishman nor a colonial text against which Rhys could build her authorship. The effect of their absence ironically speaks to their importance in
Rhys’s self-fashioning. Rhys wrote both *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “The Imperial Road” within particular constraints that differently defined the white Creole. The primary constraints within which Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* came from the plot of *Jane Eyre* that pre-determined Antoinette’s life and death to a great extent, as well as the colonial ethnography that inscribed the white Creole as culturally black. But they were helpful constraints, as Rhys used them as leverage to place the white Creole in the West Indies and herself in West Indian literature. In contrast, the constraints Rhys had with “The Imperial Road” came from the Caribbean people with whom she wanted to identify. I have shown that Rhys described Afro-Caribbeans positively in letters written in the 1930s and the 1950s, whereas she represented the same characters as vicious and rejecting in “The Imperial Road.” This difference in her racial tone indicates that she saw racial relations as a matter of dynamics among fashion-able selves. Rhys was located in the extremely uncomfortable place of the in-between in more than one sense—between the West Indies and Europe, between the ruling plantocracy and the impoverished underclass, between black and white, and between colonial and postcolonial. And she fashioned a white Creole identity by painfully yet strategically navigating the in-between-ness instead of becoming a victim of homelessness.
CHAPTER 4
CHANG-RAE LEE’S IMMIGRANT PLOT

I’m interested in people who find themselves in places, either of their choosing or not, and who are forced to decide how best to live there. That feeling of both citizenship and exile, of always being an expatriate—with all the attendant problems and complications and delight.

Introduction

Whereas Conrad defined Poland and England as unrecognized allies that should come together to protect Western civilization threatened by Russian autocracy, Rhys saw increasing antagonism between Dominica and England due to British imperialism in the West Indies. Rhys’s whiteness, family history, gender, and class made it extremely difficult for her to reconcile the West Indies and England. Feeling rejected in both places, she placed her white Creole identity provisionally and alternatively in-between the West Indies and England, mostly through dream-like cross-racial identifications. On the other hand, Conrad re-conceived his Polish past and English authorship as compatible identities. He used his “Western eyes” to write for Poland by negotiating shifting national boundaries around World War I and artfully appropriating the idea of “the West.” The way Chang-rae Lee (1965–) represented his Korean background and American authorship in Native Speaker (1995) is comparable to Conrad’s “homing” tactics in the sense that Lee did not conceive his Korean identity and American authorship as two antagonistic identities to choose from. Instead, he actively and self-consciously performed his ethnic identity to fashion himself as an American writer.

In this chapter, reading Lee’s debut novel, Native Speaker, I argue that Lee strategically uses the trope of an “authentic” Asian home to appeal to multicultural America, which favors comfortable forms of ethnic diversity over more threatening forms of racial resistance. I have posited that British modernism and international politics in the early twentieth century allowed
Conrad to articulate his simultaneous allegiance to Poland and England, and the concept of “the West” provided him with the appropriate vocabulary for his project. I do not imply any strict parallel between British modernist culture of the early twentieth century and American multiculturalism at the end of the century. Rather, I suggest that just as Conrad fashioned himself as a Polish British writer by recognizing certain options in British modernist culture, Lee attempted to construct his Asian American authorship by strategically responding to American multiculturalism.

A complexly layered text, *Native Speaker* is a novel not only about Asian American inclusion but also about writing as an Asian American male writer. As Lee’s debut novel, *Native Speaker* presents Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring as parallel projects. Lee’s project of appealing to a bigger audience than his ethnic community while addressing immigrant experience involves rendering the immigrant experience into a recognizable and acceptable form to the American reading public. Lee accomplishes this task by appropriating familiar images of Asians as a vehicle for challenging the narrow definition of America that marginalizes Asian Americans. On the one hand, the novel disrupts cultural expectations of Asian Americans and the literary conventions that code such expectations by exposing the cultural logics of the major stereotypes of Asian Americans—the “model minority” and the “yellow peril.” On the other hand, in order to place himself in the American literary industry, Lee flirts with the commodifiable form of ethnic “authenticity,” luring the multicultural American reading public with the representation of the “authentic” Asian family. This chapter contends that the tension between Lee’s criticism of American exclusiveness and his auto-exoticism speaks to the ambivalent relationship between his Asian American male authoring and American multiculturalism. I further this argument first by examining Lee’s reworking of the
generic conventions of the bildungsroman and the spy novel, which I see as a site of his authorial intervention with mainstream American culture. And then, critically considering the ways in which Lee’s intervention is gendered, I argue that Lee’s idea of “home” ultimately reinstates the masculine narrative of the American nation. Although the novel gestures towards a racially more inclusive America, it projects racial frustration onto a feminized Asia, suggesting both Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring as manly works.

Lee has fashioned himself as an insider / outsider who can address Asian American and mainstream American readers alike and command both spaces. Lee was born in Korea and immigrated to the U.S. with his parents at the age of three. Growing up in Westchester, New York, close to Koreatown and other immigrant communities of the multiethnic metropolitan area, Lee appears to have been successfully integrated into mainstream American society. He attended the prestigious boarding school, Phillips Exeter Academy, majored in English at Yale University, earned a MFA at the University of Oregon, and became a Wall Street analyst before writing Native Speaker. Winning the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, the American Book Award, and other honors, the critically and commercially successful novel quickly made Lee the most recognized Korean American writer. After the publication of his second novel, A Gesture Life (1999), The New Yorker named Lee one of the 20 best American writers under 40. In interviews, he has said that “he does not define himself as an Asian-American writer” even though “he acknowledges that he has used the Asian-American experience for his inspiration so far” (qtd. in Corley 72). Lee saw “the Asian American experience” as a source of “inspiration” and a material that he could use to become a writer, not necessarily Asian American. For him, the Asian American material did not make him an “ethnic writer” by default. Rather, he claimed that by representing Korean American immigrant experience, he was addressing something very
American, which he implied through the novel’s title, *Native Speaker*. Furthermore, Lee took the novel’s epigraph from “The Sleepers” by Walt Whitman in order to situate his work in respect to the representative poet of American democracy. Through the epigraph and the novel’s title, he claimed that the immigrant experience described in the novel was very American, placing himself within the American literary tradition.¹

While presenting himself as an American writer, Lee has also demonstrated remarkable self-consciousness about the ways in which Asian Americans have been historically portrayed in American culture. Henry Park, the narrator and protagonist of *Native Speaker*, is an ethnic spy who uses his Korean American background to spy on other immigrants, especially those from Asia. The novel interweaves Henry’s infiltration into the political camp of John Kwang, a Korean American New York City councilman and potential mayoral candidate, with Henry’s estranged relationship with his white wife, Lelia. *Native Speaker* begins on the day when Lelia leaves Henry, handing him a list of his identities that include, among others, “illegal alien,” “emotional alien,” “stranger,” “traitor,” “spy,” and “Yellow peril: neo-American” (5). Lelia’s characterization of Henry, if meant to signal their shattered marriage, summons some long-standing images of Asian Americans such as the “perpetual foreigner” and the “yellow peril.” The origin and the persistence of these images are intricately connected to the history of Asian American immigration as well as the American self-definition of the nation. Before analyzing *Native Speaker*, we need to take a detour and examine these Asian American stereotypes because the novel is a convoluted response to these stereotypical Asian American identities allotted by mainstream America.

¹ For more about the significance of the novel’s epigraph from Whitman, see Corley 73–80.
The cultural perception of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” goes back to the inception of Asian immigration to America in the mid-nineteenth century and a series of Exclusion Acts thereafter. Most of the early Asians came to America as contract laborers, and early Korean migration to America followed the general pattern of Asian American migration. In 1903, Koreans were first brought to Hawaii to replace Chinese and Japanese laborers who had started to unionize and demand higher wages. Some of those Koreans entered the mainland through San Francisco and became migratory farm workers on the Pacific Coast. At the turn of the century, especially after Japan officially annexed Korea in 1910, Korean nationalistic leaders also came to mainland America. Because of Japanese imperialism in Korea, the first Korean migrants in America, workers and intellectuals alike, identified themselves as exiles rather than immigrants, committed to the nationalistic cause for their lost country (Takaki 277–86). The connection between the beginning of Korean migration to the U.S. and Japanese imperialism is worth noting because it explains early Korean Americans’ simultaneous subjection to Japanese and American imperialisms. Early Korean Americans conceived migration to the U.S. as an alternative to living in the colonized homeland, and expatriates saw it as a way of fighting against Japanese imperialism, only to become subject to American imperialism.

Korean Americans have been defined as “aliens” first legally and then culturally. They were legally considered “aliens ineligible for citizenship” until the early 1950s, and acts like the 1913 Alien Land Act in California prohibited them from owning and leasing land, thus forcing them to remain migrant workers (Takaki 272). After Korean Americans gained the legal right to naturalize, they still have been considered culturally “not quite American” because America has been defined primarily as a white (or black-and-white) country. Henry poignantly feels the

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2 The right of naturalization and small immigration quotas were granted to Chinese in 1943, to Asian Indians and Filipinos in 1946, and to Koreans and Japanese in 1952. The discriminatory quota system was not abolished until the 1965 Immigration Act.
marginal status of Asian Americans: “It’s still a black-and-white world” (195). Besides, due to American international policies and wars in Asia in the twentieth century, Asian Americans have been put under suspicion regarding loyalty to the American nation, and have been often considered as potential enemies. 3

The term “yellow peril” was coined in the late nineteenth century when Chinese immigration to Western countries increased and Japan emerged as a military power. In the first half of the twentieth century, discourses of the “yellow peril” frequently appeared in Western popular culture and government policies to argue against the immigration of “the Asiatic horde” to the U.S. and other Western countries. Sax Rohmer (1883–1959), a British writer who later settled in the U.S., deserves credit for popularizing the “yellow peril.” Reprinted numerous times and adapted to several TV and radio shows and films, his Fu Manchu series have attracted Western readers for decades. In his first Fu Manchu story, The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu (1913), Rohmer writes that Fu Manchu represents “the yellow peril incarnate in one man” (26). Fu Manchu is an arch-villain of Chinese descent “with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race” (Rohmer 26). Chasing this oriental criminal are two white male detectives, Sir Denis Nayland Smith and Dr. Petrie, obviously modeled after Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Fu Manchu is a man of exceptional knowledge of all sorts, Eastern and Western, occult and scientific, which he uses to destroy the white race. Opposite to the stereotype of the effeminate and subservient Asian, Fu Manchu is depicted as an imposing, powerful, and determined man with “a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan” (Rohmer 25). Fu Manchu can learn

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3 In her essay, “Whose America Is It?,” an Asian American critic, Amy Ling, writes: “What is my work in Asian American literature today but an effort to make a home, a comfortable place, for myself in this still too often hostile land. […] I was not supposed to notice that in the three decades of my developing and maturing years, the United States fought three wars in Asia against people that looked like me: in the Forties against the Japanese, in the Fifties against Koreans and Communist Chinese, and in the Sixties against Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians. It’s extremely difficult and totally confusing to feel American and to look like the enemy, to think myself at home and be asked where I come from, to be a professor of literature and complimented on my good English” (28).
Western knowledge but cannot be assimilated. He is enormously capable yet incorrigibly immoral, which makes him a serious danger. At a time when the number of Asian populations in Western countries, in fact, was not significant enough to pose a real threat, Fu Manchu stories helped visualize the “yellow peril” by providing a vivid and accessible image of the inscrutable and sinister Asian.4

The “yellow peril” discourse reinforces the myth of national purity that prescribes who legitimately belongs in the American nation and who does not, while labeling Asian Americans in general as inscrutable, sinister, and unassimilable foreign agents. It functions as a national alert against “sinister agents of the orient” who would infiltrate American politics and pose a threat to the nation (Palumbo-Liu 43–58). With its racial marker and the urgency the vocabulary delivers, the “yellow peril” effectively articulates the anxiety over the unassimilable “foreign” Asian body within the supposedly organic American national body. David Palumbo-Liu explains that specific anxieties articulated as the “yellow peril” have differed depending on historical contexts, both domestic and international, as well as on racial groups. Historically, for the Chinese, the “peril” was linked to the image of “mass”; for the Japanese, it was their military and colonial power (and later their economic power, one would add); if it was Filipinos, the “peril” was connected to “a particularly malicious sexuality” (Palumbo-Liu 34–38). The “yellow peril” discourse rarely targeted Korean Americans in particular, not only because the number was simply too small to be threatening but because Koreans were officially treated as Japanese nationals between 1910 and 1945. As Palumbo-Liu’s analysis suggests, however, the “yellow peril” has covered a broad range of anxieties—anxieties over American politics, economy,

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4 Let alone film and TV show adaptations, book editions and magazine serials came with different pictures of Fu Manchu that all emphasized his dreadful and cunning appearance.
cultural life, and sexuality—and has become a sort of umbrella term that could be applied to any perceived challenge by “yellow faces.” In any case, the “yellow peril” discourse heavily relies on the equation of “yellow faces” as “alien” and “dangerous” in addition to the view of the nation as a homogenous and healthy body that must be protected from foreign—therefore dangerous—elements.

If yellow perilism defines Asian Americans as a threat against which national subjects are constructed and consolidated, “model minority” discourses interpellate Asian Americans as “good subjects,” by implication making other racial minorities “bad subjects.” In December 1966, for instance, *U.S. News & World Report* carried an article titled “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” In the article, the writer praised Chinese Americans as hard-working and self-sufficient, chiding other racial minorities, especially African Americans: “At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone else” (rpt. in Tachiki et al. 6). Earlier in January 1966, in the *New York Times*, William Petersen similarly contrasted African Americans and Japanese Americans, arguing that “new opportunities, even equal opportunities” would not improve the former (21). In a pseudo-scientific style, he detailed how Japanese Americans succeeded “by their own almost totally unaided effort” despite the internment during World War II and other discriminations that, to him, were harsher than what African Americans had to suffer (21). In so doing, he magically transformed Japanese Americans from an enemy which had to be interned only about two decades before into a beacon of “good citizenship” that “problem minorities” should follow. In *Native Speaker*, Kwang says how the “model minority” stereotype makes him feel like “getting caught up”: “When others construct and model you favorably, it’s easy to let them keep at it,
even if they start going off in ways that aren’t immediately comfortable or right. This is the challenge for us Asians in America. How do you say no to what seems like a compliment?” Through Kwang, Lee recognizes that, even though it “seems like a compliment,” the “model minority” is in fact a “challenge.”

Both the “yellow peril” and the “model minority” construct Asian Americans as not quite Americans. The “model minority” myth, if seemingly a favorable stereotype of Asian Americans, does not recognize Asian Americans as legitimate members of the nation. David Leiwei Li makes a useful distinction between “Oriental alienation” and “Asian abjection” and also attends to “a fundamental structural continuity” between the past ‘Yellow Peril’ and the present ‘model minority’” (9). By “Oriental alienation,” he refers to the first period of American orientalism during which the “yellow peril” was prevalent and Asian Americans were unassimilable “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” After the legislative prohibition ended in 1952, Asian Americans were constructed as “abject” or “unviable” subjects through cultural—if not legal—mechanisms. As Li states, even though “the discourse of ‘alienation’ typically constructs Asiatics as unamalgamatable, and the discourse of abjection casts them as essentially assimilable, one cannot fail to note that Asians remain principally external to America and American institutions in both formations” (9–10). The change in the legal status of Asian Americans is important, but it has not made them “real” Americans. Lee attempts to construct viable Asian American manhood and authorship by self-consciously appropriating these racial stereotypes that define Asian Americans as unassimilable or marginal subjects.

The Bildung and the Peril in Native Speaker

Native Speaker foregrounds the very interchangeability of the two cultural representations of Asian Americans, exposing the fact that although they are seemingly contradictory, the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” come from the same idea of the
homogeneous nation. The two literary genres *Native Speaker* is based upon, the bildungsroman and the spy novel, reflect Lee’s tactical use of these stereotypes. The bildungsroman, a representative Asian American literary expression, has tended to articulate Asian American integration into the nation, often by subscribing to the “model minority” myth. *Native Speaker* uses a major staple of the bildungsroman by following how Henry makes sense of his childhood to construct a public identity. Unlike conventional bildungsromans, however, Lee presents Henry’s coming-to-terms with society as something to be undone rather than something to be accomplished by the end of the novel. Henry becomes an ethnic spy by passively conforming to the “model minority” stereotype, and thus, *Native Speaker* problematizes successful cultural bildung. At the same time, Lee exploits the familiar trope of the inscrutable Asian spy by casting a Korean American spy as his protagonist, but he does not reiterate the “yellow peril” discourse. Instead, he complicates the old association between the Asian spy and the “yellow peril,” while calling into question the idea of white America. Most significantly, the fact that being a “model minority” makes Henry an excellent spy speaks to the cultural affinity of the two stereotypes.

**The Problem of Bildung and Double-Speaking**

Since its publication, *Native Speaker* has often been read as a loosely defined bildungsroman. Especially, early reviews praised Lee’s representation of Henry’s immigrant family and faulted the novel’s spy sub-plot which focuses on Henry’s spying on Kwang’s political career. Verlyn Klinkenborg observed, for instance, “the spy is really a storyteller. Yet *Native Speaker* is barely a spy novel. There is a plot […] but there is scarcely a frisson to be felt as it unwinds” (rpt. in Trudeau 246). Ruth Pavey similarly asked: “was it necessary to add in the spy story as well, fun though it is?” (rpt. in Trudeau 247) In March 1995, Richard Eder concluded in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* that “[t]he emotional heart of *Native Speaker* and by far its most interesting aspect is the narrator’s—Henry’s—recollections of his immigrant
father” (3). About a month later, Rand Richards Cooper commented in the *New York Times Book Review* on “a tender meditation on love, loss and family,” adding that “central characters like John Kwang exist less in their own right than as father figures trucked in as therapy for the narrator. […] I wish Chang-rae Lee had scrapped the spy stuff” (24). Cooper’s review was complemented with an excerpt from *Native Speaker*—under an added title, “His Father’s Rules”—foregrounding Henry’s recollection of the father’s assiduous, stoic, family-centered, and financially successful immigrant life and then death. The reviews’ response reflected the American reading public’s interest in immigrants’ private sphere, supposedly replete with exoticized foreign customs and traditions, and its discomfort with a racial minority’s presence in heavily politicized arenas. Highlighted in the reviews is not only the image of the “model minority” of the hard-working Korean greengrocer-father but his stubborn Koreanness, which the second-generation Korean American narrator does not quite understand. Focusing on a generational conflict and Henry’s troubled (and troubling) assimilation, the reviews framed the novel as a guilt-ridden son’s melancholic narrative of the dead father and, by extension, of lost ancestral heritage.

The bildungsroman has been the most popular and successful sub-genre in Asian American literature. As Patricia Chu has noted, “because Asian Americans write for audiences that generally know little of Asian American histories and do not necessarily share the writers’ perspectives on issues of race and nation,” they “turn to the bildungsroman for a repertoire of representational conventions” that allow them to “[code] political conflict” in the narrative of individual development (16). She explains that “Asian American literature about white racism has generally been less successful than literature that omits such themes,” and when addressing racial issues, Asian Americans use “the familiar, ostensibly depoliticized narration of formation”
as “a frame of reference accessible and acceptable to ‘mainstream’ Americans” (16). Most broadly read Asian American novels, including Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1975), and Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* (1991), to name just a few, center on protagonists’ coming-of-age. Protagonists’ cultural *bildung* invariably involves struggles between two cultures, Asian and American, represented by the private sphere and the public domain, respectively. The struggles are resolved when the individual eventually comes to terms with society through either assimilation or affirmation of cultural diversity. The bildungsroman concerns the individual’s transformation into the national subject, and the Asian American bildungsroman has been a privileged place for the negotiation between the Asian family and the American nation.

*NATIVE SPEAKER*, however, reverses the narrative move of the conventional bildungsroman that evolves towards an individual’s identification with the national polity. The novel moves from identification to disidentification, from integration to disintegration, from unification to its dissolution. Lee problematizes Henry’s false identification with the nation that has already taken place prior to the beginning of the narrative, and the novel progresses by undoing the identification. As he cynically describes himself, Henry is an “assimilist, a lackey,” or a “duteous foreign-faced boy” (160). But Lee suggests that Henry’s “exceptional English, his ability to integrate himself too well, his capacity to be almost too much at ease with the core of American power” is not an accomplishment but a source of anxiety (J. Lee 247). Henry’s successful cultural *bildung*, his conformity to the assigned role in the nation, ironically makes him a cultural outsider, not a participant. From the beginning of the novel, Lee makes clear that the qualities that have made Henry an “assimilist” have also made him a spy. Recounting how he has become a spy for Dennis Hoagland’s espionage firm and started to sell out his own immigrant
community, Henry says that the firm “conveniently” approached him “at the right time, offering the perfect vocation for the person [he] was” (127). Henry was too able and eager to assimilate, so he saw a confirmation of his identity in Hoagland’s offer without recognizing that he was only succumbing to racial marginalization. Henry confesses, “I found a sanction from our work, for I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture” (127). Native Speaker begins by suggesting that the “truest place in the culture” Henry thought he found turns out to be really not inhabitable. The novel thus traces back in retrospect how things have gone wrong for its first two-thirds or so. Then it switches to the present tense and, not coincidentally, Henry decides to quit the spying job. In effect, Native Speaker redirects the traditional bildungsroman’s thematicization of coming-to-terms with society to question the terms themselves under which the immigrant becomes the subject.

This narrative move from an immigrant’s illusionary identification with dominant culture to disidentification is a recurrent pattern in Lee’s work. In Lee’s second novel, A Gesture Life, the narrator and protagonist, Hata, is Korean Japanese American. The reader is told that born in Korea and adopted to a Japanese family, Hata served as a medical officer in Japan’s imperial army during World War II before migrating to the U.S. Seemingly, Hata has been successfully assimilated into the American nation, dutifully performing as the “model minority” and enjoying an upper-middle class life as a reward. But the novel offers a counter-narrative by calling Hata’s life “a gesture life.” A Gesture Life opens with a firm affirmation of Hata’s belonging in America: “People know me here” (1). At the end of the novel, however, Hata leaves his two-story Tudor house in suburbia that he previously considered his “home.” In the conclusion to the novel, Lee implies the illusionary nature of Hata’s belonging: “I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home” (356, my emphasis). This concluding sentence presents “home” as
something yet to be found, making a sharp contrast with the opening sentence that underscores Hata’s feeling at home in American culture. Lee’s Korean American male characters are exceptionally able to assimilate, and his narratives progress as they recognize it as a problem.

Once Lee represents Henry’s successful *bildung* as a problem, he gestures towards a more ambivalent relationship between immigrant subjectivity and the American nation than the *bildungsroman* has traditionally depicted. By the end of *Native Speaker*, Henry quits his spying job and reconciles with his white wife, Lelia. In the concluding scene, he serves as a teaching aide in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class taught by Lelia. He enters this disciplinary space as “part of her materials, the day’s curriculum” (348). In the classroom, Henry acts as the “Speech Monster” who would “gobble up kids but […] cower when anyone repeats the day’s secret phrase, which Lelia has them practice earlier” (348). At the end of class,

Lelia gives each one a sticker. She uses the class list to write their names inside the sunburst-shaped badge. Everybody, she says, has been a good citizen. She will say the name, quickly write on the sticker, and then have me press it to each of their chests as they leave. It is a line of quiet faces. I take them down in my head. Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are. (349)

Chu contends that this scene asserts “the Americanness of non-English speakers” but also implies that “this Americanness is implicitly contingent on their learning English” (3). Indeed, there is an unresolved tension in this concluding scene. On the one hand, there is an affirmation of immigrant identity that is not to be normalized—“the difficult names of who we are,” which Henry identifies himself with by using “we.” On the other hand, this affirmation is granted only after each immigrant pupil has been “a good citizen” and learned how to “properly” speak English—as if it were a reward of assimilation. Lelia calls herself “the standard-bearer” and a cultural authority (12). If she purports to appreciate the pupils’ immigrant identity, she also
The novel thus seems to suggest that, in the end, expressing immigrant identity depends on the ability to speak the official language (“proper” English in this case) because it is tantamount to the ability to make oneself understood and belong and have access to power.

Chu interprets this ending scene as a contradiction to the entire novel because it “symbolically reaffirms the beliefs that it elsewhere denies—that these pupils of English will one day be assimilated subjects” (3). I propose an alternative interpretation by reading the concluding paragraph in connection to a remark that Henry makes upon finishing his last duty as a spy. Having just been officially released from the intelligence firm, Henry reflects on the implications of his spying: “My ugly immigrant’s truth […] is that I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. This forever is my burden to bear” (319–20). The confessional tone, however, quickly changes to an assertive and declarative one as he focuses on “another dimension” of immigrant identity:

But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (320, my emphasis)

Not only does this passage signal a turning point in Henry’s career but it also anticipates his next move, clarifying the ending scene of the novel. Henry places himself and immigrants (signified by “we”) in an ambivalent relation to the nation, implying that they are at once “perilous and dutiful brethren”—both the “yellow peril” and “the model minority.”

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5 Chu similarly notes Lelia’s interpellation in this scene and points out that “only Lelia is empowered to recognize the children and speak all their languages, while Henry, her husband, is merely her assistant” (3).
Native Speaker thus indicates that “every lesson of accent and idiom” of the dominant language can be mastered and mimicked to express minority experience. In so doing, Lee constructs an Asian American identity as a kind of double-speaker of English, or Bhabha’s “mimic man.” In his influential essay, “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha explores how mimicry can be “a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (86). He explains that mimicking subjects “partially” identify themselves with disciplinary authorities and resemble them. Because of its partiality, however, the identification is only “incomplete” and “virtual,” leaving the subjects at the ambivalent site of “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, “Mimicry” 86, original emphasis). What is not subsumed in the identification emerges as difference, the “excess” that cannot be assimilated. Thus, “mimicry represents an ironic compromise,” in which colonial subjects make “a double articulation” (Bhabha, “Mimicry” 86, original emphasis). Henry claims America as his own: “By rights I am as American as anyone” (335). “And yet” he also realizes that he “can never stop considering the pitch and drift of [immigrants’] forlorn boats on the sea” and “headlong voyages” (335). He decides to use his “American education” to narrate a suppressed story of the nation back to America, misusing or abusing English as a mimicking subject.

The ending of the novel suggests “an ironic compromise” or “a double articulation” that is based on the belief that “proper” English can be appropriated to deliver different stories than it prescribes. It is a compromise in the sense that it celebrates an irreducible immigrant identity while also implying that the celebration entails certain acquiescence to American cultural institutions that have the power to decide who is American and who is to be heard. The compromise is a product of immigrants’ needs that are often at odds with each other in reality, if not in theory: the need to be recognized as American, on the one hand, and to express unique
immigrant experience on the other. It is a strategic response to the cultural perception that Asian and American are mutually exclusive and Asian Americans are not real Americans, which inevitably poses an impossible choice between Asian and American. By transforming Henry from a well assimilated “model minority” to a mimicking subject who ambivalently appropriates English, *Native Speaker* diverges from the conventional bildungsroman. Through the revision of generic conventions, Lee complicates Asian Americans’ location in the American nation. But we need to examine Lee’s use of the spy novel and its related Asian American stereotype, the “yellow peril,” in order to fully understand how Lee conceives Asian American men’s location in America.

**The Perilous State: “Yellow-peril: neo-American”**

The novel’s deviation from bildungsroman conventions is in a thematic continuum with its appropriation of the spy novel. In an interview for the *New York Times* (10 July 1995), Lee offers his own personal version of the same question as *Native Speaker* raises through the revision of the bildungsroman: “What have I done to assimilate? […] Did I so desperately want to belong so much that I did things—like refusing to translate for my mother, like going to Exeter, like dating white women—for that reason? […] I wonder about the betrayals I had made—to myself, to my family” (“Being” B4). Lee adds, “I’ve always thought of myself as a spy—a watcher, a listener” (“Being” B4). In the interview, Lee associates a misplaced desire for cultural *bildung* with spying, which Henry literally enacts in *Native Speaker*. At the same time, by characterizing the spy as “a watcher, a listener”—which Henry certainly is—he indicates that his ethnic spy diverges from the traditional spy figure.

In *Native Speaker*, Lee is extremely conscious of generic conventions of the spy novel and portrays his ethnic spy as almost a counter-figure to the conventional spy. And the characterization of Henry does not simply parody the conventional spy, but it also symbolizes
the consequence of Henry’s compliance to a racially assigned role. Noting that the popularity of conventional spies such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond derives from excessive displays and spectacles, Tina Chen explains that “[h]owever unrealistic, one of [the spy novel’s] primary conventions involves the nature of the protagonist as hero and the representation of his mission as dangerous and exciting” (155). But Henry and his colleagues are not interested in anything heroic or spectacular. In the beginning of *Native Speaker*, Henry introduces his espionage firm as follows:

In a phrase, we were spies. But the sound of that is all wrong. *We weren’t the kind of figures you naturally thought of or maybe even hoped existed.* […] We pledged allegiance to no government. We weren’t ourselves political creatures. We weren’t patriots. Even less, heroes. We systematically overassessed risk, made it a bad word. Guns spooked us. Jack kept a pistol in his desk but it didn’t work. We knew nothing of weaponry, torture, psychological warfare, extortion, electronics, supercomputers, explosives. Never anything like that. (17, my emphasis)

Henry knows exactly what readers of spy novels expect and cautions them that he is a different kind of spy (Chen 157). Instead of displaying spectacular actions as conventional heroic spies would, Henry watches, listens, and writes reports. What makes him a good spy is his ability to “stay in the background” and “know [the] effective size in a given situation” (44, 172, original emphasis). Henry has become a good spy as a result of his racial vulnerability and the fear of being singled out for his yellow face and perceived foreign accent.6

Although Lelia calls Henry a “yellow peril: neo American,” Lee decouples the “yellow peril” from the stereotype of the sinister Asian working against the American nation. Taken at face value, the characterization of Henry as “yellow peril” is conventional because the stereotype has been traditionally associated with the sinister Asian spy. However, Lee appropriates the stereotype as a multi-layered and embedded trope to problematize the idea of white America that

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6 Chen maintains that Henry is hyper-visible and invisible at once. For a detailed discussion about Henry’s paradoxical racial in/visibility, see Chen 159–64.
has denied Asian Americans’ full membership. John C. Hawley writes that Henry “consciously becomes what many Caucasians in American society suspect him of being: a voyeur, an untrustworthy ingratator who smiles and smiles and all the while is looking for information to use against the native Caucasians” (189). Henry is a “voyeur,” for sure, but his spying does not operate against “the native Caucasians.” Hoagland’s espionage firm has diverse shadowy clients ranging from the INS to “multinational corporations, bureaus of foreign governments, individuals of resource and connection” (18). *Native Speaker* describes two subjects Henry has spied on: Emile Luzan, “a primary organizer of small New York-based Filipino-American movement for Ferdinand Marcos’ return to the homeland” and the Korean American politician, Kwang (42–43). Henry and his immigrant co-workers in the multiethnic intelligence agency express a downright refusal of political allegiance and detachment from a national scheme. He does not operate between two antagonistic nations as Cold War era spies would. Neither does he intrigue against the American nation as Asian spies in American popular culture (like Fu Manchu) would. Instead, he spies on immigrants generally in the service of American governmental operations—for instance, the INS in Kwang’s case.

Distinguishing Henry from stereotypical Asian agents as well as conventional spies, Lee opposes the logic behind the “yellow peril” in favor of a principle of hybridity. If Henry is a “Yellow peril: neo-American,” it is not because of his spying *per se*, but because of the disruption he brings to the notion of national purity through miscegenation. Significantly, Mitt, Henry’s bi-racial son with his Caucasian wife, is suffocated to death in a dog pile game. Mitt’s death allegorizes the suffocation of miscegenation, racial hybridity, and heterogeneity. Lelia poignantly comments on the idea of racial purity imposed too heavily for racial hybrids like Mitt to survive: “Maybe it’s that Mitt wasn’t all white or all yellow. […] Maybe the world wasn’t
ready for him” (129). This literal as well as figurative suffocation of Mitt’s hybrid body preludes what is at stake in the public sphere, which the spy sub-plot foregrounds as it follows Kwang’s downfall and the deportation of undocumented immigrants. Lee establishes a parallel between the suffocation of Mitt’s hybrid body and that of a hybrid national body.

Kwang’s attempt at full inclusion in American politics is thwarted by the “yellow peril” discourse recalibrated in a liberal multicultural context. Kwang’s story exposes the fact that the “yellow peril” stereotype functions by projecting perilous elements of the nation onto the Asian Other that can be visually singled out, defined as “alien,” and then expelled, in order to maintain the national imaginary of the homogenous nation. Kwang, an aspiring Korean American politician and potential candidate for mayor of New York City, runs “a ‘permanent’ campaign” on which Henry is hired to spy by an anonymous client (84). After Kwang’s political demise, Henry finds out that his client is the INS that wants to obtain the list of Kwang’s ggeh members including “illegal” immigrants. When it is revealed that Kwang’s money club members include undocumented immigrants, Kwang is called a “smuggler” (331). Ultimately, these undocumented immigrants are deported and Kwang is exiled to Korea. When angry and “well organized” people surround Kwang’s house, they articulate what many Americans have

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7 This idea that the world is not ready for hybrids between Caucasian and Asian races is recurrent in Lee’s works. In his later novel, Aloft, the narrator, who is white, married a Korean woman, who we are told has died. Their bi-racial daughter is married to a Korean American and she faces a difficult decision between her own life and her unborn baby; in either case, a hybrid between Caucasian and Asian races will die. In an interview published a few months after Native Speaker’s publication, Lee said that Mitt’s death “represented the end of ‘a way of thinking about the future,’ the idea that maybe the time was not quite right for such a ‘subversive, historic, unprecedented’ blending of ethnicities” (“Being” B4). Lee himself is married to a white woman. In the same interview, Lee who had no children at the time expressed his personal concern: “What are they going to think of us? […] I’ve already sort of steeled myself for them to resent it. ‘Why did you do this to me?’ Michelle is nervous too. She knows our kids will have an even more difficult time than I did” (B4).

8 Ggeh is a credit-based traditional Korean money club where members would deposit a small amount of money and take turns to get lump-sum money. Kwang runs the money club to help new immigrants make a start in America. It was through money clubs that early Korean Americans became farmers and business owners after having been migratory workers for years (Takaki 275–76). As Won Moo Hurh explains, “The history of this cooperative financial institution based on mutual trust and help goes back many centuries in Korea, and thus it is certainly part of the cultural heritage that Korean immigrants brought with them to the United Sates” (59).
historically suspected of a successful politician with an Asian face. They ask “how many of John Kwang’s money club members have stolen their jobs,” wanting “to kick every last one of them back to where they came from, kick him back with them, [and] let them drown in the ocean with ‘Smuggler Kwang’” (331). Their banner reads, “AMERICA FOR AMERICANS” (331). The rhetoric employed by the crowd is nothing unfamiliar: immigrants taking their jobs and a sinister Asian’s villainy finally revealed. The language is couched in heated patriotism. The crowd gathers to reclaim their country and “future” that supposedly have been put in peril by foreigners. Later, when revisiting Kwang’s house, which is now vacant, Henry hears a realtor describing its former residents: “Foreigners, she says. They went back to their country” (347). The perception that Asian Americans are “perpetual foreigners” makes both the crowd and the realtor conveniently ignore the fact that “John Kwang was also American” (148). To them, Kwang was a “foreigner” who infiltrated American politics, put the nation in peril, and was expelled before long—that is, another version of Fu Manchu.

This interchangeability of the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” is the very premise for Native Speaker as a spy novel. The INS hires Henry’s espionage firm under the assumption that Kwang is a potential menace with something to hide; what Henry as a spy is expected to uncover is that Kwang, a seeming “model minority,” is in fact an unassimilable, sinister Fu Manchu. Early in the novel, Kwang is introduced as “a self-made millionaire” who “[speaks] a beautiful, almost formal English” (23). People speak of “his integrity” and “his intelligence” (23). He is “impressive,” “irreproachable,” and “unbeatable” (23). A well-educated, self-disciplined, and successful Korean American, Kwang has made his own way from being a war orphan and houseboy. Kwang the “model minority” is now suspected to be a “yellow peril” undercover as he climbs the social ladder too successfully to remain a minority. As Henry says to
his co-worker, “when someone like Kwang attempts anything larger, there’s instant suspicion” (288). When “he wasn’t going to be just another ethnic pol from the outer boroughs, content and provincial” but instead “would stand up like a first citizen of these lands,” Kwang, who could have been an Asian American Horatio Alger protagonist, becomes a peril (303). The boundary between the “yellow peril” and the “model minority” is porous, and the move from the former to the latter is far from being irreversible. This interchangeability of the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” speaks to the discursiveness of national belonging.

Describing Kwang’s downfall, Lee brings into focus two different definitions of the nation, or two ways of constructing narratives of the nation. Contrary to what the crowd suggests, Kwang identifies himself as a quintessential American. Kwang’s self-defined relation to the American nation is not primarily based on the dramatic path of his life even though his career might serve as a ready “American Dream” story. Rather, he feels entitled to the nation “like a first citizen” because he identifies America as a nation of immigrants (303). Kwang’s view of the nation counters the crowd’s perspective in that he acknowledges “all the various [heterogeneous] peoples” as legitimate Americans constituting “the living voice” that “must always be renewed” (304). Liam Corley has explained these competing notions of the nation in Native Speaker in terms of “what Homi Bhabha describes as the pedagogic function of the nation-state in contrast to the performative challenge brought by Kwang” (69). Many contemporary theorists, especially after Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, have argued that the nation is a narration—a historically grounded discursive construction. Elaborating this thesis, Bhabha explores “a double narrative movement” in the narrative of the nation—the pedagogical and the performative (“DissemiNation” 145). According to him, there is an inherent split in the signification of the nation. The nation constructs the people as “a
pedagogical object” that is supposed to accept some *a priori* connection between the nation and the people. And yet, this pedagogical move is challenged by the people who conceive themselves as subjects of an ongoing signification of the nation and approach the nation-people relation in terms of “living principles” (“DissemiNation” 145). The pedagogical draws its narrative authority from the assumed natural connection between the nation and the people, creating the image of the people that is inherently cohesive inside and distinct from outside. On the other hand, the performative suggests that the nation is not only a changeable but also a changing construct, presenting the nation’s relation to the people not as a given entity but as a messy process.

Bhabha posits that migrants tend visibly to enact the performative relation to the nation due to their liminal location in the nation. Likewise, Henry portrays the immigrant population as “the living voice” that “must always be renewed.” With no *a priori* link to the nation, performative subjects must repeatedly “renew” their belonging in the nation. Henry depicts this constant renewal as a potentially enriching and yet painful task full of affirmation and vulnerability at once: “We live here. In the street the shouting is in a language we hardly know. […] The constant cry is that you belong here, or you make yourself belong, or you must go” (344). Henry hears their differently accented English speak one message—that they are making themselves belong here because, otherwise, they “must go.” Whereas “AMERICA FOR AMERICANS” presupposes a transparent relation between “America” and “Americans,” Henry’s affirmation of belonging (“We live here.”) is validated only by “[t]he constant cry” to earn belonging.

I have argued that by strategically blending the bildungsroman and the spy novel, Lee challenges not only the exclusionary nature of American nationalism but also the traditional
representations that register Asian American subjects either as the “model minority” or the “yellow peril.” He uses some stock images of Asian Americans, such as the Asian spy and the Asian family, as cultural references acceptable to the multicultural American reading public. Yet, through hybridization, he also generates excessive significations that are not reducible to those stock images. In the following section, I turn to the problem of Asian American male authoring which Lee’s construction of authorship raises, because he self-consciously establishes a parallel between Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring.

**Asian American Male Authoring**

From the inception of Asian American studies, Asian American male writers have aligned Asian American authorship with Asian American masculinity. Contending controversially that “[t]he mere fact that four of the five American-born Chinese-American writers are women reinforces” the stereotype of effeminate Asian America, the “founding fathers” of Asian American studies, Frank Chin and Jeffery Chan defined “masculine qualities” not only as “daring, physical courage” but also as “originality” and “creativity” (“Racist” 68). As a creative writer of novels and plays as well as literary critic and editor of the first anthology of Asian American literature, Chin engaged with Asian American canon formation when Asian American studies were first being institutionalized on U.S. university campuses.⁹ For Chin, constructing an Asian American identity was intricately related to defining a recognized style of Asian American manhood, both of which he tried to accomplish by founding an Asian American literary tradition and connecting authorship and manhood—that is, by creating a new male

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⁹ Asian American studies programs were first established in 1968 on American university campuses, at San Francisco State College and the University of California at Berkeley. For more about the institutionalization of Asian American studies, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 35–38.
literary lineage and becoming a literary patriarch. It has been a critical commonplace to read the female body as a metaphor for the country or the land to be preserved or conquered. Chu has expanded this argument, interpreting the white female as a symbol of “the American cultural establishment with which the Asian American male author must negotiate in order to establish both his literary authority and his Asian American subjectivity” (28). In what she calls “the immigrant romance,” “Americanness is conflated with authorship” and the white woman mediates “the immigrant and his aspirations to claim membership in America through literary authorship” (90). In this sense, an Asian American male’s desire for the white woman is closely linked to “a racialized anxiety of authorship in America” (Chu 28). Chu’s argument helps explain the gendered project of establishing (political and literary) authorship which Native Speaker foregrounds.

The allusions to authoring abound in the novel. As has been frequently noted by reviewers and critics, the narrator Henry is very much like a writer and storyteller. “A good spy is but the secret writer,” says Henry, equating spying and writing (198). He sees himself as “the most prodigal and mundane of historians” and “a compiler of lives” who is “writing a new book of the land” (18, 279). The politician Kwang claims that “the politics, especially minority politics, remain cast in terms that barely acknowledge us. It’s an old syntax” (196). Henry and Kwang present themselves as authors of “a new book of the land” and a new political “syntax.” The desire for authorship constitutes a critical aspect of Lee’s idea of “home.” Authorship is necessary for an Asian American man’s feeling “like a first citizen” and a “founding father” in

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10 According to Chu, the “author-hero myth” that Chin’s Asian American masculinity is based on parallels what Nina Baym identifies as a definitive characteristic of American literary canon formation—the “melodrama of best manhood” (67). I would add that the “artist-hero” type of masculinity is found in British literature as well, most prominently in Thomas Carlyle’s “The Hero as Poet” lecture included in On Heroes, and Hero-Worship. For a detailed discussion on the equation of Asian American masculinity, fathering, and authoring in Chin’s idea, see Chu, chapter 2. For Baym’s argument, see her “Melodramas of Best Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” American Quarterly 33.2 (Summer 1981): 123–39.
his new land. In this project of constructing Asian American male authorship, the white woman serves as a cultural arbiter that the Asian American man has to negotiate with instead of simply preserving or conquering. In this interwoven configuration of race and gender, as I will contend, the Asian woman in Native Speaker is relegated to the position of the abject on which the Asian American man may project his own racial frustration.

**Authoring, Fathering, Homing**

Asian American male writers have often employed “the tropes of authoring as fathering and self-authoring as self-fathering,” the tropes that reflect their sense of fatherless state and the need to become fathers themselves in the new land (Chu 42). Native Speaker is replete with concerns over fatherhood and progeny. Because the “old syntax” of politics denies him as a legitimate heir to America and there is no working model for Korean American politicians, Kwang makes himself the author of a new political “syntax” that is based on racial coalitions of heterogeneous ethnic groups. Not surprisingly, Lee describes Kwang’s political project in terms of fatherhood. The money club that embodies Kwang’s political ideal is “his one enduring vanity, a system paternal, how in the beginning people would come right to the house and ask for some money and his blessing […] like other people get an inheritance” (334). Henry “wonder[s] if [he] could ever desire as much from this land” (334). Contrasted here are America, the rejecting father who will not provide immigrants, and Kwang’s alternative fatherhood. The second-generation immigrant Henry finds his Confucian Korean father an obsolete and ineffective model for fatherhood. Kwang has become a sort of spiritual father for Henry, but Henry betrays Kwang by being instrumental in Kwang’s political demise and exile, thus leaving himself fatherless. In addition, Henry is denied fatherhood as Mitt dies.

Henry’s anxiety over fatherhood and progeny is intricately related to his undermined masculinity as a result of his racial status. Asian American men have been stereotypically seen as
effeminate because of the gendered perception of Asia—the passive feminine East versus the
penetrating masculine West. The fact that many early Asian Americans had vocations
traditionally considered as feminine, such as cooks, laundrymen, and grocers, has also fortified
the stereotype of the effeminate Asian (American) man. Furthermore, racial disenfranchisement
and exclusion from the public domain are often conceived as symbolic castration. As Elaine Kim
has explained, “Among Koreans, both men and women are considered full-fledged adult
members of the community only when they become parents” and “enforced childlessness for
Asian immigrant men was condemnation to a life of perpetual boyhood in their communities” (74).
The trope of fatherhood in Native Speaker is an anxiety-ridden site of Asian American
manhood. It signifies the desire for a new lineage that is racially more amenable to Asian
American male subjectivity. Like Kwang’s project of fathering a multiethnic immigrant
organization and Henry’s fathering of Mitt, Lee’s literary project of hybridizing literary genres
and stereotypes represents this desire for a heterogeneous literary lineage. If Conrad conceives an
alternative mode of lineage based upon affiliation in Under Western Eyes, Lee embraces
hybridity as a principle of immigrant authorship in Native Speaker.

Both Kwang’s project of creating a new political lineage and Lee’s project of
constructing immigrant authorship utilize the trope of the Asian family as an ethnic resource. Lee
portrays Kwang as a Korean American who speaks for immigrants beyond his ethnicity, whether
documented or not. For Kwang, immigrant identity—being a newcomer—outweighs difference
in race and national origins. Lee’s description of Kwang’s constituency, indicating the visibly
multicultural New York and U.S. population, implies certain representational dilemmas Kwang
faces. Kwang represents undocumented immigrant workers who cannot be heard and politically

11 Song, a Chinese man who passes as a woman in David Henry Hwang’s M Butterfly, succinctly says: “I am an
Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man” (83).
counted, or “those who are unrepresentable” (R. Lee, “Reading” 342). In addition, he means to affiliate heterogeneous racial and ethnic groups whose interests are likely to contradict as much as coincide. Kwang attempts to solve, or rather transcend, both representational problems by employing the rhetoric of the family. He presents himself as a charismatic yet giving father figure and embraces immigrants as a sort of extended family, “which in its most elemental version must have nothing to do with blood” (146). About his money club, he emphatically says, “This is a family” (279, original emphasis). Kwang thus conflates the traditional Korean money club, the family, and the multiethnic immigrant community, to envision a model after which the public might be reorganized. He believes in the universal power of the family across cultures along with all the sentiments it conjures up—a sense of safety, belonging, unconditional love, and trust that the hostile new world seems to deny to immigrants.

Kwang’s conception of family also echoes anachronistically the ideal of the private sphere represented in Victorian domestic novels—an apolitical and safe place in opposition to the competitive, harsh, and tumultuous public domain. In the nineteenth century, as Nancy Armstrong discusses, the private paradoxically played a political role by providing “the complement and antidote to” the political world (48). The family served as “the ‘counterimage’ of the modern marketplace, an apolitical realm of culture within the culture as a whole” (Armstrong 48). Kwang imbues this image of the family into his money club and his political camp in order to create “a system paternal” that, he erroneously envisions, would transcend political considerations (334). But Henry is doubtful of the seamless extension of the family into the public sphere: “But can you really make a family of thousands? One that will last”? (326) In fact, the money club turns out to be the primary reason for Kwang’s political demise. Identifying Kwang’s idea of family as “distinctly Korean,” Daniel Kim reads a “liberal Asian American
political fantasy” in Kwang’s vision that, he contends, Lee ultimately undermines as a fantasy through the failure of Kwang’s project (244–45). According to him, “the fantasy here is that a figure like Kwang not only could preside over such a coalition but could infuse it as well with an undiluted yet transmuted sense of Korean-ness” (244). Through Kwang’s failed political experiment, Lee refuses the idea that racial “authenticity” could be an effective racial minority’s strategy in the political arena where it is perceived as an immediate threat to the nation.

For his literary authorship, however, Lee represented the supposedly “authentic” Asian family in order to lure multicultural American readers into this work. In 1995 when Native Speaker was published, The New Yorker carried Lee’s autobiographical essay, “Family Life: Coming Home Again.” In the essay, he recollects the last days of his dying mother and his earlier childhood memories related to her. He recounts how he resented his immigrant mother, who seemed “always there, as if she were confined to the four walls of our house” (167, original emphasis). She would ask him to call the banker because she was afraid of speaking English. The essay also depicts how the mother felt proud of, and estranged from, Lee as he was getting

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12 Lee’s mother was a full-time housewife like Henry’s mother in Native Speaker. Lee’s father was a surgeon in Korea and became a psychiatrist after the family immigrated to New York in the late 1960s. Medical professionals constituted a big Korean immigrant population after the 1965 Immigration Act and 20–25% of them were concentrated in New York City in 1980 (Takaki 438–39). The fact that Lee’s mother was a full-time housewife, in part, has to do with the family’s unchanged class status after immigration. While Lee’s father was able to continue his medical profession after immigration, many college graduates who occupied white-collar jobs in Korea became small business owners in American (Hurh 60). Henry’s father in Native Speaker fits this general pattern of post-1965 Korean “family immigration” to America; in the novel, Henry’s greengrocer father “graduated from the best college in Korea, the very top,” and he was “trained as an industrial engineer” and “completed a master’s degree” (56–57). Henry’s mother says that being a greengrocer is “below him” (56).

A full-time housewife was probably not uncommon in Korean American immigrant households that, like Lee’s family, could retain white-collar professions. But it was not typical in families that ran small businesses like Henry’s family. Hurh explains that Korean American small business owners resorted to “the availability and effective utilization of class, ethnic, and family resources” and “more than half (58%) of the spouses of Korean American small business owners in the Chicago area worked at their family stores without pay” (59, 60 original emphasis). He also points out that “about 75% of Korean immigrant wives in the United States [were] employed” (based on “Korean community studies in the Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York areas” in the 1980s and early 1990s). The employment rate of Korean American wives [had] been much higher than that of American married women in general” (88). The fact that Henry’s mother is described as a full-time housewife in Native Speaker seems a reflection of Lee’s family more than Henry’s family.
an American education. What he most dearly remembers in the essay is how he watched her
cooking Korean food in his childhood, how he cooked for her during her last days, and how his
parents brought homemade Korean food to Exeter at their first school visit. If the essay is about
heartfelt filial love and memory, it is also about the reconnecting power of Korean food at
moments of estrangement. The accompanying drawing that covers a whole page shows a big
table full of Korean dishes, with a woman in the traditional Korean costume and an Asian boy
sitting at the table, adding to the ethnic flavor of the story. Unlike Kwang’s use of the Asian
family, Lee’s “Family Life: Coming Home Again” provides an unthreatening story of an ethnic
life well tolerated and even promoted by multicultural America.

The publisher’s marketing of Native Speaker was also geared towards highlighting Lee’s
comfortable ethnicity. As Corley has pointed out, Native Speaker was published as the first book
by Riverhead Books, a New York based imprint by the international publishing house, Penguin
Putnam. The publisher says that the goal of Riverhead included “open[ing] readers up to new
ideas and points of view” and the “success [of Native Speaker] quickly established Riverhead
internationally as a house to watch for up-and-coming young fiction writers.”13 The original
cover of the novel—which contains a simplified portrait of a distinctly Asian adult male face, a
small photograph of an Asian boy dressed like a cowboy, and the ambiguous title, Native
Speaker, on the front, and a black-and-white photograph of the young writer aged 28 at the time,
on the back—conveys the newness and commodifiable multiculturalism hinted by the
publisher’s goal (Corley 70–71). Borrowing Dorinne Kondo’s distinction between “western
forms of orientalism, autoexoticisms by Asian subjects, and counter-orientalisms,” Corley argues
that “Lee’s commodification as an author within the publishing industry’s code of orientalism”

13 All quotations about Riverhead Books are taken from their website: <http://us.penguin.com/static/html/
aboutus/adult/riverhead.html>.
does not “eliminate the contestory value that may result from the counter-orientalisms deployed in his text, even as certain autoexoticisms within the text insure that Native Speaker is read as a novel with a commodifiable difference” (71–72). I agree with Corley that the counter-orientalism and the auto-exoticism in the novel do not cancel out each other. Instead, they illustrate the ways in which Lee fashions his Asian American identity by revising generic conventions and racial stereotypes while, at the same time, he is fashioned by the publishing industry and the multicultural readership.

The plight of representing immigrant experience for a larger audience manifests itself in the ambiguity of the cover of the book. The cover might accentuate the book’s selling point—a novel book by an ethnic writer that would “open readers up to new ideas and points of view,” or “an artful meditation on ethnic identity, fractured loyalties, and cultural confusion,” as a blurb included in the paperback edition of the novel describes it. At the same time, the book title, Native Speaker, written under the Asian faces might be interpreted as a confirmation of the message the book purports to send—that the Asian faces featured on the cover are native speakers. The tension between counter-orientalisms and autoexoticisms is not resolved within the novel. But the ambiguity itself speaks to the racially ambivalent location of Asian American subjectivity that is an insider / outsider of American culture.

The use of the Asian family in Native Speaker is a form of auto-exoticism that displays “a commodifiable difference,” and yet it also serves as leverage for delivering the counter-orientalism expressed in the spy element of the novel. For Lee, then, the Asian family is not an opposite of Americanness but a means of getting into the American public sphere and reorganizing it. As mentioned earlier, most reviewers of Native Speaker were drawn to Lee’s

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auto-exoticized depiction of Henry’s immigrant family and overlooked the significance of the character of Kwang. It is no coincidence that Henry’s Asian family is a major site of Lee’s auto-exoticism whereas the story of Kwang foregrounds the exclusiveness of the American nation. *Native Speaker* utilizes auto-exoticism, which was marketed and received as ethnic “authenticity” and a comfortable ethnic difference (considered as a good thing in the age of liberal multiculturalism), to introduce the counter-orientalism expressed in the story of Kwang’s political career and undocumented immigrants. Lee’s use of the Asian family, the site of his auto-exoticism, helps him address the national audience and build his authorship, which is a parallel project of establishing a style of Asian American manhood. In the following section, I argue that this Asian American manhood is fashioned through the abjection of the Asian woman, on the one hand, and the negotiation with the American feminine, on the other.

**Women at Home**

Henry’s mother and the unnamed housekeeper, whom Henry’s father brings from Korea after the death of Henry’s mother, are described as not only unwilling but unable to assimilate. The mother exists primarily to maintain a Korean home where the father can recuperate his cultural competency and masculine authority after having tolerated racist customers during the day. The reader does not really see her as an immigrant because she is described primarily as a Korean—not a Korean American. Entirely confined to the private sphere, she diligently cooks Korean food and teaches Henry to appreciate his father’s sacrifice for the family. Not surprisingly, Henry recalls his mother’s death as “more a disappearance than a death” (77). The unnamed woman who replaces the mother is also “[t]ucked away in the hyperfeminized private sphere,” and both “women are denied any meaningful access to the public sphere” (Park and Wald 265). When the housekeeper arrives at Henry’s house, the reader is told that she “had transported homemade food thousands of miles, all the way from Korea” (62). The mother and
the housekeeper embody the “motherland” or “back there in Asia.” Having delivered Korean

culture to Henry’s family, she fulfils her assigned role by maintaining a small Korea in the
private domain until her death.

In fact, the Korean housekeeper “has been imported as part of a plan for the family’s
‘move-up’” (Park and Wald 276). The father explains to Henry that he brought the housekeeper
because “soon we move to nice neighborhood, […] big house and yard” (64). When Henry
protests that he would hate living in a “rich” neighborhood, the father proudly says that they are
now “rich” and he already paid for the house in “all cash” (64). The new house in the suburban
neighborhood symbolizes the father’s desire for a “real” American life, and he sees a Korean
woman as necessary to attaining that goal. As Henry recognizes, “she was the one who really
moved us from the old house,” and thus is the person who literally moves the family into a
higher level of assimilation (65). Paradoxically, however, the housekeeper herself remains
unassimilated and unassimilable. Culturally unviable and deprived of interiority, she is radically
excluded from the national imaginary of America even though she facilitates—and indeed
enables—the father’s and Henry’s “move-up” towards the “real” American life. Native Speaker
suggests that the Korean American woman, the embodiment of the “motherland” and the private
sphere, is essential to Korean American men’s participation in American public life, to which she
herself has no direct access.

Henry’s recollection of the housekeeper predominantly consists of her uncanny and
stubborn foreignness:

For years I had no idea what she did on her day off; she’d go walking somewhere,
maybe the two miles into town though I couldn’t imagine what she did there
because she never learned three words of English. Finally, one dull summer
before I left for college, a friend and I secretly followed her. We trailed her on
the road into the center of the town, into the village of Ardsley. She went into
Rocky’s Corner newsstand and bought a glossy teen magazine and a red Popsicle.
She flipped through the pages, obviously looking only at the pictures. She ate the Popsicle like it was a hot dog, in three large bites. “She’s a total alien,” my friend said. “She’s completely bizarre.” (78, my emphasis)

The woman’s foreignness, however, is not something Henry innocently recalls. Rather, he fashions his Asian American subjectivity by abjecting the woman. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva theorizes abjection as part of the process of establishing self. According to her, the abject, like filth or refuse, is something that is indispensable to one’s self but drastically “jettisoned” and “expelled” because it is neither wanted nor assimilated. Through abjection, one “ejects” what s/he is not and, in so doing, defines what s/he is—or rather what s/he wants him or herself to be. As Kristeva states, “abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin” (*Powers 5*). In other words, the abject is the familiar that is declared and refused as unfamiliar—the reverse process of Freud’s uncanny, which takes place when the unfamiliar is found familiar.

Asian American critics have used the concept of abjection in order to elaborate the gender politics of Asian American literature. Chu, for instance, says that Asian American males often “abject the Asian feminine as a response to their own abjection as racialized others in the eyes of mainstream Americans” (11). Chu’s observation is particularly helpful in explaining how race and gender collaborate to construct subjectivity. While Asian Americans in general have been characterized as unassimilable and privatized in the American cultural imagination, Henry projects those characteristics on the Asian feminine. Henry’s compromised status vis-à-vis “legitimate” Americans in the public sphere results in the construction of the Asian feminine as fundamentally unassimilable and hyper-privatized, against which he establishes himself as American. When he recalls how he could not stand “the stench of overripe kimchee” the woman brought and how “[s]he’s always been a mystery to [him],” he opposes himself to the Asian
feminine and rejects it as unfamiliar (62, 72). The unnamed woman represents everything that he
does not want to be—everything that he fears Americans might identify him with. Telling and
retelling how the unnamed woman is “alien” and “bizarre,” Henry measures how far he has
become American.

As Kristeva explains, the abject is unnamable because it exists prior to and beyond
meaning; the abject confuses the division of subject and object and it presents itself as a
nonsense. However, there is also a cultural dimension to the fact that the housekeeper is never
named in Native Speaker. Henry’s Caucasian wife, Lelia, is troubled to find that Henry does not
know the woman’s name when she virtually raised him after the mother died. In defense, Henry
explains that “there weren’t moments in our language […] when the woman’s name could have
naturally come out” and that “‘Ah-juh-ma’ literally aunt, but more akin to ‘ma’am’ [is] the
customary address to an unrelated Korean woman” (69). Unconvinced of Henry’s explanation,
Lelia decides to talk to the woman, having Henry translate. After the woman bluntly refuses to
talk with the “American wife,” Lelia “[corners] the woman in the laundry room and [tries] to
communicate with her,” which turns to a total fiasco, making both women cry (71). Well
intended as it is, Lelia’s approach to the Korean woman betrays a certain fantasy of white
middle-class feminism; Lelia assumes that she knows what is good for the unnamed woman and
she could get the woman her name back that Korean men fail to appreciate.

The scene bears a structural resemblance with colonial narratives where white men and
women would come to rescue colored women from oppressive or simply ignorant colonized
men. In both cases, the colored woman is figured as the victim who needs to be enlightened and
saved by a racial superior. In this scene from Native Speaker, however, the triangle structure is
revised because a white woman (Lelia), not a man, assumes the role of liberator. When the
housekeeper refuses to be “liberated” and literally drives Lelia away, Lelia now assumes the authoritative voice to define the unnamed woman. Despite the Korean woman’s unconcealed hostility, Lelia feels that she has come to understand the woman after the confrontation. Lelia says, “She’s not a mystery to me, Henry, […] I know who she is. […] She’s an abandoned girl” (72–73). The housekeeper is thus defined as “an abandoned girl,” and Lelia’s naming, as one might call it, becomes authoritative because *Native Speaker* does not provide any other version, let alone one from the Korean woman herself. When the confrontation is over, Henry comforts Lelia, apologizing for the unnamed woman’s behavior: “Try to take it easy. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say about her” (72). Although the confrontation scene can be read as Lee’s criticism of western feminism, Lelia is quickly re-assigned to the role of the avatar of American cultural authority with whom Henry needs to negotiate to become a “real” American.

Even though the family is commonly assumed to be somehow politically neutral, and in this case, harmlessly ethnic, it plays a critical role in Henry’s imagining of the nation. In fact, the family is a prime site for Henry’s Americanization because his Americanness is measured against the unnamed woman and mediated by Lelia. The white female body in Asian American texts can be explained in terms of what Patricia Ann Sakurai calls “the trophy paradigm”—the female body as a symbol of Asian American man’s successful assimilation (qtd. in Chu 28). To Henry’s father, for example, the white female body is a token of assimilation and acceptance. The father believed that the American “girl [Henry] was taking to the eighth-grade Spring Dance didn’t—couldn’t—find [Henry] attractive” because of his “funny face” and “funny eyes” (73). The (supposedly white) American female represented to Henry’s father something unattainable to Asian American men like Henry. When a white woman (Lelia) did find Henry attractive, to Henry’s surprise, the father “would show her around,” introduce her to his Korean American co-
workers, “tell them proudly in English that she was his daughter,” and “hug her and ask [Henry] to take pictures” (57–58). Contrary to Henry’s expectation that his father would oppose the interracial marriage, “he liked the fact that Lelia was white” (58). Henry’s father “genuinely liked Lelia,” but he saw the marriage as a pragmatically wise decision rather than a romantic union (57). The father presumed that Henry wanted to marry Lelia because “Lelia and her family would help [Henry] make [his] way in the land” (58). Henry’s father equated Henry’s acceptance by the white female with his acceptance by the American nation, and thus the white female with the American land.

To Henry, however, the white female represents something more than a “trophy” of assimilation. The fact that Lelia is a language teacher and “the standard-bearer” suggests that she is an embodiment of American culture. Narrating his first encounter with Lelia at a party, Henry mentions Lelia’s extreme whiteness (“she was very white, the skin of her shoulder almost blue, opalescent, unbelievably pale” [9]) and describes how he “was immediately drawn to her” (10). He describes the “sensuality” of Lelia’s English, recalling how he “watched her wide full mouth sweep through her sentences like a figure touring a dark house, flipping on spots and banks of perfectly drawn light” (10–11). To Henry, Lelia’s English is an important source of attraction. While he is attracted to her beautiful English, Lelia observes that Henry speaks “perfectly” but not like “a native speaker” because he speaks “so deliberately” (12). Their conversation about speaking English is followed by his kissing her. Lelia’s whiteness, her “proper” English, and her sexuality transfuse and reinforce one another. Henry’s romance with Lelia is inseparable from his “half-blind romance with the land,” more specifically, the romance with American culture, especially with the language that Lelia embodies (267). What Henry desires is the intimacy with American culture, which might be achieved through the intimacy with “the lengthy Anglican
goddess,” Lelia (15). *Native Speaker* begins with Henry’s estrangement from Lelia, and throughout the novel, he struggles to be united with her anew. Towards the end of the novel, Henry and Lelia seem to reach rapprochement. But he accepts “a happy distance” as a part of this rapprochement (347). The “game” he plays with Lelia recapitulates the temporary and unstable nature of Henry’s acceptance to American culture: “We play this game in which I am her long-term guest. Permanently visiting. That she likes me okay and bears my presence, but who can know for how long?” (347) Henry understands that the re-established relationship is only temporary, requiring constant renewals.

Lee’s revision of literary conventions of the bildungsroman and the spy novel could be understood as a project of authoring a new, more heterogeneous, literary “syntax” that helps him enter the American literary scene—a project that involves the criticism of the exclusiveness of the American public sphere at the expense of the auto-exoticism of the Asian family. Lee uses the Asian family as an immigrant plot in order to enter the public realm with minimal cultural resistance. Kwang’s utilization of the traditional Korean money club is invested in claiming America as his “home.” Likewise, Lee’s representation of the Asian family is invested in his claim to literary citizenship. At the same time, *Native Speaker* represents American and Asian cultures as more negotiable and adaptable cultural resources for Asian American male authorship, implying that American and Asian cultures are undeniably implicated in Asian American identity. Lee views national inclusion as a central component of Asian American subjectivity as well as Asian American masculinity. Yet he addresses the question of political and literary citizenship through a transnational imagining, that is, by offering Korean culture in an acceptable form to the American public. While *Native Speaker* is spatially set within the U.S. national boundary, the novel suggests, “the imagining of America is simultaneously the
imagining of Asia,” in this case the imagining of Korea (R. Lee, *Americas* 6). As an immigrant writer, Lee fashions his Asian American identity not only by incorporating his immigrant perspective on the American nation but also by negotiating with the cultural perception of Asia in the American public mind. Lelia and the unnamed Korean housekeeper, who represent American cultural institutions and Korean culture respectively, are important in this project of Asian American male authoring, but they are important as a cultural mid-wife and a facilitator rather than as actors. In this gendered racial framework, Lee presents Asian American inclusion and Asian American authoring as manly projects, and in so doing, he reinstates the masculine narrative of the American nation.
CHAPTER 5
CODA

[...] home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference.
— bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics 148

My reading of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee began with a premise that seemed quite evident to me at the time: “home” is “no longer just once place” but “locations” that not only enable but also limit one’s perspective. What has emerged in the course of this study, however, is the complexity of the seemingly simple claim. The complexity stemmed, in large part, from the particularity embedded in the definition of “location.” Approaching “home” as locations has made me pay close attention to the specificity of the historical and cultural context, which gives meaning to the particular positions occupied by the migrant writers. In a way, I have reached the same conclusion as J. Nicholas Entrikin: “to understand place as context is to recognize that from the objective viewpoint of the theorist, no essence or universal structure of place exists to be uncovered or discovered” (3). Instead, what I have discovered in each writer’s idea of “home” are articulations of multiple locations that are not only resistant to generalization but also often incommensurable with one another. Conrad’s positions with regard to English culture, the British Empire, and Poland do not necessarily provide a coherent narrative of “home.” It is hard to reconcile, for instance, his ardent appeal for Polish nationhood with the apathy to Irish independence, or his criticism of Russian imperialism with his complicity in British colonialism. Rhys’s idea of “home” is fundamentally contradictory, reflecting the ambivalent location of the white Creole. Likewise, Lee’s cultural intervention to redefine the American nation in a more inclusive term is at odds with the auto-exoticism and the characterization of the unnamed Korean American woman in Native Speaker as an essentially alien being.
It might be important not to suppress these contradictions in Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s constructions of “home” for two primary reasons. First, recognizing the contradictions is the first step in understanding their ambivalent relationships to dominant cultures. By labeling each of the writers as either a “good” subject or a “bad” subject, one runs the risk of overlooking their critical agency or presupposing a transcendent subject position untainted by power relations. In order to avoid the binary categorization, I have used the concept of “self-fashioning,” focusing on “homing” tactics and performative self-representations. Second, by acknowledging certain cacophonies in the writers’ articulations of “home,” I wanted to avoid reinstating the traditional image of comfortable and homogenous “home,” conveniently devoid of discordant voices. I have characterized Conrad’s, Rhys’s, and Lee’s “homes” as “unhomely” not only because they are built on haunting, uncanny racial histories but also because they draw our attention to certain unease that I think is inherent in any “home.”

My discussion began with Conrad’s strategies for re-mapping his colonized homeland, Poland, and his adopted country, England, as one territory of Western civilization. I have posited that *A Personal Record* and *Under Western Eyes* reflect Conrad’s effort to fashion himself as both Polish and English. This effort was placed in the historical and cultural contexts of the changing map of Europe in the early twentieth century as well as the privileging of English culture over the British Empire in British modernism. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad reconnected his Polish past and his English authorship by fragmentarily yet consciously interweaving his Polish childhood memories and the composition of his first book, which was written in English. My reading of *Under Western Eyes* focused on Conrad’s appropriation of the term “the West.” “The West” gained added emphasis in the early twentieth century because it helped distance Europe from Russia. By obsessively contrasting Western civilization and Russian autocracy,
Conrad dissociated “the West” from Russia while associating it with a Poland that was colonized by Russian imperialism. In the chapter, I meant to explain his ambivalent attitude towards British imperialism as a function of the conflicts in Conrad’s locations with regard to different national histories and imperialisms.

Not less ambivalently located between British imperialism and Dominican nationalism, Rhys fashioned her white Creole identity in-between England and the West Indies. In order to contrast her racial positioning in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and “The Imperial Road,” I discussed West Indian intellectuals’ responses to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the racial conflicts in the West Indies around the end of the official colonial era. Due to her whiteness and her family’s involvement in slavery, she was unable to completely resolve the conflict between her family history and West Indian racial history. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she created a cross-racial identification with Afro-Caribbeans through an interlinked representation of race and gender. By representing the Englishman as both a colonizer and an exploiting patriarch, she united her white Creole heroine with Afro-Caribbean women through victimhood. In “The Imperial Road,” however, she could not use the same strategy of self-fashioning because of the intense racial conflicts in the West Indies, which placed white Creoles in a hostile relation with other Caribbeans.

My reading of Lee’s *Native Speaker* focused on his racialized and gendered Asian American authoring. I contended that Lee challenged the narrow definition of the American nation by describing a Korean American politician operating outside his racial role assigned by white America as well as his coalition with racial minorities. And yet he flirted with the trope of ethnic “authenticity” and a marketable ethnic difference as a way of luring the multicultural American readership into the more politicized, threatening message. I discussed the ways in which Lee conceived Asian American male inclusion by envisioning American culture as the
white feminine to negotiate with, on the one hand, and Korean womanhood as the abject, on the other. My aim in this chapter was two-fold. First, I tried to demonstrate that Lee equated Asian American male authoring with inventing a new literary lineage appreciative of hybridity and heterogeneity. Second, I concluded that he failed to move beyond the masculine narrative of the American nation because he considered Asian American authoring as a fundamentally manly project.

In closing, I want to return to the question I posed at the end of the introduction: if “[w]riting is impossible without some kind of exile,” as Kristeva posits, how does writing, in turn, enable displaced writers to relocate themselves? In order to stress the mutually constitutive relationship between displacement and “home,” I will briefly discuss two contemporary, self-defined international writers—the Indian British writer Salman Rushdie (1947–) and the Japanese British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (1954–). In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands” (1982), Rushdie celebrates the internationalization of the novelistic form and envisions himself among “a polyglot family” of international writers:

[…] we are inescapably international writers at a time when the novel has never been a more international form […]; and it is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents—include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assisi; a polyglot family tree, against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong. (20–21)

While we see Rushdie’s affirmation of the transnational nature of his writing in “The Imaginary Homelands,” the essay also explains his deep commitment to his homeland, India. It opens with a description of an old black-and-white photograph of his old house in Bombay (present-day Mumbai) where he was born. During his homecoming to the city after an absence of decades, he visits the house in the photograph. Standing outside the house that he remembered only in black and white, he is overwhelmed by its vivid colors and feels the “urge to reclaim” his lost “home”
through writing. It is this moment, he says, when he conceived his Booker Prize-winning novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981).

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie discursively reconstructs national and personal histories that are inseparably entwined to each other, and he does so in a transnational way by placing the novel in a uniquely polyglot world. The novel allegorically parallels the independence of India on 15 August 1947 and the birth of the protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai, which took place precisely at the same midnight moment. The year of 1947 is also when Rushdie himself was born. As he writes in his “Introduction to the 25th Anniversary Edition” (2005) of *Midnight’s Children*, the story of modern India and Saleem—that he calls “identical twins”—is based on the writer’s own childhood memories richly recreated through the incorporation of the oral traditions of India as well as English literary traditions (x). He acknowledges the pain of displacement: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (15). And yet, displacement has its recompense: “however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy” (15). If the pale photograph of the house fixed in time is a reminder of his displacement and the impossibility of being in one place ever again, *Midnight’s Children* serves as his homecoming to multiple, “imaginary homelands.”

Ishiguro, the 1989 Booker Prize winner, was born in 1954 in Nagasaki, Japan and moved to England in 1960. Although his best-known work is a very English book, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) are set in his hometown, Nagasaki. Both novels recall the years immediately following the U.S. atomic bombing of Nagasaki that ended World War II. They describe different ways in which individuals cope with the national calamity, reflect on Japanese imperialism leading to
World War II, and deal with radical changes brought about by the war. According to Ishiguro, the Japan in the books is “very much [his] own personal, imaginary Japan” (110). In fact, he did not make his first return visit to Japan until 1989—that is, until he published the three novels mentioned earlier. As his family meant to return to Japan until their departure was delayed too many times and England became their permanent residence, he prepared for returning to Japan by reading books and magazines sent from his homeland. In an interview held during the 1989 visit with the Novel Prize winning Japanese writer Kenzaburo Oe (1935– ), Ishiguro spoke of “a very strong image” of Japan he grew up with: “in England I was all the time building up this picture in my head, an imaginary Japan, if you like. […] I think one of the real reasons why I turned to writing novels was because I wished to recreate this Japan” (110). Like Rushdie’s “imaginary homelands,” Ishiguro’s “imaginary Japan” was an outcome of “thinking of [himself] as a kind of homeless writer” who “wasn’t a very English Englishman” and “wasn’t a very Japanese Japanese either” (115). This identity that is neither “authentic” English nor “authentic” Japanese is not merely homeless but flexible and imaginative, as I have tried to demonstrate in this study of Conrad, Rhys, and Lee. Rushdie is probably right that “the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group” is “a second tradition” that displaced writers “can quite legitimately claim” (20). But how each displaced writer fashions her/his self and create “imaginary homelands” out of this “second tradition” is yet to be explored.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jung-Hwa Lee was born and raised in Daegu, South Korea. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English language and literature from Kyungpook National University, Daegu, in 1994. In 1998, she graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English from Korea University, Seoul. She entered the University of Florida, Gainesville, in 2001, where she specialized in 20th-century studies and critical theory under the mentorship of R. Brandon Kershner.