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SANTA CRUZ

A LIQUID WORLD: FIGURING COLONIALITY IN THE INDIES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS
with an emphasis in VISUAL STUDIES

by

Raissa DeSmet Trumbull

September 2013

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Abstract

A Liquid World: Figuring Coloniality in the Indies

Raissa DeSmet Trumbull, University of California Santa Cruz

This dissertation explores the history of colonial representations of the Dutch East Indies and analyzes the tropes that undergird those representations. The relentless damp of the tropics, it argues, suffuses European evocations of the Indies; from drenched forests and malarial clouds to the lush figure of the concubine, the islands of the archipelago have long been made synonymous with natural abundance and tireless sensuality. As my study demonstrates, these figures are also distinctly feminine, part of the ongoing colonial project to render the tropics yielding and dominable. The dissertation aims not only to demonstrate the endurance of colonial figurations, but also to revalorize the turbid, teeming forms of tropical life that have historically been denigrated. To this end, while the first half of the dissertation is concerned with the colonial period, the latter half analyzes indigenous images of liquidity as gateways to local, Indonesian knowledge. What would it mean, this project asks, to rethink Indonesia's "liquid world" in terms that originate in the islands, rather than the metropole?

To forge an answer to this question, the dissertation develops a new methodological approach. Analyzing regimes of representation, my project is, at its core, tropological. It is concerned with the deep structures of colonial fantasy that endure over time, and in the texture and gender of those structures. And it is

interested in the ways Indonesian imaginaries escape and resist the colonial fantasy. This semiological focus requires taking the figurative seriously, as substance rather than reflective surface, and it means reading materials and material processes as assiduously as texts. My corpus includes botanical writing, literary fiction, painting, and performance. Laying European and indigenous figurations of water, women, and the tropical landscape alongside each other, I track the resonances and tensions between them. This produces a new critical framework for reading representations of the Dutch East Indies, and for understanding the colonial residue that stakes its claims on the bodies of contemporary Indonesians.

Acknowledgements

This work was a truly collaborative effort. It would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of my dissertation co-chairs and mentors, Jennifer González and James Clifford. Jennifer helped me learn how to yoke the scholarly, the poetic, and the personal; she literally helped me to find my voice, and to imagine a place for myself in the academy. I was and remain endlessly amazed by the generosity of her reading practice, by the way she could inhabit my project and its preoccupations, and offer her own startling insights. Jim championed me and the dissertation from the very beginning, providing astute comments on even the earliest drafts. He never failed to grasp and to language what it was I was getting at, often before I had arrived at the idea myself. I thank him for cups of tea at his kitchen counter, and for reminders not to neglect the body while the mind writes. I could not have completed or even begun this work without the inspiration and support of Donna Haraway; it was in her feminist theory seminar that the project, its scene and its sensations, took shape, and she who recommended that I expand my corpus to include Indonesian cosmologies. I also want to thank Boreth Ly, in whose classroom I learned so much about the visual cultures of Southeast Asia, and met many of the texts and practices that feature in the second half of the dissertation. He was instrumental in helping me arrange a fruitful research trip to Java, and introduced me to my gifted translator, Alan Feinstein. “Translator,” in this case, is a misleading term; Alan is an accomplished scholar and editor in his own right, with deep roots in Yogyakarta. The interviews I conducted about the *bedhaya* simply would not have

happened without him. And I want to offer my deepest thanks to the dancers and dance teachers themselves. Gusti Mung, Ibu Suharti, Ibu Tia, and Ibu Linah all gave generously of their time and knowledge, bearing my sometimes naive questions with grace and good humor. They are the real experts, and I will continue to learn from all they shared with me.

My dissertation research and writing was supported by a grant from the Institute for Humanities Research. Anne Spalliero, Sheila Peuse, Melanie Wylie, and Marti Stanton provided essential support for me and for this work, going well beyond the call of duty on my behalf. My colleagues and comrades, Carrie Cifka and Matthew Moore offered endless empathy, helping me talk through my ideas and reading my nearly inscrutable “zero” drafts. I would like to thank Dorothy Duff Brown and Eve Eden for their generous, life-saving counsel, without which this project might have been abandoned. Deepest thanks are due to my family for supporting me in this work: Irene DeSmet Burns, Lon Burns, Patricia Goehrig, and Peter Trumbull; and also Samantha Zenack and Marcia Sours, who are my family, too.

The debt I owe Rob Trumbull is boundless, an ocean. I could not have persevered without your love, your partnership, your insight, and your patience. And I could not have found the time to write without your help caring for our boy. You are, as ever, my all. Finally, I could not have seen my way through without Eli, who had to be born in order for the words to come, and who always reminds me of what matters.

Voor Jeanne en Bert

Indifference has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved—but also the white nothingness, the once more calm surface upon which float unconnected determinations like scattered members: a head without a neck, an arm without a shoulder, eyes without brows.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Difference & Repetition

All these states of being, perceiving, and doing are expressed by processes that are familiar to us and that have to do with the treatment of materials, pouring, flowing, dripping, oozing out, setting, hardening, coagulating, thawing, expanding, contracting, and the voluntary aspects such as slipping away, advancing, collecting, letting go—

Louise Bourgeois, Louise Bourgeois: Destructing the Father, Reconstructing the Father

I fabricated an India . . . the Indies, we used to say

Marguerite Duras, Woman to Woman

Diptych

I walk around the pond at dusk
thinking about birds,
how they grow
out of the faces of women.

The pond pulls
through itself in a
bubbling at its center.

In wide rings it splays
out to the muddy shoals,
licking the legs,

the bellies of mallards,
the retreating tails
of tadpoles, and their
clear new green hands.

The Bird Woman
in her nun's habit
combs the edges of the pond,
raking her teeth through the growth.

The geese
She shuts down on
them behind the reeds.
She closes flight.

The neck of a young goose
runs milk through
her fist.

A cartful of geese
lie like spoons.

The bird cries,
she winds back the head.

cut
dice
slice
flay
steam
stick
boil
braise
peel
mash
gut
shell
chop
beat
scald
bone

The kitchen
is the room of women's
violence.

I am sitting in the kitchen
watching my mother prepare
Singgang Ayam.

*For this recipe the chicken
is split down the breast
and flattened, marinated,*

*and simmered in coconut milk.
Finally grilled.
If you do not have a pan*

*large enough to accommodate
a spread-eagled chicken,
cut the bird in half.*

Introduction

In a keynote address to the Asian Studies Association in 2005, historian Barbara Watson Andaya called for a new “oceanic scholarship,” one that bridges geographic and disciplinary divisions, and represents an interconnected Asia not subservient to the boundaries of traditional area studies and the modern nation state. Citing rich examples from Southeast Asia’s maritime cultures, she imagined a literature and a pedagogy that redress the scholarly preoccupation with land-based studies, and the dominant historiographic narrative which figures the sea as margin. *A Liquid World: Figuring Coloniality in the Indies*, formulates one approach to this redress. Departing from images of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, I look back over the history of colonial representations of the Dutch East Indies, analyzing the tropes that undergird those representations. The relentless damp of the tropics suffuses European evocations of the Indies; from drenched forests and malarial clouds to the lush figure of the concubine, the islands of the archipelago have long been made synonymous with natural abundance and tireless sensuality. Such “deep, generative energies” in Said’s phrase are also distinctly feminine, part of the ongoing colonial project to render the tropics yielding and dominable. The aim of the dissertation is not simply to demonstrate the endurance of colonial figurations, but also to revalorize the turbid, teeming forms of tropical life that have historically been denigrated. To this end, while the first half of the dissertation is concerned with the colonial period, the latter half analyzes indigenous figures of liquidity as gateways to local, Indonesian

knowledge. What would it mean, my project asks, to rethink Indonesia's "liquid world" in terms that originate in the islands, rather than the metropole?

Empires are built discursively, as well as materially, I argue in *A Liquid World*. The Netherlands' conquest of the Indies rested on its wealth, its navy, and its guns, but also on its power to represent. The trope of liquidity, I suggest, is at the center of that colonial representational regime. Indonesia is composed of 17,000 islands. Water pervades the landscape and the lives of Indonesians. The Dutch who arrived in the 16th century found themselves in a place utterly unlike their chilled patch of land on the North Sea. They encountered a landscape shaped by wet rice agriculture and the cyclic downpours of the monsoon. Over more than three centuries, the Dutch hallucinated an aquatic vision of the Indies that can be found in the archives of the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch Republic, but also in their herbals, paintings, and novels, and in how they rendered the desire and repulsion they felt for their colonial subjects. My focus on liquidity also leads me to explore the ways that Indonesians fluidly figure themselves. Hindu-Buddhist culture flourished in the archipelago for more than a thousand years before Islamicization and colonization, endowing Indonesia with a rich material and ritual culture centered on fertility and profusion. Thus, if liquidity structures colonial representations, there is another liquidity at the heart of indigenous life. This alternate liquidity, I show, survives vibrantly into the present.

A Liquid World draws on but diverges from the work of scholars of postcoloniality and Southeast Asian Studies. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said tracks the

“styles, figures of speech, settings, narrative devices, and historical and social circumstances” that render the Orient different and less (21). Like me, Said exposes Europe’s insistence on Asia’s femininity and lurid sensuality, and how these tropes condense in the Oriental body itself. But Said and I map our Orient differently, with his emphasis on the desert places of the Islamic Levant, and mine in the torrid zone. My dissertation also owes a debt to Ann Laura Stoler. *Race and the Education of Desire* and *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* are ostensibly “Indonesian” studies, but, like mine, they, too, invoke French Indochina as a way of throwing the home country into sharper relief. Marguerite Duras’ novellas animate Stoler’s writing as well as my own, but they remain submerged at the level of the footnote, not objects for direct handling or interpretation. This is a telling difference. Stoler is an anthropologist performing a kind of ethnographic historiography. Her deep engagement with the historical record bends her text away from literary reading and towards a supplemental view of fiction. But by privileging the archive and its institutionalization, Stoler becomes complicit in the marginalization of other, less official forms. My study is about those unofficial forms. This commitment to representation and the figurative equally distinguishes my project from the work of area studies scholars engaged with the colonial discourse of tropicity. Social scientists such as Warwick Anderson, David Arnold, and Susie Protschky have begun to interrogate “the tropics” and its instantiation in fields as diverse as law, literature, and medicine. Here, too, however, artistic productions are read secondarily, as indices and reflections of social histories.

Focusing on artistic productions, my project seeks to build on Said's, Stoler's, and the tropicality scholars' work by approaching our common concerns with a different method. My study is about regimes of representation and is thus, at its core, tropological. It is interested in the deep structures of colonial fantasy that endure over time, and in the texture and gender of those structures. And it is interested in the ways Indonesian imaginaries escape and resist the colonial fantasy. This semiological focus requires taking the figurative seriously, as substance rather than reflective surface, and it means reading materials and material processes as assiduously as texts. My corpus thus includes botanical writing, literary fiction, painting, film, photography, and dance. These diverse genres and objects are held together in the dissertation by the remarkably stable and mobile trope of liquidity. This trope condenses the Dutch impulse to represent the archipelago as a seascape, as a lush, primordial garden, and also as encroaching, infecting, swarming with life and death. At the same time, because I am interested in the chronic, hangover-like endurance of colonial structures of representation, I analyze texts from the colonial past and the postcolonial present. Laying European and indigenous figurations of water, women, and the tropical landscape alongside each other, I track the resonances and tensions between them. This produces a new critical framework for reading representations of the Dutch East Indies, and for understanding the colonial residue that stakes its claims on the bodies of contemporary Indonesians.

Chapter One: The Grove

The dissertation begins with an analysis of Dutch colonial representations of the Indies, specifically the perceived threat and overabundance of the tropical landscape. The trope is pervasive, and may be found in Dutch evocations of the islands dating from the late 16th century all the way up to—and indeed beyond— independence in 1945.¹ Europeans tried to get a handle on the Southeast Asian environment, especially the jungle, by making it an instrument of imperial power. Hanging was a spectacular method of control and punishment in the colony, and the image of the hanging tree, I show, is one pregnant with the threat of violence. At the same time, Europeans sought to contain and discipline the tropical landscape by cataloging it in botanical compendiums called herbals. The 17th-century Dutch naturalist Rumphius' *Ambonese Herbal* is a seminal example of this genre, in particular his account of the *upas*, a leaking milk tree whose infamy had circulated since the medieval period. The *upas* produces an acrid sap causing cardiac arrest. Indonesians had used the liquid for centuries in their internal conflicts, and found the *upas* to be an effective weapon in their wars against the Dutch. Having never seen the *upas*, Rumphius' report is an exercise in colonial fantasy; alongside a set of physical descriptions that can only have been dreamed up on the basis of dried samples, he goes to great lengths recounting the steps required to prepare the poison (indigenous knowledge which would have been difficult for him to access), and the sensations that overtake those who die by poison dart. This image of the tree, I show,

¹ Indonesia declared its independence from colonial rule in 1945, but was not recognized as a sovereign nation by the United Nations—or the Netherlands—until 1949.

stands in marked contrast to the tidy hierarchies of the Tree of Man, the arboreal diagram through which Europeans visualized racial difference at the time of the *Herbal*. Finally, I explore the afterlife of Rumphius' imagined *upas* by analyzing its evocations in the 18th and 19th centuries, respectively, by the poet Erasmus Darwin and the painter Francis Danby. This brings out the durability of the colonial fantasy, and its particular vision of the tropical landscape and its life forms.

Chapter Two: The Underwater Body

With Chapter Two, I shift my attention from the islands to the mainland, and the work of Indochinese-born Marguerite Duras, whose written and filmic texts are central to European images of Southeast Asia in the 20th century. The turn from the Indies towards Indochina is part of the oceanic, deterritorializing work of the dissertation, demonstrating connectivity between these two nodes of the Indic world, and the way the Orientalist fantasy seeps across lines of empire and the South China Sea. My reading is centered on the figure of the Asian Beggarwoman in Duras' novella, *The Vice-Consul*. The trope of liquidity that my study traces pertains not only to the landscape, but also to its inhabitants, condensing most acutely perhaps in the Asian woman's body. Duras' Beggarwoman is instructive here: taken up by French feminists as an icon of the primordial feminine, she remains, I demonstrate, a searing example of the European drive to dissolve the Southeast Asian subject. Cast out by her mother for illegitimate pregnancy, the Beggarwoman spends ten years ranging over Indochina before stopping in Calcutta. She has lost her hair, her wits, her language, and countless children along the way, and spends her days singing and

swimming in the Ganges. The tale of the Beggarwoman is the fantasy of another character, Peter Morgan, who has made her the center of his novel. Peter Morgan relishes his narrative power to make the Beggarwoman monstrous. By novella's end, she is hardly recognizable as human, tearing the head off a live fish with her teeth, and slipping into the sea. My analysis of the Beggarwoman emphasizes this creaturely turn. Tracing how she becomes aquatic, I argue that Peter Morgan abjects the Beggarwoman by making her identical with the slick, teeming totem of the fish. I am assisted in this reading by phenomenological theories of disgust and Julia Kristeva's model of abjection. Problematizing the Beggarwoman's appropriation by French feminist theorists, I unpack the material and gendered aspects of her dehumanization, arguing that they are ultimately too Eurocentric and too uninterested in race and coloniality to account for the degraded Indochinese subject. The chapter ends with an alternative reading of the Beggarwoman as *naga*, a Hindu water serpent. This reading strategy restores the Beggarwoman's cultural specificity and returns her to a Southeast Asian imaginary. It speaks back to the colonial representational regime, and suggests another way of figuring liquidity in the tropics.

Chapter Three: The Underwater Eye

Having shown how the trope of liquidity operates within colonial regimes of representation in the Indies, I turn my attention in this chapter towards an Indonesian articulation of liquidity, the *naga* Goddess of the South Sea and consort to the kings of Java, author of earthquakes and tsunamis, Kanjeng Ratu Kidul. Presented in the *Babad* or Javanese chronicles as a hybrid historical-cosmological figure, she is said to

have been born a princess in West Java. Fleeing the confines of marriage, she sought exile in the forest before plunging into the sea, thus losing her human form, becoming fishly from the waist down. Hypervisible in various forms of media since independence, and identified with the Indonesian state, Ratu Kidul was all but unrendered during the colonial period, and while central to Javanese court and village life, was often “missed” in the Dutch colonial archive. As a result, scholars have tended to read the 19th and early 20th centuries as a period of dormancy for the goddess, an occasion for mourning. But I propose another, less despairing explanation. Drawing on Donna Haraway’s work on underwater optics, as well as Gayatri Spivak’s theorization of subaltern silence, I explore how the goddess endured and, indeed, enunciated during the colonial period, pointing to the “unseen” as a field of action and representation that resists colonial visibility. This field, I argue, is not organized according to the European fixations of absence and presence, but is instead fluid, marked by the watery tropes of swimming, surfacing, welling up, fogging, reflecting, refracting, and receding. These metaphors, I show, allow us to read Ratu Kidul as neither manifest nor disappeared, but ephemeral, processual, refusing any fixed visibility.

These watery tropes are central to Ratu Kidul’s conversion narrative, the paradigmatic image of her body, and the figure of submersion, or what I call “the dive.” The hybrid body she acquires through her plunge into the Indian Ocean encodes a mutability, an *amphibian becoming*, I argue, that is denied the purely regressive Beggarwoman of Duras’ novella, and houses a visibility that exceeds the

narrowness of the colonial regime. This “underwater eye,” a fluid mode of appearing and disappearing, is thus integral to the figure of the goddess. That Ratu Kidul seems to fade in and out of the colonial archive, accordingly, need not be read simply as the sign of her marginalization, but as an enactment of another visibility that is intimately tied to the visual and ritual cultures of Java. By way of conclusion, I locate this visibility in the ceremony that honors the goddess, the *labuhan*.

Chapter Four: Chasing the Goddess

The final chapter takes up Ratu Kidul’s spectral appearances. Ghosts, after all, are nothing if not fluid, suddenly coalescing and suddenly dispersing, announcing themselves as shadow or a dancer’s double. My focus is on the apparitions of Ratu Kidul one finds not only in the colonial archive, but in the contemporary nation state. Ghosts are everywhere in Southeast Asia, sediments of violence that stretch from the first European footfall on the beach at Banten to the genocidal purges of the 1960s. All of these specters follow a Javanese ghostly grammar, making them resolutely sited, attached to a specific time and place. Building on the work of Rosalind C. Morris, I argue for reading the presence of such specters in Indonesia not simply as the residue of trauma, but as figures that open up the possibility of thinking differently about the past and the future in the region.

Ratu Kidul’s ghostly appearances erupt within a variety of formal contexts: archival photographs originally unearthed by John Pemberton, a compilation film from bits of colonial propaganda reels, a key form of Javanese performance. Each

medium has its own phenomenology and so each appearance is handled differently, but throughout I read Ratu Kidul's apparitions not as indicators of either her mere presence or absence, her speech or silence, but rather as figures that point to her processual becoming, her way of appearing to disappear. Ultimately, my attention comes to be focused on the Ratu's haunting of the sacred court dance of the *bedhaya*, one of the spaces in which Ratu Kidul has been continuously rendered throughout the colonial period and afterwards. The Ratu is said to appear at every rehearsal and performance of the *bedhaya*, visions which emerge out of the dance's dramatization of the play between forces that are concealed and unseen. Drawing on interviews I conducted with *bedhaya* dancers and members of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta courts, I show how the *bedhaya* constitutes a densely occupied spectral space. In the *bedhaya*, we encounter again the seeping, suffusing power of the ghostly, something that flashes on and off, emanating from no discernible source. I read the goddess' flickering mode of appearance as another instance of her wafting in and out, of her complex form of presence and visibility. It is precisely the Ratu's fluid visibility, I suggest, that not only ensured her endurance during the colonial period, but also allows her to survive in the contemporary moment.

*

The "excess" I set out to trace here is both material and metaphoric. It is the excess of bodies, of water, of "life" even (the figure of the teeming will play a crucial role here, as we shall see). And it is the excess which overflows the bounds of traditional postcolonial critique. Postcolonialism is a bivalve construction, a before-

and-after story. It is wedded to and predicated on a sequential temporality: there is colonization, and then there is what comes after. Thus the task of postcolonial criticism is often that of contradistinction; it proceeds by disentangling everything associated with the original catastrophic event from its aftermath. To characterize the underlying logic of postcolonialism in this way is not to minimize its importance or to question its use; it has had profound effects everywhere, not least on this small work, as the following pages, indeed, the entire dissertation show. But the project of *A Liquid World* is different from many of its antecedents, and it envisions a different temporality. In the sodden spaces trawled in the chapters that follow, guardian spirits, ancestral presences, and other residues from the deep past well up in the present, haunting the “modern” and the contemporary. Indeed, this welling up opens onto a future unforeseen and at times excluded by the strictly *post*-colonial frame. One could even say, following Rosalind Morris, herself invoking Derrida, that this welling up points the way to an entirely new future to-come. In what follows, then, excess and liquidity operate not simply as themes or tropes, but also as figures with a job to do, as modes of dissolving hardened structures, and thereby allowing alternate forces, alternate narratives to emerge. Closely allied to the figures of liquidity I am exploring, the spectral and the ghostly, in particular, will operate as another kind of temporal disturbance that exceeds the postcolonial timescale. In this way, the time of *A Liquid World* is post-postcolonial: not in the sense that the postcolonial no longer matters, but in the sense that it insists on remembering and retrieving what came

before contact, bringing it forward and through into the present, perhaps even the future.

Chapter One: The Grove



Figure 1: *After the Tsunami*, Banda Aceh, 2005, Paolo Pellegrin

In the days and weeks following the tsunami, numerous photos circulated of trees surrounded by devastation, survivors of the rush of water. The tree's lone vertical mark stood in stark contrast to the uncountable horizontal marks by the roadside, dead bodies in plastic shrouds. The tree has long stood in for the human body, and played a powerful role in the construction of difference between human bodies. In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock argues that the new spatialized history of the 18th century could be consumed *in a single glance* in the form of the Tree of Man, the ladder of human difference that came to replace the Renaissance's Chain of Being (36). After all, the tree is (too) easy to picture: a common trunk breaks into a network of branches; at the apex perch the Aryans, above, but within range of the Polynesians and Semites; midway down are the Chinese, Japanese, and Americans, the Samoeds, Magyars, and Lapps; lower still are the Tasmanians; and at the very

bottom, nearly trailing on the ground like ripe fruit, are the darkest-skinned and consequently most wretched peoples, the Fuegians and the Hottentots, Negritos of all kinds (38).² The tree matters to McClintock, via Fabian, in that it “has always been one of the simplest forms of constructing classificatory schemes based on subsumption and hierarchy” (37). A secularization of its cosmic referent, the Tree of Man is read quickly, instinctively as the progress march of human history, the European surging out of the mud, towards the sky. I, however, would like to slow that quickness with a provocation: that the tree matters both as a “genealogy of power” and as *a tree itself*—woody, sapping, spreading. In this chapter, I will trace the tree as trope and a matter that manages difference in the colony. My three objects are the Tree of Man, the hang tree, and the *upas* or Poison Tree.

My reading of McClintock’s Tree of Man is vivid, violent: it erupts through the colonial pavement, cramming the sense organs with roots and leaves. The materiality of her evocation made me wonder: How might the tree produce a phenomenology of difference in the tropics? Alphonso Lingis offers up the body as both sensitive substance and a “structure of competence”: sensitive as an assemblage of agonizing and voluptuous vibrations; competent in that the assemblage does not simply respond to stimuli, but rather arranges itself to deal with, answer, and act upon it (*Foreign Bodies* ix). Lingis demonstrates this via the practical demands of a lemon: tart-fibrous-dimpled-ovular “There is in the body a knowledge of a lemon . . . a

² Interesting for the geographic field of this essay, the racial category “Malays” is unstable. In Mantegazza’s *Morphological Tree of the Human Race*, Malays share a high collection of branches with the Chinese, Japanese, and Americans, while in his *Aesthetic Tree of the Human Race*, they’ve been ousted by the Polynesians, slid down to middling level, “on par” with Peruvians (Figure 1.5, 38).

knowledge of how to deal with such a thing, how to station oneself before it, how to apply oneself to it—such that the sensible essence of the lemon, its way of being, is communicated in the body’s own visible, tangible, sonorous, reality” (14). Thus the body that greets the lemon is resonant and technological (“praktognostic,” coins Lingis), kin to Gilles Deleuze’s desiring machine. As a machine, feeling is not limited to the sensual bag of the body, and instead includes the objects or tools that a body appends to finger its world. “A tool . . . is an extension of an organ of our body,” Lingis writes—and immediately I see a fichus growing out of a spleen (ix). Exactly which organ the Tree of Man extends may or may not be obvious; what interests me more is how the tree’s anatomy produces difference and dominance in the Indies and elsewhere in colonial Asia.

The spleen I envisioned is not accidental. Soft and purple and shaped like a fist, the spleen is tucked under the left diaphragm, surrounded by vessels. It creates, stores, and filters the blood. It is a reservoir of blood. In Galenic medicine, it is twinned with melancholy. Contemporary cultural definitions expand this feeling to include rage, bitterness, the deep and seething resentment Fanon describes as the internal condition of the colonized. The imperials augured this. Under the Raj, Indians were said to suffer the malarial condition of “enlarged spleen,” an affliction so debilitating, that a kick to the abdomen meant certain death (Bailkin, Jordana, *The Boot and the Spleen*, 463). The spleen was thus made the site of Asian vulnerability, with “the ruptured spleen defense” providing a compelling framework within which whites could cause the death of Indians without being charged with murder (492).

Murder may seem far from the tree and its bright, photosynthetic canopy; indeed, one might be tempted to think of trees as pulmonary. But train the eye downward, and one can follow the line of the trunk into the soil, watch it break into a spray of roots. Underground, the tree reveals another, burying aspect, a dark thread between trees and the gallows, the lynch tree, and the crematory kiln.

Cruelties abound in 19th-century Asia, but it is British India, cousin and financier of the southern American States, where bodies swing from trees: hanging, it seems, is an Anglo-Saxon diversion.³ Tens of thousands of people were condemned to death by hanging in England and Wales in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a zeal that extended with Britain's reach abroad (V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree* 7). If independence had clipped the United States from its former imperial power, it continued to exist as colonial space, sharing a racial worldview with the metropole and a "racial simultaneity" with India, Southern Africa, and the other British possessions (Smith, *The Discourse of Violence* n. pag.). Lynching was a powerful tool in each of these sites for projecting racial difference: "By acting out a performance ritual on an objectified black body, white society exploited the unspeakable power of violence to affirm its own identity as the body politic, to elevate the white individual as the source of subjectivity, and to designate the black person as different and outside the pale of active citizenry" (n. pag.).⁴ The ritual has

³ In my research, I could find no evidence of hanging under the VOC. The British, by contrast, were known to hang everywhere across their vast pink empire.

⁴ Historian Thomas E. Smith argues for the unity of transatlantic lynching narratives on the basis of shared British and American constructions of black masculinity. While the figuration of colonized Asian men differs in important ways from those of their African and African-American counterparts,

long roots on the Indian subcontinent. In early 19th-century Calcutta, Fancy Lane, a corruption of “Phansi” or “hanging,” in the also grotesquely named Coolybazaar, was the site of numerous public executions (Sumanta Banjeree, *City of Dreadful Night* 2053). The convicted were dangled from a tree in iron shackles until midcentury, when hanging and other penal experiments were moved out of sight, into the jail (whites protested when dead bodies, dumped into the river by the warden, returned bobbing on the tide) (Banjeree 2054). While all manner of criminals suffered the punishment, in the British colonial imaginary, hanging also became the very particular remedy for the very particular crime of rape.

In India as elsewhere, dark male bodies were constructed as vessels of sexual threat: the lisping “Hindoo” who charms the memsahib like a snake; the Muslim brute, remembering Mughal might. Nancy L. Paxton interrogates these “rape scripts” and others in *Writing Under the Raj*, developing Ann Laura Stoler’s contention that “concern over the protection of white women intensified during real and perceived crises of control” (*Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* 58). For Paxton, the proof is in the surge in literary depictions of rape in the wake of the 1857 “Mutiny,” an uprising which ended in a gallery of bodies in the mango trees, shot by musket before being strung up. More than 80 “mutiny novels” were published between 1857 and 1947, each organized around the rape of English women by Indian men, a crime which, according to the legal records, almost never occurred (10). Paxton argues that this compulsive, “iterative” gesture was a symptom of British racial and gender

there is enough commonality among Anglo racial formations that I feel Indians can be meaningfully folded into the category “black”; indeed Calcutta was divided between “White” and “Black” towns.

anxieties laboring “to legitimize British colonizers’ moral superiority by asserting the natural lawlessness of Indian men,” while supporting calls for male dominance in both English and Indian domestic spheres (112). Lawlessness, of course, has a special flavor in the colonies. Indian men who were convicted of raping white women found themselves in breach on not only of local “personal” law, but of the sweeping, post-mutiny reforms to the Indian Penal Code of 1861, which implemented a new, narrow definition of rape. This legislation did not, it is important to emphasize, protect against the marital rape of English *or* Indian women; further, while the rape of Indian women by English men was now formally illegal, it continued to function as such a plain fact of nature and daily life that charges were seldom brought (113 and 13). The rape of the colonizer by the colonized, by contrast, is an abomination. For Paxton, it reveals an indigenous animality requiring colonial discipline; more radically, I would add, it *inverts* colonial order, threatening miscegenation, yes, but also the very dissolution of racial difference. Rape of the colonizer casts the colonial project to the edge of its own frontier, where its defense must take the form of absolute brutality. It is for this reason that the “rapist” must be extinguished so terribly, as a scene: he stands in for all forms of rebellion. Some excellent scholarship has been done on the scene of lynching and, especially, the spectacle of the lynched body.⁵ I, however, would like to broaden the visual field, to take in the tree as well as the body, and ask how the tree becomes an actor in the visualization of racial terror.

⁵ See David S. Marriott’s essay, “‘I’m gonna borrar me a Kodak’: Photography and Lynching,” *On Black Men* (2000).

Why was hanging the spectacle of Anglo colonial power? What is performed visually in the joining of man and tree? One can see, even with eyes closed, how the two come together: the long, hooded approach, the weight of each ascending step. Then weightlessness. The tree and the body form two vertical stripes in the landscape; the trunk is fixed, but the body and finer branches move. McClintock would argue that it is the uprightness of the trunk and its cascade of branches that matter, asserting dominance, a “genealogy of power” based on high and low (37). A body can also be diagrammed this way. The deeply reflective quality between trees and persons—and in many cultures trees are considered persons—has been written about widely, with most contributions emphasizing “the symbolic correspondence between tree parts and body parts” (Rival, *The Social Life of Trees* 9). The paradigmatic example of this correspondence is the milk tree (*mudyi*), famously named by Victor Turner “for its white latex, which exudes in milky beads if the thin bark is scratched” (*The Forest of Symbols* 20). The tree is the central pillar in Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols*, his study of ritual among the Ndembu of Southern Africa. Standing for matriliney, continuity, he declares the tree the “backbone” of Ndembu social life (20). The Ndembu themselves invest the milk tree with multiple bodily qualities, calling it “the place of all mothers” (*ivumu*, literally ‘womb’ or ‘stomach’),” and, unsurprisingly, the tree also connotes breasts and their milk (20). During the *Nkang’a* puberty ritual, performed when a girl’s breasts begin to ripen, “a novice is wrapped in a blanket and laid at the foot of a *mudyi* sapling” (20). In Nusa Penida, a small island off Bali, the coconut palm accompanies the person ritually

through the lifecycle: its fruit houses the placenta at birth, saliva at the teeth filing ceremony that marks puberty, and the crematory ashes, which are thrown into the sea (Giambelli, *The Social Life of Trees* 147). The tree's sap is called *getah* or blood, the coconut's shell *kau* or skull (141). This transcultural equivalency between the tree body and the human body is not simply lexical, but a tie of kinship. The exchangeability of terms suggests an exchangeability of matter, as though each could transubstantiate into the other, embrace the other. This adds another layer of meaning to the metaphor of "strange fruit."

The power claim expressed by hanging is already audacious: trees bear fruit, as everybody knows; to make that fruit flesh is to vivify the tacit idea that fruit stands for human beings. The obscenity of hanging thus rests not simply in its power to objectify and extinguish, but also in its power to literalize, to make the signifier the signified. A godlike power. Colonial authority is built on such images of "shock and awe"; what I propose is different about the hang tree, different even from the scaffold, is the uncanny effect produced by the anatomy of the tree itself. By design, the hanging ground is dense with figures: the executioner, the magistrates, the condemned, the ringing crowd. Colonial administrators sought to amass the largest possible gatherings, beating drums to summon onlookers, retaining the body in its roost long after death to prolong the display (Banerjee 10). Marking the tree's embodiment, its cruciform arrangement, the limbs that would seem to reach and touch, means bearing the presence of one more, a witness and companion as well as an instrument of death. Traditional modes of viewing insist that all eyes train on the

body-cum-corpse, but the embodied tree doubles that vision. Rather than winnowing to doomed or dead flesh, the scene must be read en toto: a body draped with bodies. The British unconsciously deployed this vision in the spring of 1857, when they used mango trees, local symbols of life and fertility, to house the bodies of the rebels. No photographs of these hangings exist, but the image recurs in written recollections (“reminiscences” in the starchy British view) (William Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny, 1857–59*, 179). This then can be understood as the full ripening of the arboreal violence of the early colonial period, when the very shade of the Calcutta groves was usurped, converted to imperial hunting grounds.

I would like to submit another basis for treely embodiment, one with very different implications for the hanging and the hanged. To upend the tree is to throw the root system overhead, subordinating the trunk. This undoes the tree’s hardness, its masculinity, the singular claim of the trunk and its rule over the branches. Returning to the language of Lingis, the body that greets *this* tree must comport itself according to an utterly different sensible schema: dig-dark-worming-sponging. The inverted tree does not surge; its activity is lateral, the tissue first elongating, then pushing each root tip forward, a multiplicity of root tips, in all directions. The inverted tree is not so much a ladder as a net. In this respect it resembles Deleuze and Guattari’s *rhizome*:

Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes. Plants with roots or radicles may be rhizomorphic in other respects altogether: the question is whether plant life in its specificity is not entirely rhizomatic. Even some animals are, in their pack form. Rats are rhizomes. Burrows are too, in all their functions of shelter, supply movement, evasion, and breakout. The rhizome itself assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extensions in all directions to

concretions into bulbs and tubers. When rats swarm over each other. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 7)

We will meet the rats in their swarms in the next chapter. For now, I want to affirm that roots possess the concrete, water-storing, water-seeking qualities attributed by Deleuze and Guattari to the bulb or tuber. Roots are vascular organs, composed of three concentric circles of primary tissue. In all but aerating and aerial varieties, they anchor the plant to the earth from which they absorb water and minerals, trading nutrients with all manner of fungi. Endlessly thirsty, they nose into the soil. Roots are diggers, excavating a network of burrows not unlike those of their furred, rhizomatic kin. Underground is a sightless place, and so the sense faculty that operates here is touch. This is expressed physically in the knoblike structure of the root and in its fingery texture (roots are said to be covered in “skin” and “hair”). Like Deleuze and Guattari’s bulb and tuber, the root is a composite of solid and liquid. Even when dry to the touch, the pulp saturates the surface, imparting a coolness and a weight the handler instantly recognizes as waterborne. This contained liquidity upsets the regime of dry, hard, woody trees. Roots liquefy *those trees*, revealing a depth and a core that is fluid.

As we have seen, trees are symptoms of colonial power relations: the Tree of Man and its hierarchy of bodies; the hang tree, gross literalization of that diagram on the ground. But trees are not only the device of the colonizer—trees can resist. One example is the *upas*, another milk tree, different from Turner’s, that terrorized the Dutch, who erected elaborate physical and psychic barriers against its sap.

Called *arbor toxicaria* in Latin and *Poison Tree* or *Spatter-tree* in Dutch, the *upas* is a Southeast Asian cousin of the *mudyi*, occurring in southern Sulawesi as well as Java, Sumatra, Borneo, and on the eastern slopes of the Balinese volcanoes Batur and Agung (Georg Everard Rumpf, E.M. Beekman, *The Poison Tree* 131). The great naturalist Rumphius devotes five and a half pages to the *upas* in his 17th-century *Herbal* (135). *Herbal* is a brutal abbreviation of the original title: *The Amboinese Herbal, Being a Description of the most noteworthy Trees, Shrubs, Herbs, Land- and Water-Plants, which are found in Amboina, and the surrounding islands, According to their shape, various names, cultivations, and use: together with several insects and animals, For the most part with the Figures pertaining to them, All gathered with much trouble and diligence over many years, and described in twelve books by Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, Med. Doct. Form Hanau, Former Merchant and Counselor in Amboina, also known under the name of Plinius Indicus, Member of the Illustre Academia Naturae Curiosorum, established in the Holy Roman Empire . . .*

(11). It was published between 1741 and 1750, decades after Rumphius' death and nearly a century after the project's inception. That it was published at all is a not-so-small miracle. The books were composed in Latin until 1670, when Rumphius lost his sight to glaucoma, making him dependent on the eyes and hands of assistants provided by the Dutch East India Company (hereafter called by its Dutch acronym, the VOC). The project was begun all over again, this time in Dutch. Half of the original illustrated chapters were destroyed by fire in 1687, and a another redrawn

manuscript sank with its ship, the *Waterlandt*, in 1692. It would be five more years before all twelve volumes arrived safely in Amsterdam.

The *Herbal* is in all ways monumental. The seven published volumes contain 1661 folio pages, 876 chapters, and 696 plates (Georg Everard Rumf, E.M. Beekman, *Rumphius' Orchids* xxxix). E.M. Beekman, Rumphius' devoted translator, explains the formal arrangement this way:

The first five books . . . dealt with “edible, fruit-bearing, aromatic, and wild trees”; book six concerned itself with “all sorts of shrubs which stand upright”; book seven included “such Shrubs which cannot stand upright on their own, but which creep along with a long and slender trunk, or wind around other trees, the like we call in the Indies *Forest-ropes*, or *Taly-Outang* in Malay.” Books eight through eleven described herbs, while the twelfth presented plants “which do not wax on land but in the Sea, and which have a mixed nature of wood and stone, and which are called Sea-trees or *Coral-plants*. (*The Poison Tree* 11–12)

Here one can see how the premodern Rumphius organizes his *Herbal* according to the Classical tripartite system of trees, shrubs, and herbs, drawing further shades of variation according to position and movement (12). “Kind” is another taxonomic idea at work in the *Herbal*; an aesthetic or moral category, as much as anything else, it allows corals to slip between the families of animals, plants, and minerals, and deems phosphorescent shrimp a quality of the sea (12 and 51, respectively). Each plant's name is presented in Latin, Dutch, Malay, Ambonese and often Javanese, Hindustani, Portuguese, and Chinese (12). Writing a hundred years before Linnaeus, Rumphius is free to invent each name, often drawing on indigenous nomenclature. After name comes habitat. Though the *Herbal's* announced task is to map the natural world of the Eastern Archipelago, it is in fact more expansive, referring to plants from

all over the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, China, Japan, and even South America, Mexico, Peru, and Brazil (*Rumphius' Orchids* xli). Following name and place are lists of the plant's physical characteristics as well as practical, medical, and magic uses.

To say "list" is to diminish Rumphius' endeavor. Rumphius is, above all else, a *phytographer*, a describer of plants [*In Memory of G.E. Rumphius (1702–1952)* de Witt, 108]. His physical descriptions are careful, attending to the joinery of a tree trunk, whether or not twigs are plentiful, and the color and texture of bark in dry and wet seasons. But there is more here than the strictly botanical. Sift through the entries and one will learn "how to black shields and forge swords, remedies against conception, remedies to promote conception, how to cleanse the digestive tract of a newborn, how to ward off the troubled sleep of children by placing certain shells under their pillows" (xliv). The *Herbal* is striking in terms of form as well as content. Consider, for example, the marvelously called *Nude Tree*, the *Blue Clitoris Flower*, *Pleading Grass*, and the *Godless Flower (The Poison Tree 29)*. The descriptions, too, are full of startling imagery. Jellyfish are broken stars; whitewater, a kind of tide, glimmers "like snow or milk" (56). In rendering *The Poison Tree of Macassar*, Rumphius takes a dramatic tone: "Under the most pernicious ones one will find the telltale sign of bird feathers, for the air around the tree is so tainted that if some birds want to rest themselves on the branches, they soon find themselves get dizzy and fall down dead" (129). This narrative intensity reflects the violence of the tree's reputation, but also, the limits of Rumphius' writing conditions. Most of the *Herbal*

was set down after he went blind, an experience he said “took away from me the entire world and all its creatures” (*Rumphius’ Orchids* xxxiv). His text is an effort to recall and remake that world. One sees this in the *Herbal’s* voracious scale, in the wide spectrum of colors Rumphius describes from memory, and in his recordings of the tastes of plants (*The Poison Tree* 27). What Rumphius could not convey in words appears in the drawings which accompany each entry, the work of his many assistants and his son, Paulus Augustus (19). These delicate if slightly naïve line drawings, rendered in black and white with a metalpoint stylus, are presented in the usual manner, a numbered specimen floating in a white field.

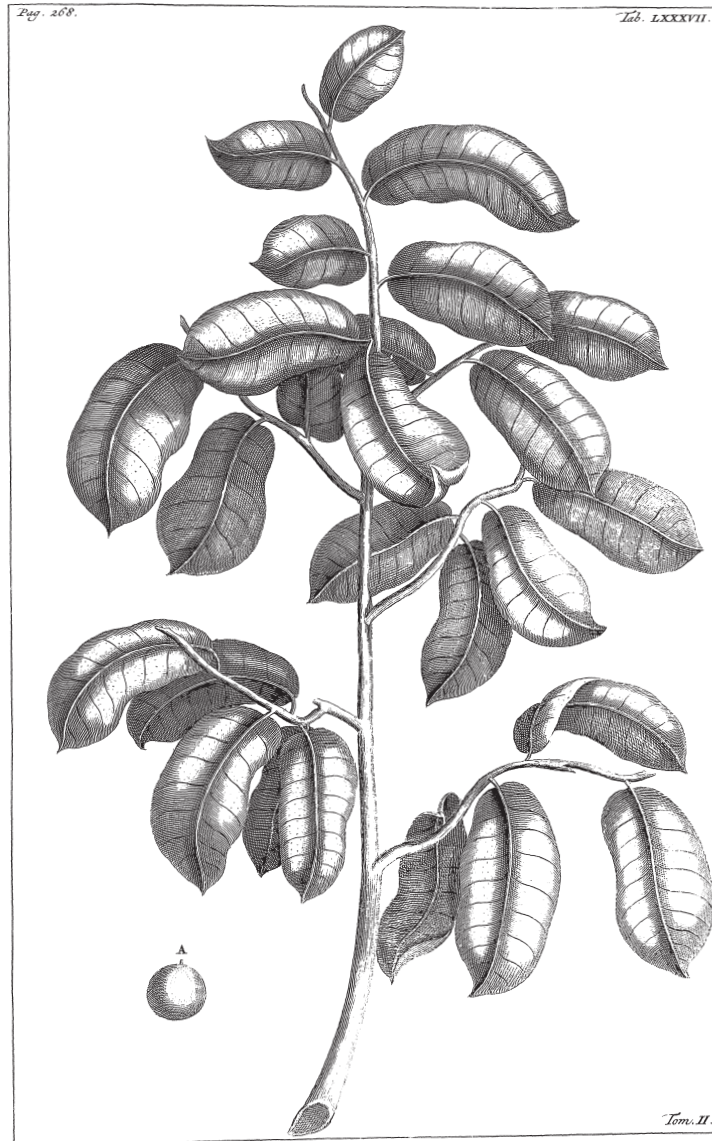


Figure 2: *The Poison Tree from Macassar*

Rumphius was born Georg Everard Rumpf circa 1628 in Wölfersheim, Germany and lived through the turn of the 18th century. The son of an architect, he was among many Germans recruited by the VOC to support its projects in Southeast Asia, which were transitioning from the commercial—the VOC was the planet’s first multinational corporation—to the imperial, legwork for an empire that would last four

hundred years. Rumphius' path to the East Indies was circuitous. Having fallen victim to a "soul merchant," a broker who purchased "souls" as contracts for the Dutch West Indies Company, the VOC's Caribbean wing, Rumphius boarded a ship bound for Brazil, believing himself en route to Venice. The ship was captured by Holland's chief naval opponent, the Portuguese, and Rumphius spent three years in Portugal, most likely as a soldier. The Portuguese were the first to establish a European presence in Southeast Asia, and it is possible that Rumphius caught the allure of the East while living there (3). In 1652, he traveled to East Indies with the VOC as a "gentleman soldier," arriving in Ambon, in the Moluccas or Spice Islands, in 1654. Home to the cloves that incited European expansion,⁶ the Moluccas had been at war with the VOC since 1650, and it is likely that Rumphius took part in these campaigns (5). But Rumphius was more scholar than soldier—the two often mingled in that age—and, after several promotions, he was relieved of his military duties, allowing him to devote more hours and energy to the study of the natural world. For the rest of his life, Rumphius would serve as a faithful employee of "The Company," performing bureaucratic tasks during the day, and pouring over his collections at night (he called these labors by the Portuguese word *Lucubrationes*, "nocturnal studies by lamplight") (5). The only text published during his lifetime was a remembrance of the 1674 earthquake and tsunami which took the lives of his wife and young daughter, but he was prolific, also producing a *History of Ambon*; the *Thesaurus Amboiniensis (Amboninsche Rariteitkamer)*, describing various mollusks,

⁶ It is worth noting that clove trees must be stripped for harvesting.

crustaceans, minerals, and stones; and a Malay dictionary up to the letter P (8–9).

Rumphius continued to work on the *Herbal*, entry by entry, until just months before his death in 1701.

Rumphius' identity as a colonial bureaucrat is absolute, but the *Herbal* does not regard the flora and fauna of the Malay Archipelago from an altogether outside position. Rumphius landed in Batavia in 1653 and never saw Europe again; his first wife is believed to have been Eurasian. He intended the *Herbal* to be “diverting to Lovers of Nature” everywhere, but also sought to make something “of use and service to those who live in the East-Indies” (12). As a result, the entries are full of local knowledge. In assessing a plant's medical properties, for example, he often refers to “hot” and “cold” ailments in the manner of indigenous healers or *dukuns*, and measures amounts “imprecisely” as handfuls, pinches, with weights likened to old coins, and lengths to that of a joint or finger (12). And yet, even he could fear and symbolically arm himself against the local landscape. One can see this in his entry for *The Poison Tree*.

The Poison Tree of Macassar appears in the third book of the *Herbal*, which describes “those trees that produce some Resin, notable Flowers or hurtful Milk” (*Rumphius' Orchids* xxxix). *Hurtful milk* is a telling phrase. The sap of milk trees is, of course, characteristically opaque, white,⁷ and leaking; in the case of the *upas*, the milk contains a poison causing cardiac arrest. For this reason, it has for centuries been impregnated into the tips of spears, darts, and arrows to fell enemies in times of

⁷ The variety Rumphius surveys is red.

raid or war. It belongs to the same family as the *strychnos* tree, whose seeds are the source of strychnine. The *upas* is a tree of power: in Malay, the male variety is called *upas radja* or “king of poisons” (134). Rumphius is less reverential. In classing the tree “hurtful,” he places the emphasis not on the subject, but the pain of its objects. He is afraid of the *Poison Tree* and he makes himself its victim. This has a dulling effect on the text: the lush, romantic nativism of the surrounding entries disappears; the prose is bland, even as the visions of death grow more terrible. There are several possible explanations for this. Rumphius had never seen the *upas*. It did not grow on his island, and is thus one of few entries based almost entirely on the accounts of others. For knowledge of the *upas*, Rumphius relied on the writings of botanist Jacob Bontius, as well as two informants, Maximiliaan de Jong, an administrator under Governor-General Cornelis Speelman, and Jacob Cops, the Governor of Ambon (139–140). The latter sent Rumphius some twigs and poison, collected deep into the mountains of Celebes,⁸ where “the Shore-people and strangers can hardly reach” (127). This is Toradja country, home to “the wildmen of the mountains,” the upland people said to be indigenous to the island (131). By mapping the tree this way, the *upas* is plunged into the “savage” heart of Celebes, much as it was identified with the Bataks in Sumatra and the Dayaks in Borneo. “Nature has set this evil plant apart from the dwellings of people,” Rumphius writes, firmly casting his lot with the shore-dwellers (127).

⁸ Present-day Sulawesi, west of the Moluccas, across the Macassar Strait from Borneo.

Rumphius is further distanced from the *upas* by his position as a former soldier. The tree's entry begins:

Up to now I have never heard of a more horrible and more villainous poison coming from plants, than that which is produced by this kind of Milk-tree. I call it a Milk-tree because it yields a reddish-brown sap; and this sap is the pride of Indians throughout the Water-Indies, and with it they dare provoke Dutch arms. The Soldiers were erstwhile more afraid of this than they were of Canon or Musket; but now that its nature and antidotes are better known than before, it is neither feared nor esteemed quite as much. (127)

Immediately, Rumphius hails the *upas* as an opponent. He had fought for the VOC, dodging darts and arrows, draping himself with sailcloth to repel the sap (134). For him, the tree's poison is a menace, proud property of the Macassarese, who deploy it in their fight against the Dutch. He says the Macassarese "dare to" deploy it—an act of insolence. Throughout the entry, Rumphius writes in the voice and with the memory of one terrorized by the *upas*. It is not a friendly specimen, a grass that grew near his home, or one of his dear orchids. On the contrary, it is something to subdue. The entry is an attempt to get a handle on the *upas*; one sees this in the movement at the end of the first paragraph, his declaration that the tree has been solved, denuded. One need only read a bit further to find the anxiety beneath this claim.

Rumphius presents the *Poison Tree's* physical description in two parts, according to the samples he received. The first sample he names "female," the second "male." This was common botanical practice at the time, with sex assigned according to a specimen's appearance. In this case, the female is stout and wrinkled, with branches like a mango tree; the male tree is taller with a scant canopy and stiffer twigs (128). The male is, unsurprisingly, considered more virulent than the female,

but in either case, Rumphius warns the reader to take care: “No person dares approach it without having swaddled his head, arms, and legs with cloths, or he will become aware of a strong tingling in his limbs that will make them stiff and insensible. When drops from these leaves fall on someone’s body it will make it swell up; nor should one stand under the tree with his head uncovered or his hairs will fall out” (129). But Rumphius does not make the *Poison Tree*’s danger a simple matter of contact. Instead, he figures the tree’s toxicity as atmospheric, roving, like the clouds or “miasmas” said to blow through the tropical jungle spreading disease (David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 33). The tree is thus presented as *exuding* poison; the venom may be expressed most directly as milk, but the leakiness of that substance flows everywhere, purging the surrounding earth of vegetation, and felling people and animals caught downwind (129). Even from the relative safety of Rumphius’ writing desk, many hundreds of miles from Celebes, the *Poison Tree* exerts its deadly pull: “The branches that had been sent to me from Macassar, in a large Bamboo that was tightly shut, were still powerful enough that if one stuck a hand in there one felt a tingling as one does in frozen limbs after returning to where it is warm,” he writes, remembering cold weather (129). The tree’s power is so autonomous, it assumes the form of the *Ular Batu*, “a horned snake that cackles like a hen . . . and by night has fiery eyes” (129). Rumphius says this creature lives beneath the *Poison Tree*. It is the tree’s familiar, an animalic condensation that, like its host, can kill from afar with its breath.

In spite of Rumphius' claims to the contrary, the Dutch had no true antidote against the *upas*. His unease about the tree is real, even as it takes on fantastic proportions. One way Rumphius manages this unease is to shift his narrative focus from objects (leaves, stems) to processes (gathering, curing, dart-making). Much as the relief workers soothed themselves with counting after the tsunami, Rumphius quiets his concern by describing how the *Poison Tree's* sap is extracted, hauled, stored, and heated with bitter ginger to form a gum. Translating the actions that produce the poison into words tames them, unhooking the barb, as it were, from his own flesh. These long passages appear rather unexpectedly under the categories of "Name" and "Place." Here is how Rumphius describes extraction:

No one is so bold as to approach this tree and get its sap with his bare hands. For if he did he would feel as if all his limbs were shriveling up and stiffening. Therefore they first swaddle their head, hands and legs with cloths, and then take the aforesaid long and pointed Bamboo which they plunge forcefully and at a slant into the bark of the nether trunk, since the lower it is to the root the more potent the poison. They leave four or five of these Bamboos in one tree for as long as three or four days, and so a bloody sap flows down this cannell and that shortly thereafter hardens, and one kind will fade to russet and the other to black. Only the foremost segment of this Bamboo is filled, the rest is cut off; and to make this poison even more malicious they immediately cut the tree down with long axes after they have extracted the poison from it, contending that when the tree dies all those will die who have been wounded with the sap they have drawn from it; but if the tree remains alive so will also the poison's power grow weaker with time. But I believe that they do this to only very few trees, for otherwise not many trees would be left standing. (132)

The passage begins with the familiar injunction to bind the extremities or risk death. Once swaddled, however, Rumphius gains the confidence to move through the litany of operations till the tree itself is speared, bleeding, allowing him to leave the sap for the bamboo pipe that conducts its flow. This, in turn, lets the reader settle on the

homeliness of the technical detail—the segmented bamboo, the hardening sap. Midway through the paragraph, however, terror resurfaces. Rumphius repeats the rumor that tapped trees are cut down to increase their killing power, but he soon steadies himself, reasoning that the practice must be restricted or else few trees would survive.

Rumphius' methodical description of the sap's processing is also interrupted by hearsay. The extracted sap, he explains is "brought to Macassar to one of the great *Creyns* [monarchs] . . . who puts it in his Castle . . . and guards it carefully in a separate dwelling. It is kept at a middling heat, since too great a cold will harm it, but too great a heat will harm it even more, hence it is wrapped ten times in linen cloths and is loosened once every seven days, wiped off, the cloths and rags shook, and then wrapped up again" (132). In this way, one learns of the careful, even reverent treatment of the *upas*—the way the tender sap is set apart in its own structure in the royal compound, the long cycles of wrapping and unwrapping. Rumphius notes that these tasks were left to the women, who fools said "[did] mingle their menses with the poison, and that it was for this purpose that the women of Macassar wore trousers so that they could collect therein" (133). This myth seems to emerge out of the relatively "equal" gender relations of the Buginese. The fierce, seafaring Bugis had once been matriarchal, and after Islamicization,⁹ Buginese women retained control over their households, ate with their husbands, could lead warriors into battle and divorce (145). Though Rumphius calls the tale of contaminated blood "foolish,"

⁹ The peoples of Celebes were among the last to be converted to Islam (145).

through its repetition, he becomes one more voice linking the monstrosity of the *Poison Tree* to the monstrosity of women: the red *upas* sap and menstrual blood are made to run together, bearing pollution, strangeness, and death.

The death Rumphius fears would come on the tip of a *sompit*, an arrow or dart, often made of a shark's tooth, and smeared with poison. He describes how the poison is readied:

Now if they want to go to War and want to prepare this poison to bedaub the arrows and darts, they will gather all the lumps and rolls of the various colors, and place those of the same color together. But to distinguish the most potent one from the rest cannot be done at sight, but this is done as follows. Take the root of . . . bitter Ginger, crush it, soak it in water until it becomes sticky, press it and then strain it through a cloth, then pour some of it in a little dish and add a tiny lump or some scrapings of the poison. The most experienced ones could presently judge its strength are then pushed together and put in that sticky water. And one will be amazed to see how this poison begins to seeth, and shew its power, boiling and often changing itself so forcefully that there is a pit in themidst of it wherethrough one can see to the bottom of the saucer or bowl (133)

Again, one is struck by the slowness of Rumphius' narration, its careful sequencing, its technicity—remarkable feats of imagination. He had never seen the sap sorted or stirred, and yet he knows how much poison to scrape from the bottom of the dish and the quality of the water. It is at this moment in the entry that he is closest to the poison and therefore most at risk. But by naming each stage of preparation, Rumphius gets out of the way of the *sompit*—*he* crushes the ginger, *he* stirs the bowl. One could say he becomes, temporarily, Macassarese. But inhabitation and the safety it affords cannot last. Once the sap is activated, the mixture—and Rumphius—begin to reel. The liquid is so animated that it forms an eddy, mirroring the action of the poison in the body described earlier in the entry: “When the venom penetrates into the

warm blood it immediately spreads throughout the entire body until one can feel it in all the veins, causing a great fire and thereupon comes *a grievous whirling in the head*, followed by a weakness, and then death” (130, my emphasis). The death Rumphius imagines is dizzying, an inversion. The mood of the entry is one of shock and bewilderment; *white men should not die by trees*, it seems to say. But this logic is overturned by its conclusion.

Rumphius’ ends his treatment of the *Poison Tree* with a recollection of what he calls “the last Madjerasensian War,” a campaign he says taught him and his fellow soldiers to “frustrate the arrogance of the Macassar people when they thought to overrun Amboina on the strength of their villainous darts” (134). He is referring to the 1650–1656 wars with the Sultan of Ternate, but one of the numerous Ambonese Wars¹⁰ that would last a hundred years and decimate thirty percent of the local population. The list of defensive devices is unimposing: spacious garments made of Spanish leather and sail cloth, tall miters, various antipoisons which go unnamed (134). Rumphius briefly describes what we learn were expectorants in an appendix titled *Concerning the Powers and Characteristics of the Aforementioned Dart Poison*,

¹⁰ In Ambon, the VOC encountered a culture whose traditional warfare took the form of headhunting. Raids (*Kora-Kora*), presided over by a shaman, began at sea; retrieved heads were hung on rods over the victor’s shoulder, and later placed in the village ceremonial hall. The proximity of these violent acts to the ocean is striking: “Sometimes it might happen that some of the prisoners were placed in the bow of a ship and that their heads would be chopped off the moment the vessel ran aground on the beach.” Castle Victoria, the VOC’s former headquarters in Kota Ambon, is on the seashore, and coral was used to fortify VOC garrisons. (“Headhunting, Carnage and Armed Peace in Amboina, 1500–1700,” Knaap, Gerrit (*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 46, No. 2, *Aspects of Warfare in Premodern Southeast Asia* (2003), pp. 165–192).

and its Antidotes.¹¹ This begins with a caveat: no true remedy had been found, though the radjas of Macassar were said to be experimenting on prisoners, introducing the poison into a toe or thumb, then lopping it off, to see if the victim survived. What little Rumphius can tell of existing antidotes had been learned, he says, from Macassarese women, “by coaxing or force” (*The Ambonese Herbal*, 405). *Radix Toxicaria*, the *Dart-Root*, was chewed, the juice swallowed, and the remainder laid over the wound; this would induce intense vomiting, believed to expel the venom (406). Similar therapies were made from the sap of the water-*Djeruk*, the broad-leaved *Varinga*, the bark of the *Sayor Banyang*, and the roots, stems, and leaves of the *Parari*, the *Cadju Radja*, and the *Pule* tree. But in each case, treatment often failed, explaining the Dutch turn away from cure, towards protection. The Dutch could not solve the *upas*; against muskets, handguns, swivelguns, cannon, axes, bushknives, hand grenades, a thousand galleons, white flesh continued to break and die (Knaap Gerrit, “Headhunting, Carnage and Armed Peace in Amboina, 1500–1700,” 7, 14–16). In the end, Rumphius, too, cannot conquer his subject. The entry resolves and the tree persists, a condition of being in the Indies.

*

The *upas* had a long life after Rumphius. It is mentioned in nearly all botanical accounts of Southeast Asia through the start of the last century, and was a favorite lyric object among the Romantics. Byron, Coleridge, Dickens, and Charlotte

¹¹ I have learned of the existence of this appendix via a preview of the complete English version of *The Ambonese Herbal*, translated, edited, and annotated by the late E.M. Beekman and published in 2011 by Yale University Press.

Brontë all turn towards the Poison Tree.¹² In *Little Dorrit*, a dazed prison guard reports feeling he had captured not a man, but the *upas*, and “was going round and round in a vortex” (Charles Dickens, 336). Bertha Mason’s madness is likened to its venom in *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 195).¹³ In every case, the tree is figured as destroyer, wasting bodies as well as the tropical landscape. Erasmus Darwin, Charles’ grandfather, evokes its power this way:

Where seas of glass with gay reflection smile
 Round the green coasts of Java’s palmy isle;
 A spacious plain extends its upland scene,
 Rock rise on rocks, and fountains gush between;
 Soft zephyrs blow, eternal summers reign,
 And showers prolific bless the soil,—in vain!
 —No spicy nutmeg scents the vernal gales,
 Nor towering plantain shades the mid-day vales;
 No grassy mantle hides the sable hills,
 No flowery chaplet crowns the trickling rills;
 Nor tufted moss, nor leathery lichen creeps
 In russet tapestry o’er the crumbling steeps.
 —No step retreating, on the sand impress’d
 Invites the visit of a second guest;
 No refulgent fin the unpeopled stream divides,
 No revolant pinion cleaves the airy tides’
 Nor handed moles, nor beaked worms return,
 That mining pass the irremeable bourn.—
 Fierce in dread silence on the blasted heath
 Fell *Upas* sits, the *Hydra-tree* of death.
 Lo; from one root, the envenom’d soil below,
 A thousand vetative serpents grow;
 In shining rays the scaly monster spreads
 O’er ten square leagues his far-diverging heads;
 Or in one trunk entwists his tangled form,

¹² Byron invokes the *upas* in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812–1818); Coleridge in *Remorse* (1813); and Dickens in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (143–1844) as well as *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857).

¹³ As scholars of postcoloniality and the novelist Jean Rhys have emphasized, Bertha Mason is a Jamaican Creole, animalized for her non-whiteness. [See Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and *The Critique of Colonial Reason* (1999) by Gayatri Spivak, among others, for an introduction to the scholarship on this subject.]

Looks o'er the clouds, and hisses in the storm.
Steep'd in fell poison, as his sharp teeth part.
A thousand tongues in quick vibration dart;
Snatch the proud Eagle towering o'er the heath,
Or pounce the Lion, as he stalks beneath;
Or strew, as marshal'd hosts contend in vain,
With human skeletons the whiten'd plain.

(*The Upas Tree*, quoted in *The Poison Tree*, 139)

The Upas Tree appears in “The Loves of Plants,” one half of Darwin’s diptych *The Botanic Garden*, a bawdy, popularized presentation of Linnaeus published in 1789. Trained as a physician, Darwin declined George III’s invitation to practice medicine at court, and went on to become one of the great English intellectuals of the 18th century. A naturalist, botanist, poet, and philosopher, as well as a physician, Darwin prefigured the work of his famous grandson, writing that warm-blooded animals had evolved from a single ancestor and formed “one living filmament” [*Zoönomia* (1794–1796)]. Warm-bloodedness, you could say, was a preoccupation. In the preface to “The Loves of Plants” Darwin writes: If Ovid “did, by art poetic, transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses, into trees and Flowers, I have undertaken, by similar art, to restore some of them to their original animality” (vii). This deliberate eroticism is important. The colony was always the site of “original animality”—a new Eden where whites might recover pleasures lost.

The poem begins in paradise: the wind, the sea, an island. Darwin's Java¹⁴ is the height of European tropic fantasy, but something intrudes on this idyll. The seemingly lush landscape is empty. There are no people, no worms. Even the scent of nutmeg—which drew the invaders in the first place—has been stripped from the air. The absence is explained by a presence. Over the “blasted heath” sits the *upas*, which Darwin calls the “*Hydra-tree* of death” [19, 20]. The Hydra was, of course, the second foe of Herakles, a terrible, many-headed serpent that dwelt in the swampy country near Lake Lerna. Looked at simply, the Hydra is a blown up version of the *Ular Batu*, both creatures being scaled and cold-blooded, with the power to kill with their breath. But the blowing up is far from simple. The Hydra was self-replenishing, growing two new heads each time one was cut off. The exact number of heads is unknown; more, it is said, than the potters could paint. Over the centuries, the Hydra became an icon of excess and disorder. The myth was often invoked to convey the immensity of colonial endeavor—the clearing of land, the slave trade—and the snare of native resistance (Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 2). Figuring the *upas* through the Hydra invests the tree not only with monstrosity, but with the *fullness* of the monster. Against the waste of the Javanese terrain, the *upas* is pregnant with horror: too many heads, teeth, those thousand darting tongues

¹⁴ Most of these Anglophone writers locate their *Poison Tree* in Java, not in Celebes, as does Rumphius. This is likely the result of the Java-centrism of travelogues penned by English and French adventurers.

[28]. As a multiplicity, it makes quick work of the singular signs of European power, the eagle and the lion,¹⁵ who battle uselessly on a field strewn with skeletons [32–33].



Figure Three: *The Upas Tree or Poison Tree on the Isle of Java*, Francis Danby, 1820

The Upas Tree is made visible by the Irish painter Francis Danby. Danby was born in County Wexford in 1793 and, after moving to England in 1813, became a prominent member of the Bristol School. A loose federation, rather than a formal movement, members of the School met to sketch in the evenings, and were known for their gentle depictions of the rolling West Country. Danby, too, began his career quietly, but turned, with the fashion of the day, to dark, monumental pictures, works belittled by Constable as “grand and murky dreams” (Andrew Graham-Dixon,

¹⁵ The lion has, of course, long been synonymous with the British crown, and the eagle was chosen as the official emblem of the United States in 1782. The beasts are also Christian icons, associated with the evangelists Mark and John, respectively.

Darkness Visible). In this genre, Danby was and, in some ways, remains dwarfed by the figure of John Martin, but emerged in his own right in 1820, when he made his London debut. The painting was *The Upas or Poison Tree on the Isle of Java*, and it was the sensation of that year's British Institution exhibition. It is a massive composition, 66 by 99 inches, the size of the canvas amplifying the already awful theme. The Bristol School had literary leanings (some members were friends with William Blake), and "The Loves of Plants" was introduced to Danby and his cohort by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Lindsay Stanton, *Review: Francis Danby*). There is a faithfulness to Danby's visualization (*rocks rising on rocks*), but there are also discrepancies between the written and imaged scene. In the painting, there is no remainder of a prior paradise. The moment is post-apocalypse: no fountains, no sea, only a dry ravine, cut in tiers to show where the water has been. The very temperature of the tropics has disappeared. The air is thin, clear, and in the distance, a ring of white mountains. Java by way of the moon. Darwin's tree squats over the valley, but this *upas* is different. It stands—erect is the only word—in its stone canyon, the painting's overdetermined phallic center. The tree is anything but multiple. Without limbs, sharpened to a point, and strangely winnowed, it seems to have spent all its poison on the corpse in the middle ground. The tree is balanced by the presence of one other figure. In the foreground, on a table-like outcropping, a woman clutches her face and hides her eyes, twisting away in horror. The figure is spot-lit, seared by a white light that is brighter for the rest of the scene's shadow.¹⁶ I

¹⁶ The strength of this contrast is, in part, an effect of restoration. Danby's canvases were so dim and

call her female, but the assignment of gender is complex. The garment, a classical white swath of cloth, covers only the lower half of the body; the hair is short. And yet something about the gesture is profoundly feminine. She may be read as a reference to the criminals said to be able to buy their freedom from prison with retrieved poison,¹⁷ casting the painting into a familiar Romantic register of moral parable. Or would this be a restricted interpretation?

It is also possible to read the figure as a transplant from the 15th century. She has wandered in from the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, where Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* clings gingerly to the upper register of the stucco wall. This is a moral parable to be sure—the “original” moral parable, if the monotheists are to be believed—but on a scale far grander than is suggested by conventional reading. In the Masaccio, one sees another post-traumatic moment: Eve and Adam, after the Fall.

his paint application so fragile, that many works, including *The Upas*, were believed lost by the end of the 19th century. A restoration project was launched, however, in the 1980s, enabling a major retrospective at the Tate in 1989.

¹⁷ This explanation appears in Darwin's note on lines 237–8 of Canto III, and is a reworking of the myth circulating in Rumphius' time, that the *radjas* used prisoners as test subjects in their quest to develop an antidote (Victoria & Albert Museum online catalog <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O82563/oil-painting-the-upas-or-poison-tree/>>).



Figure Four: *Expulsion from Paradise*, Masaccio, 1426–1427

The couple leaves the garden together, but differently. Adam is distraught in the foreground, his hands over his face, his penis exposed. His muscular body is idealized and his arms a bit pinched, but the overall effect is naturalistic, inspired by Masaccio's studies of the Laocoön. Eve, by contrast, is boneless and sightless: animal. Her body dramatically expresses all the suffering in the world. Where

Adam's pain is recognizable as tragedy, narrative even, as the lower half of his body strides beneath the covered eyes and bent head, Eve is demolished by sadness. Her face howls and her hair is all but unrendered, sliding off the back of her head, colluding with the hands that mask her breasts and vulva, unsexing her. Only they don't. Like the figure in *The Upas*, Eve remains doubtlessly female. Viewed side by side, one can see that the figure is, in fact, a mixture or "child" of the doomed couple: the hands and legs of Adam, but the feeling of Eve. Not just shame, annihilation.

It is unsurprising that Danby should invoke Masaccio and the iconography of Biblical epic in general. The grandiose narrative paintings he specialized in were often Biblical "histories" [*The Delivery of Israel Out of Egypt* (1825), *An Attempt to Illustrate the Opening of the Sixth Seal* (1828), *The Deluge* (1848)], and, in each case, he drew on a recognizable visual program to make his canvas legible. If the Java of his imagination was remote in space, translating it to a place remote in Christian time had the effect of bringing the subject nearer, even internal to, his viewer. Java's otherness thus becomes *incorporated* into the otherness of a fallen humanity; a distant and disciplined memory, rather than a menacing present. But something confounds this logic. By transporting *Expulsion* to an island in the Indian Ocean, Danby sews the seeds of another Fall. The colony was synonymous with Eden; that has already been established. Darwin writes of zephyrs and fountains and unending heat, and his reader knows she is in Paradise, long before the arrival of tree and serpent. And yet it is only in Danby that the *upas* becomes the Tree of Knowledge. That tree, lush and wasting, nourishing and deadly, requires an object for its power, needs Masaccio's

wretched figure to take on its terrible dimensions. The *upas* is similarly enlarged through its proximity to the Genesis story, itself decentered and reworked by the Indonesian ground. Here, in Java, the Tree of Knowledge portends not simple banishment, but two specific modes of exile: the end of Dutch rule, 125 long years into the future, and another, more immediate, more total exclusion. For all the West's attempts to "deal with" the Orient, "by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it . . .," Europeans remained fundamentally *outside* (Said, *Orientalism* 3). In this way, the *upas* reinscribes the split of that other Tree of Knowledge—a Tree of Death for the colonizer, a Tree of Life for the native, whose sovereignty it marks and defends.

Together, the Tree of Man, the hang tree, and the *upas* form a kind of grove, damp and cool, the sky only partly visible in lacy patches overhead. The tropics are deeply entwined with the forest and, especially, the "jungle," a term coined in British India, early in the 18th century. The word once required a qualifier; jungles could be wet or dry, scrub or canopy, but came to mean a wood filled with wild animals and luxuriant vegetation (Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze*, 80). In India, the dense, jungly tracts of the far north and far south were marked off as heathen, "entangled with rank, miasmatic, over-fecund plant life as Hinduism appeared to teem with primitive beliefs and convoluted superstitions" (81). The Indies were considered part of this "Indic" world, nominally Islamic, but littered with Hindu and Buddhist monuments and practices, yoked to the subcontinent by geographic proximity, as well as cultural, climatic, administrative, commercial, and scientific ties

(145). But we are missing the trees for the forest. In each of my three examples, I have sought to demonstrate how the tree operates as an icon and instrument of colonial violence: the Tree of Man as a diagram of racial difference; the hang tree as that diagram's brute literalization; and the *upas*, the arboreal bogeyman¹⁸ that stirred the imaginations of naturalists, writers, painters, and poets. In each case, the tree becomes the apparatus for making and perceiving racial difference in the colony, like an anthropometrist's rule. Each tree functions visually as a scene, evoking, and sometimes performing, the act of execution. To liquefy the tree then is to dissolve its hierarchies and free the captives hung eerily on its boughs. I have sought to do this by throwing the root system overhead and by turning towards the *upas*, a tree that it wears its roots on the outside, leaking decolonial matter on the bloodstained ground.

¹⁸ A corruption of *bugis*, the fierce seafaring people of Southern Sulawesi.

Chapter Two: The Underwater Body

Marguerite Duras' best-known work in the Anglophone world is *The Lover* (1984), a fictionalization of her youth in Indochina and her affair with the son of a Chinese merchant. The story was retold by Duras in *The North China Lover* (1991) and visualized in a 1992 film by Jean-Jacques Annaud. The novella begins with a string of images, the Speaker or *elle*, crossing the Mekong. The details of her crossing are sharp—the threadbare silk dress, the fedora But no photograph was taken. The Speaker tells us that the image does not exist: “It was omitted. Forgotten. It never was detached or removed from all the rest. And it’s to this, this failure to have been created, that it owes its virtue: the virtue of representing . . .” (10). The missing photograph can be understood as an argument for the imaginary, a counterworld to Duras’ girlhood poverty, to meals of stork and crocodile, but it is also an enactment of her very particular approach to writing. Duras’ turn to negative, amnesiac objects signals a subtractive method: “Rather than telling a story or expressing ideas . . . Durassian texts engage in a continuous ‘travail de perte’ (practice of loss) producing stylistic effects such as ‘dépouillement’ (stripping) and ‘évidement’ (voiding),” with “characters, plots, and decors undergo[ing] a process of continual erasure from one text to the next” (“Duras on the Margins,” *Figuring the East*, Marie-Paul Ha 87). In the 1970s, feminist critics lauded the holes in Duras’ texts as markers of a new “Écriture féminine,” an antiliterature of blanks, nonsense, and the unsaid which reflected the patriarchal damping, indeed gagging of women’s voices, and originated, like a scream, “in the body” rather than being issued by the

mind. A great deal has been written about this. What interests me more is the photograph itself—how an object comes to have the status of the unappeared. Duras is writing in Paris, remembering Indochina. Surely things are lost, over such a distance, but I think the vanishing happens differently. Indochina is a wet place, not only the river, but the entire landscape, the paddies and the market stalls and the misty mountains. “Everywhere . . . there’s a very slight deafness, or fog,” *The Lover’s Speaker* observes (34). She is describing the country and the text. Water cleanses, as everyone knows, but it is also a precondition to rot; in the tropics, a fedora, left outside, can be reduced to mesh in a year. This, I suggest, is the action that destroys the photograph. Before it’s had a chance to develop.

The image flashes just before a reverie that can only be described as a nightmare of water:

I always get off the bus when we reach the ferry, even at night, because I’m always afraid the cables might break and we might be swept out to sea. In the terrible current I watch my last moments. The current is so strong it could carry everything away—rocks, a cathedral, a city. There’s a storm blowing inside the water. A wind raging. (11)

The Speaker augurs what the 21st century has seen.¹⁹ Her premonition of catastrophe at the bottom of the Mekong hurls itself into the future towards Banda Aceh, complete with the Atlantis-like submersion of city and mosque. The vision is reason enough to read Duras as part of a project about Indonesia, but there are other, longer threads. I argued in the introduction that the Indies are a permeable space,

¹⁹ On 3 May 2008, Cyclone Nargis struck Burma, killing tens of thousands of people and displacing millions. In the days following the disaster, the Western press reached back into its tsunami notebook, and the headlines once again swam with the dead: “The bodies come and go with the tide . . .,” a typical *New York Times* article begins (11 May 2008).

thousands of islands stretched across thousands of miles. Ships and monks and missionaries and traders have long linked the archipelago with the mainland, as well as birds, bats, seeds, the monsoon, and the sea itself. Ann Laura Stoler invokes Indochina in her two book-length studies on the Dutch East Indies, and read Duras obsessively during her research. What is it about this “French” writer, born in Indochina in 1914 and raised in the flat red country of the Delta, that speaks across the South China Sea? Looked at simply, Duras affords the scholar of the Dutch East Indies the structure and vantage of comparison. While no one would argue that the Indies and Indochina “looked everywhere and from anywhere the same,” colonial scholarship “identifies striking similarities in policy and practice: patterns of panic, discourses reiterated, outrages rehearsed, and fantasies shared” (Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* 209). Both territories were subject to that particular brand of fantasmatic projection that flourished in Southeast Asia (exaggerated fertility, of plants, of women . . .). Both were called *Indo-* by their ruling powers, believing that everything civilizational had come from outside.²⁰ In this way, Stoler looks across a critical but not absolute distance when she compares Indochinese *metis* with Indo-Europeans, when she reads Duras to deepen her understanding of Indies-born whites.

My connection to Duras, and my appeal to her, are more elemental.

Water suffuses her work, especially the “India Cycle” of films and novellas, and the three memoirs set in Indochina. These are drenched texts, lapped by the Mekong, the

²⁰ There are histories (and mythologies) of traffic between the two cultures as well. The Hindu Cham people of Central Vietnam, for example, are said to have migrated from Borneo.

Ganges, and the Indian Ocean. The water is both matter and metaphor: storm-stirred tides invade the crops and also the bodies of the female protagonists. These women, the Speaker, Anne-Marie Stretter, Lol Stein, the Beggarwoman of Savannakhet, are all cast as bathers, swimming—at times drowning—in what Duras calls a *liquid world*.²¹ Scholars have interpreted the “fluid Durassian land of swamps and marshes” as a space where “there can be no fixing or fixed borders to separate *the self from the Other*” (Ha 84, my emphasis). This has been a productive frame, but Duras studies has come rather late to postcoloniality, and dominant reading practices have tended to emphasize the former over the latter, interpreting the watery terrain as an allegory of psychic dissolution.²² I, by contrast, would like to linger on the second term, shifting the focus from subjectivity to subalternity.

In this chapter, I will argue that the gender of water, the comingling of water and womanhood, take on particular meaning against the India Cycle’s Asian ground. By liquefying the already sodden landscape, by making it female and dominable, Duras assists in a colonial project. This may feel like a blow. Duras abhorred colonialism; her entire *oeuvre*, from the Asian works to those set in anti-Semitic Europe, may be read as a repudiation of white supremacy. *The Sea Wall*, for

²¹ Duras identifies a possible source for this in a 1979 interview with Xavière Gauthier: “All my life, even when I was small I’ve seen life’s appearance on earth in this form: a gigantic and inert marsh on whose surface, suddenly, an air bubble bursts, a single one, stinking; then—thousands of years pass—another one bursts. At the same time that these air bubbles, these life bubbles, manage to free themselves from the bottom of the marsh, the light is changing, the moisture lifts and light comes to the surface of the waters. For me the waters in Genesis were like that: heavy, weighty as liquid steel, but cloudy, under fog, deprived of light” (*Woman to Woman*, Note 70, 129). Later, she would find the bog again in the dried tributaries of the Loire, and imagine the Ganges basin.

²² For a discussion of geographic metaphors in Duras, Marie-Paule Ha cites Mireille Rosello [Amertume: l’eau chez Marguerite Duras] and Madeleine Borgomano Un Lecture des fantasmés, “L’Histoire de la mentiante indienne. Une cellule génératrice de l’oeuvre de Marguerite Duras.” *Poétique* 48 (1981): 479–493.

example, is a thinly fictionalized account of her mother's struggle against the corrupt colonial authority, and a wretched portrait of the lives of the Vietnamese under French rule. But Duras' position as a *colon* meant her life, like Rumphius', was inextricably bound to that of the colonial state. Though she critiqued the colonial system, she also participated in its maintenance, coauthoring a pro-government pamphlet entitled *L'Empire Francais* and working for the Ministry of the Colonies after her "return" to France (73).²³ Duras' relationship to the French colonial administration can therefore best be described as *ambivalent*, like the structure of colonialism itself.²⁴

Water, too, is an ambivalent substance. It yields, running always to the lowest place, but is also elusive, escaping. It conducts the flow of relations between the white Speaker and her Chinese lover, who, upon seeing the girl on the banks of the Mekong, hesitates, overwhelmed by her youth, her beauty, and the impediment of race. *The Lover* begins with the ferry and ends, a shift in scale and orientation, with the ocean liner that will bear the Speaker across the sea, through Suez, to France. The underwater space, of salt, of shipwrecks, brackets their love affair; even his rooms in Cholon are a kind of aquarium: "The sound of the city is so near, so close, you can hear it brushing against the wood of the shutters. It sounds as if they're all going through the room. I caress his body amid the sound, the passers-by. The sea, the

²³ The pamphlet was coauthored with Philippe Roques under the patronym "Donnadiou," and published in 1940. It was never reprinted.

²⁴ See Homi Bhabha's seminal essay, "Of Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

immensity, gathering, receding, returning” (43). Of their first love-making she says: “The sea, formless, simply beyond compare” (38).

The India Cycle is a set of written and filmic texts comprising *The Ravishment of Lol Stein* (1964), *The Vice-Consul* (1965), *L’Amour* (1971), *La Femme du Gange* (1973), *India Song* (1974), and *Son Nom de Venise dans Calcutta desert* (1976).²⁵ Three of these works are set in British India, giving the Cycle its name, the others along the French Atlantic, a strange contiguity of warm and cool oceans. This contiguity is produced through an elaborate recapitulation of motifs and narrative structures, as well as a cast of recurring figures.²⁶ Anne-Marie Stretter and her lover Michael Richardson travel from S. Thala in *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* to the Calcutta of *The Vice-Consul*, whose Beggarwoman appears again in *India Song*, and as the title *La Femme du Gange*. All the stories revolve around the themes of crime, loss, madness, mourning. All of them take place against the backdrop of the opulent but decaying colonialism of the 1930s.²⁷

Formally, the India Cycle gives the appearance of closure, an ornate and tidy

²⁵ The language used here denotes the work’s translation status, i.e., whether or not an English edition exists.

²⁶ The elliptical arrangement is Duras’ own, but it emerged in the context of a wider French literary movement, the *nouvelle roman*. “The New Novel” coined by Émile Henriot in *La Monde* in 1957, challenged the realism of dominant fictive modes with experiments such as unstable narration, slippages in time and space, and the recycling of motifs and moods. While Duras was not formally aligned with the school (she preferred the term “incoherence” in describing the atonality of her work), she acknowledged a certain sympathy between herself and its practitioners, who, at times, were also her collaborators. See, in particular, the work Alain Robbe-Grillet and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Duras’ famous collaboration with Alain Resnais.

²⁷ That the colonial reality recedes in these texts, appearing atmospherically as signal words like “oleanders,” “incense-burners,” “rice-fields” is read by Maurie-Paule Ha as a symptom of Duras’ firm location within white society and the exotic literary tradition. The Beggarwoman can also be read this way, however, I am inclined to interpret the backgrounding of the colony in *The Vice-Consul* both as a re-inscription of domination, and a critical enactment of the brutality of the colonial regime.

knot. A reader once rang Duras to congratulate her on its organization: “It’s interesting how you devised things,” she said (*Woman to Woman* 84). But, for Duras, the India Cycle was not a closed set nor a conscious act of assembly. Rather, it was an upwelling from the same vat of memory that fed the autobiographical texts, *The Sea Wall* (1950), *The Lover* (1984), and *The North China Lover* (1991). There is a profound openness between these two cycles; though they are not intertextual in the manner of their constituent works, they share a common tonality—the color of the monsoon, the reflection of light on water. The Beggarwoman shuttles between them, as does the plight of a young, poverty-stricken woman seeking sanctuary for her dying child. These episodes, we know, come from Duras’ childhood. What is interesting is the way the episodes repeat across the diverse topographies of India and Indochina, and the exchangeability of those terrains. Duras was as surprised as anybody to find the Sub-Continent her recurrent milieu: “It’s not possible, it’s not possible,” she fumbles, in a 1979 conversation with her friend, Xavière Gauthier, “for it to exert such a fascination over me. I saw Calcutta once, but I was seventeen years old. I spent a day there—it was a port of call—and that, I never forgot²⁸ But I think I’ve got to go further back Have got to go . . . to the ricefields in the South of Indochina” (85). Throughout the interview, Duras speaks of the need to reverse her own course by ocean liner, the dockings at Calcutta and Singapore, go back to her youth in the Delta. This return remaps the at times unwieldy geography of the India Cycle, the Himalayas erupting within a day’s drive of Calcutta and

²⁸ My mother tells the same story, in the same tone of voice, about passing through Calcutta on the long journey from Jakarta to Genoa, and then on to Amsterdam.

Ceylon in the middle of the Ganges Basin. It unveils Duras' India for what it is, not a place, but an evocation, a code, an overlay: “. . . when I say, ‘What is that murmuring’? ‘It’s the Ganges,’ it’s the Mekong speaking. Do you see?”²⁹

The Vice-Consul and its accompanying stage script and film are the only texts in the India Cycle to take place both in India and in Indochina. “Take place” requires some explanation here; the primary narrative is set in Calcutta, with a frame story that spans the waters of Tonle Sap to the Ganges. Over the course of this chapter, I will invert this arrangement, but first let me lay it out plain. The action of *The Vice-Consul* occurs during the monsoon. The light is thin and yellow, like the faces of White India, who languish in their shuttered rooms, waiting for night and sipping scorching green tea. The city is a nest of concentric circles: the Black Town around the White Town around the lepers. There is a smell everywhere, the sound of dogs barking and lepers crying out in their sleep. By the river stands the French Embassy and its apartments, all illuminated. Anne-Marie Stretter, the Vice-consul of Lahore, and the Beggarwoman of Savannakhet form the architecture of the novella. It is worth meeting each of them before we move on.

*

The ambassador's wife is Anne-Marie Stretter. She played the piano as a girl in Venice, and can still be heard playing, an old instrument, swollen with damp. She is younger than the ambassador, plucked as a girl of seventeen, dragged through the

²⁹ This is not only true in Duras, for the word Mekong or “Mae Nam Khong” is a corruption of the Sanskrit “Ganga” (Boreth Ly, lecture, 22 February 2011, *Ancient Arts of Southeast Asia*, U.C. Santa Cruz).

dust of Savannakhet, and, for twenty years, the capitals of Asia. Anne-Marie Stretter has pale eyes beneath transparent lids. She is the center of White Calcutta, hosting balls which last into the early hours of the morning, and end with her passing out roses grown in the cool, green country of Nepal. After the party, Anne-Marie Stretter retires with a group of Englishmen to the Blue Moon. She has many lovers. She has been in love Michael Richardson for some time. Anne-Marie Stretter is always encircled by the ring of Englishmen, who drive with her at weekends, out to the islands of the Delta, where they stay at the impeccable Prince of Wales hotel, facing the sea. She is reduced to tears there; there is talk of ambulances blaring in the middle of the night. All this the ambassador permits. Everyone permits it; Anne-Marie Stretter is the height of discretion, they say.

The Vice-consul of Lahore is recently arrived in Calcutta. He was relieved from his previous post, an awful business, the very worst thing. He fired on the sleeping lepers in Shalimar Gardens, and also into the mirrors in his room.³⁰ He offers no explanation. In a letter, he says he awaits the ambassador's decision, not caring when the decision comes or where he is sent. He is still young, handsome, in a way, but those flat, dull eyes, the hollow voice. There have never been any women. What little is known about him comes through the letters of an old aunt in France and the Club Secretary, with whom he drinks in the evenings. The Club Secretary repeats everything; the Vice-consul relies on this. The men exchange stories of pranks at

³⁰ At the time of writing, a CIA contractor, Raymond Davis, was jailed and later freed with the payment of \$2 million "blood money," after shooting two men in Lahore (*New York Times*, 16 March 2011).

school, of steaming piles of excrement in the desk drawers of their masters, gay times, expulsion. The Vice-consul has never been in love, he says, not until he sees the bicycle left by the tennis courts, unused in the heavy rain. From his window, the Vice-consul watches Anne-Marie Stretter. They have passed in the street, but not spoken. A note arrives late in the afternoon, the day of the party. Just one word, "Come." All of White Calcutta is there. The turbaned servants move noiselessly about the room, guests swaying to the tinkling of Indiana's Song. All eyes are on the Vice-consul. The guests talk of India. Some people never get used to it, they say, like the wife of the Spanish consulate secretary who went mad, believing she had leprosy. The Vice-consul is not afraid of leprosy. He has not taken his eyes off of Anne-Marie Stretter. They dance, almost without speaking. The Vice-consul says he will scream if he cannot be with her tonight.

The Beggarwoman is singing. Outside, along the banks of the Ganges, her song mingles with the cries of the lepers, the screaming of the Vice-consul. She lingers outside the villa; electric lights mean only one thing: food. In the heat of the day, she sleeps among the lepers, very near to them. By night, she swims, her skin thick and grey with the river's silt. She is not from Calcutta. Listen closely and you will hear—Cambodian. Interspersed between the singing and peels of laughter, the name of her village, *Battambang*. Pregnant at seventeen, her mother drove her from the house. Start walking, lose yourself, she said. The girl starts walking. She splashes through the marshy country around Tonle Sap, walking along the causeways to the long, flat horizon. She is hungry. The child inside her thrashes like a fish, it

devours everything. The girl pulls mangoes from the trees and sifts young rice from the fields. *Mother earth give me something to chew!* Her belly grows more and more distended. Her hair falls out, replaced only by tufts of down. From now on, she will have the appearance of a dirty nun. She follows the Mekong, believing that soon the solid country of the north will melt into the sea. It doesn't. She has been walking the wrong direction. The time of the child is near, and she hides herself, a small enclosure in a gravel quarry. Here the fishermen find her. The men come and go from her hiding place, a bit of money, to feed the child, a small morsel of salted fish. When the baby comes she straps him to her back. She keeps walking. The baby forms a small square of heat between her shoulder blades, she knows exactly the size and weight. Gradually, the weight begins to lighten. The baby sleeps all the time now, its eyes closed. She chews a bit of young rice and dribbles it into the child's mouth, but he spits it back up again. A Cambodian woman tells her the child is dying. Give it away, she says. In Sadec and Vinh Long, the girl looks for whites. She spreads a cloth out in front of her. She squats and waits. A white child and her mother approach and hand her a piastre, then turn away. She runs after them, chasing them down, the listless child and the piastre held in outstretched arms. She follows them all the way to the villa's gate.

*

The Beggarwoman is the invention of another character, Peter Morgan, a young Englishman recently arrived in India and drunk on its suffering. He is writing

a novel based on the mendicant who lives along the Ganges, below his embassy rooms. He looks out his window:

There she is, opposite the residence of the former Vice Consul of France in Lahore. In the shade of an overhanging bush, her dress of coarse sacking still sopping wet, she lies asleep. Her bald head is shaded by the bush. Peter Morgan knows that she has spent part of the night swimming and hunting for food in the Ganges, and the rest accosting passersby in the streets, and singing. This is how she spends her nights. Peter Morgan has followed her through the streets of Calcutta. This is what he knows. (18)

There is an empiricism to Peter Morgan's account: he watches the Beggarwoman, follows her. He sees that she is foreign, that she has lost her hair, her wits, that she sings and babbles, though one wonders if, to an Englishman, Khmer might sound like singing. The Beggarwoman is also a fantasy, the meeting of Peter Morgan's imperial longing with the memory of Anne-Marie Stretter. Peter Morgan is one of her English suitors. While staying with her and the other men at the Prince of Wales hotel, he is asked if the Beggarwoman will be alone in his novel. "No," he replies quickly, easily. "There will be another woman . . . Anne-Marie Stretter" (125). Anne-Marie Stretter met a beggarwoman in Savannakhet, Laos all those years ago, trying to sell a baby. She never forgot it. The dates and place don't coincide, yet "Savannakhet" adhered. The trope of a woman trying to sell a baby emerges from Duras' own memory. Her mother bought a sickly six-month-old at the market in Vinh Long; it lived only a few days. "I still see my mother crossing the garden with this woman who followed her . . ." she recalls (Borgomano quoted in Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot* 152).

The pacing in the garden becomes the Beggarwoman's journey in *The Vice-Consul*:

“She will walk,” he [Peter Morgan] says. “I shall make a great thing of it. It will be an immensely long trek, broken up into hundreds of days of walking, all pulsating with the same rhythm, the rhythm of her footsteps. She will walk, and my words will echo the beat of her footsteps. She will follow the railway line, a road. She will leave behind her, as she goes, signposts driven in to the ground bearing names of places, Mandalay, Prome, Bassein. Facing westward, moving always towards the setting sun, she will cross the path of the sun, cross Thailand, Cambodia and Burma, plains under water, and mountain passes. She will walk for ten years, and, when she reaches Calcutta, she will stop. (144)

This tale of the Beggarwoman constitutes *The Vice-Consul's* frame story; the first fifty pages are given over to her long walk to Calcutta, and she appears again near the novella's end, stepping out of Peter Morgan's narration to confront another Englishman, Charles Rossett, at the edge of a lagoon. The language of the frame story is lush compared to the spare central drama between the Vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter. With luxuriant detail, the reader learns of the worms running under the Beggarwoman's crusted foot, the buzzing in her bald head, the ecstasy of a piece of salted fish, saliva pouring from her mouth. This stands in contrast to the ball taking place at the ambassador's villa, an austere affair, almost unmoving, unspeaking, and the somber trip taken by Anne-Marie Stretter and her entourage to the Islands. These two worlds, one white, one Asian, one exposed to the elements, the other contained to the point of asphyxiation, leak into one another through the embassy villa's open windows. Amidst the barking of the dogs and the lepers' cries, the tinkling of the phonograph, the song of the Beggarwoman filters in.

The Beggarwoman is, by design—Peter Morgan’s and Duras’—an escaping figure. Her mother’s commandment to make herself lost is enacted literally by the text; without second, and even third readings, it can be difficult to track her movements across Indochina to the Bay of Bengal, to identify when she appears “as herself,” part of the Calcutta landscape, and when she is being rendered by Peter Morgan. The climactic episode on the beach near the Prince of Wales hotel is told in such a way that it is unclear whether her appearance is actual or the fantasy of Charles Rossett. Critics have been mostly deft in their handling of the Beggarwoman’s ambiguities, but some have fallen prey to the confusion, misidentifying her as Laotian or failing to mark her nationality as Cambodian in *The Vice-Consul* and *India Song*, and Vietnamese in *The Sea Wall*, *L’Amant*, and *The Lover*.³¹ These mistakes may sound like small breaches of unnecessary orthodoxy. The Indochina of the 1930s was a blurry place; France had carved up the Southeast Asian mainland into the three Vietnamese territories of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina, as well as Cambodia in 1887, adding Laos and Guangzhaowan, a speck of Guangdong Province, in 1893. The lines between these protectorates were hallucinatory and porous, with ethnic populations and language groups streaming through the gaps.³² The Beggarwoman’s unstable ethnicity, her *creolité* in the language of Jane Bradley Winston, may thus be

³¹ *Postcolonial Duras* by Jane Bradley Winston and *The Mother/Daughter Plot* by Marianne Hirsch are two examples. In *Pain and Sorrow in the Modern World*, a version of *The Malady of Grief* published five years earlier than *Black Sun*, translator Katharine A. Jensen makes the odd choice of referring to the Beggarwoman as “the Buddhist woman” (146). Here, “Buddhist” functions not as a religious marker—there are no references to religious practice in the novella—but as a *racial* marker, to distinguish her, presumably, from the Hindu and Muslim majority population of Calcutta.

³² Professor Boreth Ly, lecture, *Arts of Ancient Southeast Asia*, 24 February 2011, U.C. Santa Cruz.

read as one of the many imprecisions and confluences of colonial rule.³³ It may be read as an act of resistance, a refusal to be placed according to the whims of the French regime. But the Beggarwoman's unlocatability is also an effect of careless reading, of the lazy substitution of one far-off-place for another. More sinisterly, we must ask if the substitution is not lazy but willful, a calculated conflation, by Peter Morgan, Duras, or the colonial state itself, to wash away native difference.

Washing away is critical to any reading of the Beggarwoman. She is, above all else, a liquid figure, emerging out of the bog and disappearing, at novella's end, into the sea. Her "progress" through the book is described in terms of dissolution; by the time she reaches Calcutta, her hair, her wits, her language, have all sloughed off, leaving only her singing and the three syllables "Battambang" (146). In my reading, I will attempt to restore her cultural specificity and historicity while attending to the trope of liquification. My vehicle for this is perhaps unexpected. Rather than focusing on the medium of dissolve, on water, I want to emphasize the form the Beggarwoman is made to take in that medium. Peter Morgan does not make his Beggarwoman coterminous with the Great Lake or the Ganges. Instead, he makes her the most abject icon he can summon, a creature of those waters, something monstrous, like the lepers she sleeps with, a fish.

The Beggarwoman's fishliness is in evidence almost from the start. The frame story begins after she has been raped by a fisherman and fallen pregnant. Expelled by her mother, she tries to lose herself on the plain of Tonle Sap, a vast

³³ In her essay "Going International," Jane Bradley Winston calls the Beggarwoman "presumably Asian" and "a mobile and shifting, racial and cultural créole" (*Postcolonial Duras* 63).

marshland laced with causeways. Already, from the first page, the Beggarwoman is beginning to transition from a land-dweller to a water-dweller: “Day after day she walks, at times following the causeways, at others *splashing through water*” (1, my emphasis). In search of an uncle whom her father said might take her in as a servant, she makes her way across the Plain of Birds to the edges of the lake. It rains everyday: “The sky is in perpetual turmoil, with clouds scudding towards the north. The great lake is swollen. Wind fills the sails of junks on the lake of Tonle Sap. The opposite shore of the lake is visible only when the sky clears between storms. Seeming to rise out of the water, a row of bluish palm trees is silhouetted against the sky” (2). Here, in this turbid, shell-studded estuary, the Beggarwoman experiences a change in vision. At first, she has a clear view across the lake to the other side. She can see her village, imagine her family and the small house she will never again enter. But soon the far shore and the lake itself disappear. The vast complex of marshes stretches behind her “like a dazzling sheet of metal” until it too is “blotted out by rain” (3). The lake and the marsh and the weather form a reflective screen between the Beggarwoman and the world. As though she were looking through water.

Driven by hunger and the child, “snapping like a fish” in her belly, the Beggarwoman leaves her home country (3). She relies on the waterways radiating from Tonle Sap to map her movements. With head bent, she follows close to the river’s course, learning to catch fish along the banks. “Sometimes, at night, she swims” (3). The Beggarwoman is becoming riverine. This is not unusual in her part of the world; the river, particularly the Mekong, is the life’s blood of Indochina. An

artery of commerce and community, its banks are farmed all the way down to the water's edge, its currents full of ferries and waders gathering riverweed. The river frames the view in Indochina, a wide muddy stripe beneath the sky. Here, pinned to the horizon, the Beggarwoman makes out details that were invisible from her village: the water, thick as porridge, the teeming life in what she had mistaken for empty space (6). She no longer regards the river, but looks out from it. It has become for her, a structure of competence, a way of assembling herself in exile. Though lost—she thinks she is heading north when she is heading south—the river propels her; day after day she gropes along its edge, sure that, eventually, it will spill into the sea. At night, the dark waters surround her, offering seclusion as well as pleasure to a girl cast out of her mother's arms. Even when the child's time approaches and the Beggarwoman leaves the river for the gravel pit, she fixes her gaze on the rising Stung Pursat. Watching the bamboo drown in great woody clumps in the yellow river, she suppresses her hunger by imagining herself drowned (9).

The Beggarwoman's immersion in the rivers of Indochina changes her body: "In the gravel pit, on the ground, she finds strands of hair, her hair. She pulls her hair and it comes out in handfuls The hair that grows in place of her old hair is soft and fluffy like swansdown" (8). Her bald head is said to give her the appearance of a "scrubby Buddhist nun," but may also be read as a sign of devolution, the loss of a mammalian marker in favor of the down of waterbirds and, eventually, the crust and silt of bottom-feeding fish (8, 163). She loses her verticality as she swims more, walks less and less. In this way, and over many months and years of travel, the

Beggarwoman *becomes aquatic*. It is not merely a physical change. As her body sheds its human qualities, her mind, and, with it, her language fly. By the time she reaches Calcutta and the Ganges, she is incoherent, singing and prattling in a nonsense tongue. The Beggarwoman emerges from the river long enough only to sleep on its banks, to drink from the water bowls left out by Anne-Marie Stretter, and to follow the black Lancia to the Islands.

The Islands are in the Ganges Delta, a landscape not unlike the plain of Tonle Sap: “An immense stretch of land under water, criss-crossed by a thousand causeways. Strung like beads along all the causeways, in single file, rows of people with bare hands. The horizon is a straight line, as it was before there were trees or after the Flood” (140). Anne-Marie Stretter and her Englishmen have come, as usual, to stay at the Prince of Wales, a hotel like the deck of a luxury ocean liner. The hotel is separated from the rest of the island by wire fencing; a village lies at the far end. The wire runs the width of the island and out into the sea itself, to keep out sharks, as well as the native population. The trip has been full of the Beggarwoman. Peter Morgan has been talking of the book he is writing and of the Beggarwoman, his girl. “She comes to the Islands sometimes,” remarks Michael Richardson (145). As the party crosses the garden in front of the hotel, they hear a voice singing:

She has, indeed, arrived on the island. She comes almost every weekend during the summer monsoon, by the first boat, which brings supplies but no passengers. She crouches in a corner for a free ride. She has only arrived today. She never fails to get the right island, but the same instinct that teaches mad elephants where to find banana groves. The façade of the great rectangular building, six hundred feet long, a patch of white dotted with electric lights: food. (159)

Peter Morgan is still talking, still animalizing the Beggarwoman, making her a creature compelled not by desire but hunger.

The rest of the party returns to the hotel by way of the beach, but Charles Rossett, the young attaché and newest member of Anne-Marie Stretter's circle, prefers to go through the palm grove. He imagines the island empty of all but the Beggarwoman: "He sees her swimming, floating on the water, drenched by every oncoming wave, asleep perhaps, or weeping in the sea" (160). Following the wire fence, he arrives at the lagoon. Suddenly, behind him, the patter of naked feet. It is the Beggarwoman, standing erect and calling out to him, laughing. The meeting is ambiguous, perhaps an actual encounter, perhaps Charles' Rossett's heady dream. It is the first time in the novella that the Beggarwoman appears at such close range outside Peter Morgan's narration, and the first time, since her departure from Tonle Sap, that she appears so upright, so human. "*Someone* is calling," the text reads (163, my emphasis). But the anthropomorphism does not last. Charles Rossett approaches the Beggarwoman, some loose change in his hand. Then he stops:

She must have come out of the water. She is sopping wet, her legs are coated with glistening black mud from the shallows of the lagoon, which, on this side of the island, faces the estuary. Mud, which the sea does not wash away, the mud of the Ganges. He does not go any nearer, but stands there, with the coins in his hand. She repeats the word that sounds like 'Battambang.' Her skin is dark, leathery, her eyes sunken in nests of wrinkles, etched by the sun. Her head is covered with a brown crust, like a skull-cap. The sodden dress clings to her thin body. The unwavering smile is terrifying. (163)

To Charles Rossett, the Beggarwoman that steps out of the lagoon is a monster, a kind of swamp thing. Her drenched dress, black, thickened skin, and ringed eyes, all signify a being so radically other that he feels as though he were being confronted by

“a wild animal” (164).³⁴ Sweat streams from his body; he is afraid. The Beggarwoman’s animality reaches its apex a moment later, as she “fumbles inside her dress, between her breasts. There is something in her hand. She holds it out to him: a fish, a live fish. He does not move. She withdraws her hand, lifts the fish up so that he can see it, and bites its head off. Laughing more than ever, she chews the fish head. The decapitated fish jerks in her hand” (163).

Whether imagined or actual, the meeting between Charles Rossett and the Beggarwoman fulfills one of Peter Morgan’s literary ambitions. Late one night, in the dining room of the Prince of Wales Hotel, Peter Morgan and the other men talk of his novel while Anne-Marie Stretter sleeps. Peter Morgan describes the Beggarwoman: “She is as dirty as nature itself, it’s incredible Oh! I want to dwell on that, her filth compounded of everything, and for a long time now ingrained in her skin, a component of the skin itself. I want to analyze her filth, describe what is in it: sweat, river-mud, scraps of stale foie-gras sandwiches from your Embassy receptions, dust, tar, mangoes, fishscales, everything. I want to disgust you” (146). The pleasure Peter Morgan takes in this sketch, his relishing of it, is instructive. He seems to thrill at each rank detail, the way the filth bonds to the Beggarwoman’s skin.³⁵ To disgust his reader is a curious aim for a man introduced at the start of *The Vice-Consul* as wanting “to shoulder the misery of Calcutta to plunge into its depths” (18). Plunging is, of course, a primary action of the novella; the Beggarwoman dives into the river, Anne-Marie Stretter walks into the sea. For Peter

³⁴ The two are proximate, of course.

³⁵ Here, as everywhere, the skin becomes a hypervisible sign of racial difference.

Morgan, the plunge is framed as an act of sympathy, a way of joining to the suffering of Calcutta, like tar to a body, of making it “as much a part of oneself as breathing” (125). But what, at first glance, looks like compassion is revealed instead to be an appetite for debasement. Peter Morgan’s Beggarwoman is not a simple object of pity, but a screen on to which he and the other white characters project their feelings of desire and revulsion. When asked why he chose the Beggarwoman amidst so many wretches, he replies, “Because nothing more can happen to her” (125). Michael Richardson fastens on the deeper meaning of this statement: “He wants to deprive her of any existence other than the existence in his mind when he is watching her. She herself is not to feel anything” (146). The insistence that the Beggarwoman be insensate allows Peter Morgan to conduct all feeling away from her and towards his reader—a brutal, total dehumanization. In her unfeeling, the Beggarwoman becomes a device that allows the feelings of others: pity, disgust, horror, nausea.

From the time of Ptolemy, the devilish heat of the-far-off-place was understood to be contiguous with the native, enabling the statement “to be an African is to be lascivious” (McClintock, *Imperial Leather* 22). In the self-assured early stages of imperialism, the assignment of sexual aberration to the native body rested on the conviction of absolute difference, itself the result of separate and unequal Creations (Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body* 119). A subtle but important shift, however, occurs late in the 18th century, when the second half of the formulation, “to be born

in Africa is to be an African,”³⁶ is ushered into discursive possibility by the environmental school of racial science. Shockingly liberal for their day, the environmentalists prefigured Darwin by maintaining that human variation was not authored by God in the Garden, but rather that phenotype and humor evolved over time according to climatic zone (Schleinbinger 138). The body became an ongoing act of weather and geography; hot or cold, wet or dry, low- or high-dwelling, all the windy phenomena of the world blew into the limbs and genitals rather than arising with them in the primordial ooze. The whole hot girdle of the earth was thus marked off as a space of contagious sexuality, where the vapors threatened vice as well as typhoid. “The tropics” is a two-tiered administrative, aesthetic, and erotic construction, a sweaty union of the hot and the wet. If heat bears all the masculinist traces of an active, quick, incinerating desire, then water carries the more “feminine” principles of lubrication, extinguishment, and submission. Through the fog of these two elements, Anne McClintock’s formulation of the “porno-tropics” becomes visible as a kind of glasshouse, a winter garden, a conservatory. It is an unnatural space built to create the appearance of nature *out of place and in excess*—impossibly high kapoks, orchids with flesh like a face. But where lies the horror one might ask, dazzled? As we shall see, the great secret of disgust is that it springs not from the deathly thing, but from all that hums, surges, swells, and signals liveness.

For the purposes of this essay, I would like to introduce the work of phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai and literary/legal critic William Ian Miller, two

³⁶ This will have profound implications in the settler colony. See Stoler on the matter of Indies-born Dutch.

scholars thinking and writing about disgust at opposite ends of the 20th century. Both theorists chooses the word “disgust” over its abundant alternatives; Kolnai because he believes disgust, horror, and desire to be discrete, individually mappable affects (he notes with medical self-certainty that with horror the heart rate quickens, while with disgust it slows), and Miller because he thinks the term is roomy enough to hold the shades of variation. But the preference for “disgust” over other terms is not without consequence. Writing in 1927, Kolnai felt the need to seed his monograph with the following qualifier: “We cannot avoid here a certain wallowing in filth . . . we hope only that it will prove justified by its scientific interest” (*On Disgust* 53). Fifty years later, Miller begins his own prologue with an anxious sigh (*The Anatomy of Disgust* ix). But wallowing is a feminist act³⁷—for those outside the circle of implication, an act of solidarity—and it will be a primary epistemological mode through the length of this chapter. Resting on the soiled work of preceding scholars, we will ask without caveat: “Who wallows?” and “Who made the dwelling a wallowing?”, which is to ask, “Who made the living a ‘bare life’?”³⁸ Neither Kolnai nor Miller engages the racial registers of these questions directly,³⁹ but each is fierce in exposing disgust as a marker and guarantor of difference (Miller 50).

³⁷ Donna Haraway, the length and breadth of her graduate seminar *Feminist Theory: When Species Meet: Categories, Encounters, and Co-Shapings*, University of California at Santa Cruz, Spring 2006.

³⁸ Kolnai’s analysis of the threat of crawling animals is interesting in light of Agamben’s formulation: “their pullulating squirming, their cohesion into a homogenous teeming mass, the evocation of decomposition and decay . . . the strange coldness, the restless, nervous, squirming, twitching vitality . . . as if it were all somehow an abstract demonstrative dance of life without however any appropriate feelings of warmth and without inner substance of life” (55).

³⁹ Kolnai is writing as a Jew on the brink of conversion in proto-fascist Europe, making the omission strategic, disassociative, or forgetful. Miller is more straightforward: “The phenomenology of the disgusting that I construct is one meant to resonate with Americans of my [upper] social class” (11).

An English translation of *On Disgust* was not available until 2004, six years after the publication of *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Though Miller was apparently unaware of the ground broken by his Hungarian predecessor (Kolnai's name appears nowhere in the text nor in the list of works cited), the unity of voice is striking and not lost on Kolnai's translators, who turn repeatedly to Miller in the introduction (Korsmeyer and Smith 1–25). Both texts serve as counterpoints to the structural formulation popularized by anthropologist Mary Douglas: *disorder spoils pattern and yields disgust* (in her language, “dirt”). According to this logic, the shaman, the fetus, the fetish of the pangolin with its eggs and scales and suckled young are all soiled, monstrous for their disruption of the “natural” order (*Purity and Danger* 95). But “it would be inadequate to define dirt as ‘a thing which is located at an improper place’,” “responds” Kolnai, anticipating the claim nearly forty years before its printing,

for should I find precious stones scattered in a peat bog, I would not say that the peat were “filthy with diamonds,” but much rather that I had found diamonds in a heap of dirt. Even a sooty hand is not a characteristically dirty hand. We think of dirt more readily as a grayish black layer of uncertain composition, above all as involving smallish sticky particles of which this stickiness is more essential than the stuff from which they originate. There exists here a substantial connection with feces . . . and also with grease and sweat. (55)

Miller makes the same distinction, though perhaps more plainly. Again citing excrement, as well as the cuddly-but-anomalous kangaroo, he argues that fundamentally “it is not that [disgusting] things don't fit; it is that they fit right at the bottom of the conceptual grid” (45).

It is in the low, damp, trampled, discarded space that both Kolnai and Miller find evidence for the strange discovery we made earlier in the hothouse: that the

disgusting bears more resemblance to life than to death. This statement begs unpacking, and Miller is a lucid guide. He writes: “What disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life, and not just because life implies its correlative death and decay: for it is decay that seems to engender life. Images of decay imperceptibly slide into images of fertility and out again” (40). We recoil from liveness not because it portends the finality of death, but because it signals a cycle of eternal return—the seed becomes the tree becomes the plum, so heavy with sugar, becomes the leaves, becomes the leeches, becomes the seed again (43). Kolnai calls this quality of being “pregnancy with death,” explaining that disgust exists only in relation “. . . to what is positively vital, to what is animated . . . there is undoubtedly associated with the extinction of life . . . a heightened announcement of the fact that life *is there*” (18 and 53, respectively). Thus disgust is about presence not absence, lushness not waste (as any good ascetic will tell you). Moreover, the offending presence is not a sheer presence that arises out of and sustains itself; rather, its thriving necessarily implies something else’s failing and decay (Miller 43).

An example of this jealous, at once refusing and voracious aspect of disgust can be found in the *Ponds* chapter of Lewis Thomas’ *The Medusa and the Snail*, in which a Manhattan upwelling becomes the dumping ground for unwanted goldfish. No one knew how there got to be so many. People must come at night, they said, pouring their pets from furtive bowls, scurrying off between the tenements. In the daylight, people couldn’t bear what they’d discarded: “With the goldfish, it is almost detestable . . . There are, clearly visible from the sidewalk, hundreds of them. The

neighborhood people do not walk by and stare into it through the broken fence, as would be normal for any other Manhattan pond. They tend to cross the street, looking away” (26). But the other side of the street was not far enough. The ASPCA was summoned; people called for nets, for poison, for dynamite. The thought of fish swimming under the winter ice abused them, and all that feeding, feeding, feeding (27)! Lewis, a biologist and perhaps unconscious theorist of revulsion, dissects the reflex this way: “Goldfish in a glass bowl are harmless to the human mind, maybe even helpful to minds casting about for something, anything, to think about. But goldfish let loose, propagating themselves, worst of all *surviving* in what has to be a sessile eddy of the East River, somehow threaten us all” (27).

Thomas’ insight is remarkable, but more can be wrung from the goldfish by submitting them to Miller and Kolnai’s respective classifying grids. Miller divides the disgusting between structures of prohibition and surfeit. Prohibition works as a barrier to satisfying unconscious desire, a “reaction formation” in the language of Freudian psychoanalysis that not only prevents the activation of unconscious desire, but is part of the very process of repression that drives it underground (109). In this way, the wish for intercourse with one’s mother is neatly forgotten and one can go about eating, sleeping, and laundering without consciousness of sin. Surfeit, by contrast, governs all the permitted thirsts of the waking world: food, alcohol, sex. While prohibitive disgust upsets action and thus thwarts regret, the disgust of surfeit arises as nausea *after* the wish has been fulfilled, i.e., when one’s head aches from too much wine or when satisfaction drains appeal from the lover’s body (110). Kolnai’s

system includes both types of revulsion, eschewing the general principle for six precise intentional object classes (16):

- 1) Materially disgusting: purification, excrement, bodily secretions, dirt
- 2) Disgusting animals, especially images when they appear with the apparent excess of swarms
- 3) Foods in certain conditions
- 4) Human bodies that are too near
- 5) Exaggerated fertility
- 6) Disease and deformation

Taking the two grids as complementary, one can see that the fish in Thomas' essay offend for a complex nest of reasons: being out of bounds (prohibition), out of proportion (surfeit), excreting (materially disgusting), en masse (swarming), and increasing (exaggerated fertility). So too Peter Morgan's Beggarwoman, whose swollen, infected body repels even the fishermen who would ravish her, whose smile and laugh and hunger revolt White Calcutta more than the listless lepers. The fish and the Beggarwoman are, in other words, slick totems for the mindless generation of life that Kolnai describes as "senseless, formless surging . . . [the] redundancy of life provoked by the experience of reproduction in excess that lacks the structure of life but merely enacts fecundity—overflow, extravagant profusion far beyond necessity" (16). For their excess—and for their humidity—the fish and the girl invite us again to take seriously the materiality of abjection and ask the question "What is disgust made of?" Raking one's hands over the scales, the mud, the answer comes quickly but uneasily: sticky, viscous, oozing slime.

Even the structuralist Mary Douglas could not ignore it: in the land of the

object, slime covers everything.⁴⁰ While again attributing the sting to taxonomic transgression, rather than hierarchical low dwelling, she marks the association of oppressed social minorities—constitutive outsiders to the body politic—with the biological body’s rejected fluids: blood, pus, excreta, semen (125).⁴¹ Sartre is an equally keen if less immediately political analyst. In *Being and Nothingness* he writes:

Slime is the agony of water Water is more fleeting, but it can be possessed I its very flight as something fleeting. The slimy flees with a heavy flight which has the same relation to water as the unwieldy earthbound flight of the chicken has to that of the hawk Throw water on the ground; it *runs*. Throw a slimy substance; it draws itself out, it displays itself, it flattens itself out, it is *soft*; touch the slimy; it does not flee, it yields. (774–5, quoted in Miller, Chapter 4, Footnote 5)

Like Thomas, Sartre offers us a visceral narrative that lends weight—and touch—to the theoretical claim that “the viscous, semi-fluid, obtrusively clinging . . . carry the motif of an ‘indecent surplus of life’” (Kolnai 54). In the absurdity of assigning pain and the flight response to inert material, Sartre deftly hails the observer; in daring that observer to watch, throw, and touch the viscous thing, he exposes the uneasy continuity between the subject’s own flooding body and the flooding world. This makes Sartre kin to both Thomas and Miller, who understand that the only place outside the body that poses the threat of the body is the pond:

⁴⁰ Again, Donna Haraway.

⁴¹ Compare to Agamben on the questionable fate of the body’s afterlife emissions in *Physiology of the Blessed*: “The problem that the Fathers had to confront first of all was that of the resurrected body’s identity with the body of man in life what about hair and fingernails? And sperm, sweat, milk, urine, and other secretions?” (*The Open* 17). Compare also to “God’s List of Liquids” from Anne Carson’s poem *The Truth About God* (*Glass, Irony and God* 52).

In those lower phyla primitive plant and primitive animal merge into slime, ooze, and murky quagmire, fens, bogs, and swamps with their odors of decaying plant life, and whether the creatures making for the fetid “pondness” of the setting have chlorophyll is not all that crucial to their capacity to make the environment in which they thrive disgusting. (Miller 40)

As ever, the intimacy of “thriving” with “disgust” is essential. The shallow might be a drowning place, a stinking place, but its greatest offense is its capacity for life. It is this sticky threat of regeneration that we will not stand, that we cross streets, hold noses, starve, gas, and drain to avoid. And the precondition for all this clamor? The simple activating wet. Water, of course, has the power to rinse, to purify, but wateriness, when paired with heat, is also a vehicle to suppuration and disease (Miller 39). It is this dual, *pharmakon* nature of poison-and-cure that invests the medium with so much cosmic threat; the clear waters might run turbid, thickening, slowing into “the gooey mud, the scummy pond . . . life soup, fecundity itself: slimy slippery, wiggling, teeming . . .” (40–41). This is the soup that the West has long tried to banish to the-far-off-place. This is the soup that got stirred by the tsunami.

One way to give structure to this morass is to drape it over Julia Kristeva’s theorization of the abject, a concept related to disgust, but with some critical differences. Where disgust is, at its core, a material formation, a set of objects and textures which occasion physical dread, Kristevan abjection belongs to the subject’s interior. Emerging out of object relations theory, abjection opens up the *psychic* dimension of disgust, allowing us to ask why the sight or sensation of slime makes us quaver, and what old trauma is revived when our foot grazes the mossed rock at the bottom of the pond? As importantly, Kristeva’s formulation insists on understanding

revulsion as a response to the *monstrous feminine*, lending the lens of gender to a field which had been content to make phenomenological determinations without attending to sex. The model of abjection elaborated in *Powers of Horror*, I suggest, allows us to read the Beggarwoman as more than an assembly of crude sensations, and Peter Morgan's need to render her disgusting as an analog for the appetites of colonial rule.

But what are the contours of Kristevan abjection? This is a difficult question to answer succinctly. Kristeva begins *Powers of Horror* with an invocation: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1). Immediately one has a sense of the abject as a stealing, stalking thing, at once internal and external to the subject, thus piercing the psychic envelope and spilling identity. The scale and multiplicity of the threat, its "exorbitance," is critical, for as we shall see, the abject is characterized by excess, overflow; in Kristeva's language, it is "edged with the sublime" and therefore the product of "something added" (11–12). This matters especially in disrobing colonial figurations of "the native" as always already plural, undifferentiated, swarming, like fruit flies or beggars. Arising out of this mood of pestilence, the urge to expel the abject, to eject it into a zone commensurate with its unintelligibility, is also crucial to my racially-interested reading. For now, let it suffice to note that the flinging action that exiles is inseparable from the spasm of desire: "Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (1). Any naïve

antagonism between lust and loathing thus collapses, and abjection is revealed in all its complex ambivalence: a “vortex of summons and repulsion” (1).

The Beggarwoman evokes both these sensations. One’s heart breaks to read of her, lurking outside the home of the white family in Sadec, waiting to see if the child will be accepted, if it will live. Her baby, wrapped in white linen, is laid out on the veranda. The white woman bends over the child, inspecting it, shaking it. The Beggarwoman watches this. Her back is “against the smooth trunk of a custard apple tree There are custard-apples on the ground. Windfalls that burst as they hit the ground, exposing creamy pulp, thick as butter, which oozes into the dust” (43). Here, in the garden, a place of terrible anxiety, the girl eats. A servant brings her food, “meat, fish, hot rice, laying it on the ground in front of her” (45). One wants to feed the Beggarwoman, to ladle the food into her mouth, and yet the continuity, the oozing of the apples and the oozing of her infected foot. She squeezes the foot, the pus runs into the grass.

The pus is important. In Kristeva’s psychoanalytic reading, abjection harkens back to the founding, traumatic separation from the child’s archaic and indifferentiated relationship with its mother, and the expulsion of bodily fluids. In short, the experience of birth, marked by mucous, blood, and the amniotic sea, imprints on the mind of the infant as a vile as well as brutal separation. As the child matures and becomes increasingly aware of her own bodily functions, the story—and repressed memory—of her expulsion from her mother’s body birth verges dangerously close to defecation. Was I excreted, the child wonders? Am I shit? In

this way, abjection establishes boundaries by terrorizing the distinction between inner and outer, and, consequently, between the ego and the non-ego, the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead. Alongside excrement, the corpse, perhaps, is the most stunning example:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it is as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (3)

The Vice-consul of Lahore, the Beggarwoman, and Anne-Marie Stretter are all corpse-like figures. The Vice-consul is able to shoot at the lepers in Shalimar Gardens because he is “dead already.” A virgin, he lives outside the realm of desire; his firing into the night, into the mirrors in his room, is an attempt to break free from death and access the sensory world (*Woman to Woman* 160). The Beggarwoman is referred to throughout the novella as “life in the midst of death,” “death following but never catching up” (*The Vice-Consul* 138). The white characters marvel at her ability to survive her squalid surroundings, the filth of the river and the nearness of the lepers. For the Beggarwoman, death is a kind of freedom, the condition of her survival. She is unkillable. Duras attributes this endurance to the Beggarwoman’s “Indian culture”: “There’s a self-sufficiency in the Beggarwoman; it’s enough for her to walk, to sleep, to swim in the Ganges in order to catch fish, to sing the Savannakhet song in order to dance. She’s still liberated, though she’s living death”

(*Woman to Woman* 158). The occidental Anne-Marie Stretter, by contrast, is not content to dance or make love or play the piano, and is condemned to death. She “. . . seems to carry death buried within her thin, pale body,” writes Kristeva (*Black Sun* 239). Bearing the same lifeless eyes as the Vice-consul, Anne-Marie Stretter moves anaesthetized through her well-appointed rooms. Approaching middle age, she still assembles something like beauty, but is unmasked at the Prince of Wales hotel:

They [the Englishmen] look at her. She is thin in her black housecoat, her eyes are screwed up. She is no longer beautiful. She seems to be in a state of what can only be described as unbearable well-being.

And now, the thing happens that Charles Rossett, without knowing it, has been waiting for. Has it really happened? Yes. There are the tears. They are oozing out between her eyelids and rolling down her cheeks, in very small, glistening drops. (Duras, *The Vice-Consul* 156)

Next to the Beggarwoman’s rotting body, “Anne-Marie Stretter’s Venetian tears may seem a capricious and insufferable luxury,” but they alert us, again, to the common malady that unites these figures (Kristeva 148). At the end of the novella, the day the Beggarwoman walks out of the lagoon to laugh at Charles Rossett, Anne-Marie Stretter walks into the sea. The Beggarwoman’s persistence and Anne-Marie Stretter’s suicide require each other. Explains Duras, “Anne-Marie Stretter’s disappearance and the survival of the Beggar. They blend together” (*Woman to Woman* 157). Duras’ framing of “living death” as an Asian condition offers us an important clue for reading *The Vice-Consul* and other India and Indochina Cycle texts. The Beggarwoman is able to survive the “swarming ant’s nest” of Calcutta, because she herself is swarming (*The Vice-Consul* 18). Anne-Marie Stretter, by contrast, taut and hollow, cannot bear another monsoon.

Kristevan abjection hinges on the maternal and the porous borders of the subject, but she does not explore how these themes get articulated through racial difference. In fact, Kristeva reads like Peter Morgan writes, relying on the racial other, making her work. Kristeva's clammy, engulfing, pre-Christian "feminine" is less divorced from "primeval essence" than she claims, and that that fact is belied, in part, by her colonizing reliance on ethnology as evidence (*Powers of Horror* 58–9). It is one thing to assert that "Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection . . ." and quite another to reproduce Freud's primitivisms by following, and quickly, with "savage" "proof" (79). For example, Kristeva locates dread of generation first in distant societies where "patrilineal power is poorly secured" and who thus employ pollution rituals to protect against "excessive matrilineality" (77). The following usage is representative:

The instance of the Nuer . . . is very significant It involves a society that is dominated, at least among the aristocrats, by the agnatic principle and in which women are a divisive factor; essential for reproduction, they nevertheless endanger the ideal norms of the agnatic group, the more so as cohabitation with maternal relatives seems common. Menstrual pollution, as well as prohibition with incest with the mother, considered the most dangerous of all, can be interpreted as the symbolic equivalent of that conflict. (77)

Beyond the obvious exoticism, it is interesting to note the reading practice Kristeva employs to *report on* ethnologic material vs. the one she uses to *interpret* the "literary" texts that are her central objects of study. More often than not, she simply relays the findings of Dumont or Pritchard, et al, to assert with confidence: "The hierarchical nature of Indian society does not come into play between the sexes" or ". . . the Enga are not acquainted with cannibalism" (78–9). The work these statements

are made to do within Kristeva's text, and how their un-interrogated evidentiary status contrasts with the complex interpretive schema she brings to bear on other genres is stark. Compare her concrete turn to ethnology, for instance, with the following exaltation of a watery Joyce: "How dazzling, unending, eternal—and so weak so insignificant, so sickly—is the rhetoric of Joycean language" (22).

Similarly, a snatch of *Cities on the Plain* figures not as proof, testimony, but as an ecstatic demonstration of how

Proustian writing . . . never gives up a judging prerogative, perhaps a biblical one, which splits, banishes, shares out or condemns; and it is in relation to I, with it and against it, that the web of Proust's sentence, memory, and morality is elaborated—infinately spinning together differences (sexes, races, classes) into a homogeneity that consists only in signs, a fragile net stretched out over an abyss of incompatibilities, rejections, and abjections. (22)

But where is the "with and against," the "fragile net" of the Enga? the Nuer?

Kristeva's inattention to race is a revelation: What is the colonial project if not the systematic evacuation of human beings? What other kinds of evacuations and expulsions are part of a Christian European imaginary? And how do those fantasies animate *Powers of Horror*?

Powers of Horror does not read Masaccio's *Expulsion* directly, but the fresco hovers above the text, as though it had been written in the cool recesses of the Brancacci Chapel. Her scope is vast, but Kristeva returns again and again to the scene of banishment, the secret garden, where Eve prodded Adam into sharing God's apple. Kristeva's interest is primarily semiological; following Mary Douglas, she explores notions of defilement in the Old Testament, arguing that the biblical zeal for separation is rooted in the putrefying "cathexis of maternal function" (91). This

thesis leads her deep into Leviticus and the matter of dietary restriction. For Kristeva, the prohibition against eating carnivorous or cloven hoofed animals, crustaceans of all kinds, all harken back to the original abomination plucked by Eve from the Tree of Knowledge (95). That it was Eve and not Adam who did the plucking has, of course, had resounding implications: “Sin originated with woman and because of her we will all perish” declares the *Ecclesiasticus* (126). The gender of temptation is a critical piece of evidence for Kristeva, allowing her to read expulsion as, among other things, a repudiation of the female body (126): “At the limit, if someone personifies abjection without assurance of purification, it is a woman, ‘any woman,’ ‘the woman as a whole’” (85). Eve’s body then, arguably, is the monotheistic West’s corporeal referent for the abject: the “flayed skin . . . neither inside nor outside, the wounding exterior turning into an abominable interior, war bordering on putrescence, while social and family rigidity, that beautiful mask, crumbles within the beloved abomination of innocent vice” (135). Understanding this, and without adopting a facile and violent logic of analogy to explain the complex relationship between gender and race, we can watch the swift tumbles Kristeva and others make from the flayed skin to the dark skin, and know that the ejection of Eve as Other ushers in the discursive possibility of all exiles, all frontiers.

This is an important genealogy, but the object-centered line of inquiry obscures another crucial element of the Fall. Eve and Adam’s banishment is, perhaps above all else, *a gesture*, a casting out, a spasm, a flinging. Kristeva no doubt knows this, beginning her text as she does, with an exploration of *abject* as a verb (3). But

she does not, in concrete terms, offer a reading of the Fall's dynamism. For this, we must turn to Masaccio and his striding Adam, and to Danby, his doomed figure *in the throes of shame*. These images attest to the overdetermined quality of expulsion within European iconology, something that must be taken into account when the myth is transposed to the colony. Danby is already there, his painting entitled "Poison Tree in the Isle of Java." In the painting, the doomed figure contorts in pain, as though she were being chewed up and spit out by the inhospitable landscape. This, of course, is the story of the European in the colony. Lured by pleasure, he cannot take root in the unfamiliar soil, and, in the end, is again ejected from Paradise. It is the foundational story, the founding trauma of Western Judeo-Christian culture, and one suspects that the Judeo-Christian sees it everywhere. One might be tempted, for example, to read such a gesture into the story of the Beggarwoman, who wanders, like Kristeva's exile, "A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *abject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines . . . constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder . . . a *stray* . . ." (8). But this is not the Beggarwoman's errand. She emerges out of a different set of cultural texts, and her movements map another kind of transformation.

In the decades that followed *The Vice-Consul's* publication in 1965, French feminist critics⁴² discovered the Beggarwoman. She was made the face, the howl of *l'écriture féminine* and related developments in psychoanalytic feminist theory, heavy lifting for such slim shoulders. Other critics have traced this appropriation, including

⁴² Though the *écriture féminine* was a French movement, many of the critics were not, strictly speaking, French. Hélène Cixous is a North African Jew, Julia Kristeva is Bulgarian.

Hong Kong-based scholar, Marie-Paul Ha. Ha presents a lucid history of the Beggarwoman's critical reception in her essay *Duras on the Margins*, asking what it means to figure the native Other as the site of "Other writing" (*Figuring the East* 89). Ha begins with Marcelle Marini's seminal *Territoires due feminin avec Margurite Duras*, published in 1977, the first in a series of book-length studies on Duras that would appear over the next decade. Marini focuses her analysis of *The Vice-Consul* on the Beggarwoman, appointing her "the figure of Woman's fate under patriarchy" (Jane Bradley Winston, *Postcolonial Duras* 67). Marini was not alone in such universalizing treatment. Ha traces how Marini's inheritors, Madelinie Borgomano, Mireille Rosano, and Hélène Cixous among others, all read the Beggarwoman as a condensation of the feminine and an enactment of the new anti-logos writing. Formerly considered "unreadable," Duras' texts were praised by feminist critics for their "fragmentary," "lacunary" nature, their habit of spilling rather than advancing (88). They championed the Beggarwoman's tale as one of continual loss, her progress—or rather regress—through the novella reframed as *un autre devenir féminine* ("another becoming of the feminine") (87). That the figure chosen to represent the work of *l'écriture féminine* was a "languageless, illiterate, insane and almost bodiless non-European pariah" was no accident, argues Ha: ". . . for Western readers, the absolute Other, being the unsayable and the unrepresentable, cannot be derived from within their culture, but has to come from outside" (89). This necessity, of course, is deeply problematic. As we have seen, the Beggarwoman's journey evacuates her, returning her to what Ha calls "the pre-symbolic order" (92). With no

historical or cultural specificity, the Beggarwoman's plight can only be understood in archetypal terms; she is destitute because destitution is her originary condition, not because she is a victim of colonial violence.

Ha's critique is brilliant and just. She ends her reading of feminist appropriations of the Beggarwoman by quoting Chinua Achebe's response to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can anybody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?" ("An Image of Africa," quoted in Ha 93). She is indicting Duras as well as the feminist critics. For Ha, the Beggarwoman's dehumanization is set in motion by Peter Morgan's declaration, "I want to disgust you," and fulfilled when she emerges from the lagoon opposite Charles Rossett (89, 92 respectively). These are the only moments of the novella that Ha presents "in full," i.e., as block quotes, allowing her reader to encounter again the scraps of foie gras, the headless fish jerking in the Beggarwoman's hand. By presenting both episodes, Ha attends indirectly to the sensorial dimension of the Beggarwoman's othering, but she does not linger there, eager as she is, to diagnose the lack of historicity in the text and its criticism, and to prescribe an historical approach to the Beggarwoman's undoing. Rural Indochinese women suffered immensely under colonization, Ha reminds: "French economic policy destroyed many farming communities, and ruined traditional crafts such as spinning, weaving, and silk worm raising that formerly secured women a livelihood" (93). Knowing this

historical context allows us to understand the Beggarwoman's wandering as something other than a *travail de perte*. It is the wandering of a disenfranchised young girl.

I understand Ha's urgency and her prescription, but I want to approach Duras and the French feminists somewhat differently. Duras is indeed culpable for rendering the Beggarwoman outside of place and time, for making that woman in her mother's garden not a woman at all. But the focus of these first two chapters is the colonial imaginary, the fantasmatic space that endures despite the historicity of the Beggarwoman-as-subject. Despite here is not an accurate term; the fantasmatic endures precisely *through* the repression of history; if the historical conditions of rural women under French colonial rule were to surface in the novella, the power of the Beggarwoman as an orientalist fiction would puncture and drain. Granting then, that there is something of use, as well as something deeply disturbing about the Beggarwoman's figuration, I would like to consider how the feminist critics redouble her dissipation, taking her up, it would seem, only to empty her out.

Marini, Borgomano, Cixous, and Kristeva approach the Beggarwoman through a common conceptual grid: the Oedipal drama of mothers and daughters, the unspeakable, duplication, and, the return to the primordial feminine. The multiplicity and sequencing of these frames matter. The feminists' readings unfold in a cascade of violence, each frame eroding the Beggarwoman until she is sheer, undifferentiated substance. Below, I trace each stage of erasure.

Emphasizing the “founding trauma” of the girl’s expulsion by her mother, neo-Lacanian scholars argue that the Beggarwoman’s psychic dissolution derives from “the masochistic separation of mothers and daughters,” that even her hunger must be understood as allegorical, not a quest for food, but for the maternal object (Marini, *Territoires dufeminin: avec Marguerite Duras*, 1977). Kristeva echoes this idea in *The Malady of Grief*, nailing down the girl’s suffering to that one awful parting:

. . . the mad bonzian woman in *The Vice-Consul*, who pregnant and gangrened, unconsciously travels from Indochina to India, struggles against but above all against her mother who had driven her out of her native house. “She says a few words of Cambodian: hello, good night. To the child, she would speak. And now, to whom? To her old mother in Tonle-Sap, the source, the cause of all evils, of her crooked destiny, her pure-hearted love. (*Black Sun* 242)

The Beggarwoman’s loss of language is the traumatic effect most written about by feminist critics. Her dissolve into unspeaking made her an attractive emblem for scholars seeking a vehicle to critique phallogocentrism, the Song of Savannakhet becoming a kind of rallying cry for *l’écriture féminine*. Duras’ friend and interlocutor, Natalie Gauthier, defined the “Other writing” in a 1974 issue of *Tel Quel*: “if ‘full’ words belong to men, how then to speak ‘in another way’ (*autrement*) unless maybe by *making us hear* that which agitates and suffers, mute, in the *blanks of speech (trous du discours)*, in the un-said or the non-sense” (“Existe-t-il une écriture féminine?,” *Tel Quel* 58, quoted by Ha 89). The Beggarwoman was a natural for this. That she suffered, there could be no doubt, her body an instrument easily bent in order to *make others hear*. Others did hear: Mireille Rosello extols her

singing, laughter, and repetition of *Battambang* as another form of text, “barvardage” (chattering), while Borgamono regards her as a Derridean “site of writing” (Ha 88). In each case, the Beggarwoman’s utterance surfaces not as sound, but as negative space towards which meaning rushes. *Battambang*, for example, circulates in these readings as a mythical rather than a cultural signifier, its capacity to map having been stripped in favor of a purely musical function, that strange sound to Western ears, *bat-tam-bang* (88).

The Beggarwoman repeats the act of maternal abandonment with her own children, one of many examples of doubling drawn out by feminist critics. Her looping, non-progressive travels, her serial rape by fishermen, repetition of a single word, all are understood to be part of a wider traumatic “language of duplication” that expresses the pain she can no longer speak (Kristeva 247). Most profound among these doublings is the Beggarwoman’s mirrored relation to Anne-Marie Stretter. The relation has two aspects, one parasitic, the other parallel. The Beggarwoman lurks outside on ambassador’s residence in the evenings, waiting for food and water. She follows her and her entourage to the Islands. Beyond these material crossings, there are deep narrative resonances between the two women: “Both are musicians, one a pianist and the other a delirious singer; both are exiles, one from Europe, the other from Asia; both are wounded: one suffers from an invisible wound, the other is the gangrenous victim of social, familial, human violence” (248). This doubling does not enlarge the Beggarwoman, but disappears her into another, white subject.

The feminists' third and final critical lens returns her to the primordial feminine. In this view, the Beggarwoman's grief and madness have restored her to an elemental state, a space of biological and cultural indifferenciation in which her body is "idealized as the exemplum of nonalienated plentitude" and, at the same time, "interpreted as an emblem of horror or abjection" (Ha *Figuring the East* 92). She scratches. She squats. Bears another child and keeps on walking. The Beggarwoman is "death in the midst of life," but she is also pure productivity, like the village described in *The Sea Wall*, where "with the rhythm of plant-life, as if, in a deep, long, inhalation, each year, the body of each woman took in and swelled with child, expelled in an exhalation a child, and then, in a second inhalation, took in another" (92). In both texts, the Indochinese woman's body is rendered as exorbitantly and unconsciously fertile, like the Mekong Delta or the Plain of Tonle Sap. There is a whiff of this natural analogy in the very title of Marini's study, *Territoires du feminine*. Though her evocation of territoriality is not geographic, "but in relation to . . . the topographies of feminine desire, and the female body," Marini's choice of the Beggarwoman to be that generalized body obliterates her, melting her not only into the Ganges but another, metaphoric landscape (Winston 67).

For Ha, the Durassian landscape is never purely metaphoric. It is Vietnam, always Vietnam, . . . *it's the Mekong speaking, do you see?* Ha reads the Beggarwoman's elemental state not merely as a scriptural space, but a revisioning of the home country: "In re-writing the Motherland into the site of an Other writing, Duras alters a land and a people she once called her own" (93). This alteration is not

neutral, in Ha's view. It is an othering through which "the sufferings of large masses of human beings . . . enhance the aesthetic experience of a *happy few* . . ." (93, my emphasis). She is talking about Duras' white protagonists, as well as her readers. If the French feminist critics evacuate the Beggarwoman, it is because, Ha argues, that violence already resides in the text. I want neither to affirm nor to challenge this. I have already presented Duras as a deeply ambivalent colonial writer, and *The Vice-Consul* as a deeply ambivalent text. What keeps me returning to the novella is the way it embodies the deep psychic structures of colonial fantasy, structures which, I argue, collude with and enable the "harder mechanisms" of colonial rule. I share Ha's concern that Duras and her critics fail to ask why the Beggarwoman is driven to eat dirt, why she must sell her body until her baby is near term, and why she is unable to keep her child (93). But these are historical questions, and the historian's task is different from my own. For me, it is as urgent to ask, what cultural narratives make the Beggarwoman's erosion natural, inevitable, desired?⁴³ Can those narratives be supplanted? And are there ways of figuring tropical liquidity that do not erode the tropical subject?

Here is where I append my own recuperation of the Beggarwoman. This is not a salvage project. Rather, it is a small gesture towards alternate reading practices for colonial texts, and a predictor of the decolonizing work that will be taken up by the second half of the dissertation. If the Beggarwoman has been made overly tropic

⁴³ Cultural narratives are, of course, always already historical, emerging out of particular, traceable conjunctures. But one of the key interests of this project is the *transhistorical* quality of the colonial fantasy, how its tropes endure across many centuries and push back against historical specificity.

and amorphous, made, as a servant of empire, to do so much work, I would like to restore some of her cultural specificity, to revalorize her liquidity, and lighten her load. However, rather than prescribing history, in the manner of Ha, my recuperation will stay within the realm of the figurative, reading the Beggarwoman through narratives which emerge out of the Southeast Asian context, rather than those imposed from outside.

The Beggarwoman is from Battambang, once a small town on the Sangker River and a provincial capital in present-day Cambodia. The town was under Siamese control for more than a century, and, like much of Southeast Asia, it is ethnically mixed: Khmer, Vietnamese, Lao, Thai. This mixing is nothing new. Like its rival, the Majapahit, to the south, the great Khmer Empire was a crossroads of seamen, brahmin, and traders. Buddhism and Hinduism entered the region from India in the fourth century, and, like Indonesia, Cambodia was, and in some ways remains, part of the Indic World. One figure from this Hindu-Buddhist heritage that continues to permeate Cambodian culture is the *naga*. *Naga* is usually translated as “serpent” or “dragon,” but *nagas* are interstitial creatures, often depicted in half human form. Like turtles, buffalo, and crocodiles, *nagas* cross from the liquid underworld to the world of solids above (Wessing 208). Though they can appear as either sex, *nagas* are essentially female, encoding the amniotic, generative quality of their watery origins. In Cambodia, the fertile *naga* is central to even the nation’s birth. A prince set out over a globe covered by water, the story goes. He sailed until he reached a slip of land, and there fell in love with the daughter of the seven-headed Naga King.

When the pair married, the king offered his wedding gift: he swallowed the waters of the cosmic ocean, revealing the mountains, the forest, and the great bowl of the Cambodian plain.



Figure Five: A *naga* at Angkor Wat

Similar creation stories are told in Sumatra. In *Symbolic Animals in the Land Between the Waters*, anthropologist Robert Wessing reads the *naga* in the Indonesian context, observing that the serpent's symbolic function is generalizable across Southeast Asia (207). From Aceh to the Mekong Delta, the *naga* is a marker of transition between states of being, and a guardian of humans undergoing similar transformations. Wessing argues that the *naga* operates in two dimensions: the

vertical axis or *axis mundi* of the underworld and the upperworld, and the horizontal axis of the earth (207). The feminine, watery underworld is the place of origins, the masculine upperworld the domain of birds. In between these registers is the human realm: people, communities, and the wet rice agriculture upon which both depend. The *naga*'s vertical function is represented visually as the rainbow, a double-headed serpent that drinks from the ocean and spits rain, the tree of life or *kayon* of shadowplay, and the crematory pyre. Horizontally, it manifests in the fishlike thrashing in the mother's womb and the vehicles that bear the young boy through the ritual of circumcision and the remains at cremation (207). In this way, the *naga* becomes a spatial and a temporal map, a way of figuring the cosmos, and a creature that can both inhabit and house the human body.

Reading through the *naga*, rather than Peter Morgan's monstrous fish, Eve, or the inchoate feminine, produces an altogether different figuration of the Beggarwoman. She remains deeply female, an icon of fertility and abundance. But whereas Duras and the French feminist critics mourn the Beggarwoman's failed maternity, the Beggarwoman-as-*nagini* succeeds in birthing not only her own children, but the rice harvest, the individual, and the state. It is, admittedly, not the specific, historical young woman sought by Ha; this Beggarwoman, like the others, becomes animal, becomes the terrain. Yet the *naga* is nothing like the creature of the lagoon. Despite its fangs and scales, the *naga* is a figure of devotion, its ferocity serving to drive off evil spirits that would slow the birth pains or lead the soul astray. The Beggarwoman of the novella, by contrast, does not wield her power, instead

finding herself driven off by those who will not stand her hunger, the insult of her sick foot and bald head. Rather than being obliterated by a descent into the natural, the *naga* emerges out that element. Its body is itself the Mekong, the silted paddy, the sea. As such, there is nothing to dissolve, only a profound liminality that allows the *naga* to swim, slither, and crawl in and out of the waves. She may even assume the form of the harvest goddess, Sri (218). This fluid, amphibian nature is the antithesis of Peter Morgan's Beggarwoman, who loses her land-dwelling attributes as she becomes riverine. Reading the Beggarwoman in the shadow of the *naga*, rather than the Western referents, allows her to be creaturely while retaining her humanness, to flow out into the landscape without losing all form. The *naga* cannot restore the Beggarwoman to Ha's dream of a finite, markable historicity, a notion inherited from the West. It cannot, in other words, make her real. But it does, I think, something that is equally important: it makes her part of a different, Southeast Asian reality.

Chapter Three: The Underwater Eye

There is another *naga* goddess to the south. She goes by many names: Kanjeng Ratu Kidul, Nyai Roro Kidul, Nyi Lara Kidul. Her true name is Kanjeng Ratu Kencana Hadisari⁴⁴ and she is Queen of the South Sea. Born an earthly princess in West Java, the tales of her spiritual conversion are also multiple. She was cursed by an evil stepmother, stricken with leprosy, and therefore banished. She was a mystic who took refuge in the forest, or perhaps, wishing to escape the confines of marriage, disappeared among the trees. In each version of the story, the princess meditates while in exile, learning to perform miracles and shift between forms. Having perfected her powers, she makes her way to the Indian Ocean and throws herself on the waves. The plunge is curing: it heals Ratu Kidul's body and restores her to her rightful place as queen of the Javanese spirit world.

From a *kraton* or palace on the ocean floor, Ratu Kidul rules the underworld and the deep energies of the island. As a sea deity, she embodies the ambivalence of her medium, seeming to yield, yet wielding the powers of life and death. The patron of fisherman, sailors, and birds' nest gathers, her waters travel on the winds to nourish the fields, but she is also the author of earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic blasts. Residents of the southern coast both honor and fear her, asking for her protection before entering the water, and bringing her inside their homes in the form of votive objects, a painting or a photograph pinned to a wall. The goddess is a

⁴⁴ This was explained to me by Gusti Kanjeng Ratu Wandansari (Gusti Mung), a princess of the Surakarta court and member of the Indonesian House of Representatives who has devoted herself to the preservation of Javanese court culture.

dangerous seductress as well as a protector (Strassler, *Ratu Kidul's Photographic Appearances*, 5). Many believe she will claim those who dare to wear green, her favorite color, to the water's edge, bearing them down to her underwater kingdom to serve as a lover or soldier; sexually voracious, she takes handsome young men with the tide (5). But the queen maintains still more intimate ties to the human realm.

One day, the story goes, prince Panembahan Senopati received the divine light of kingship while sleeping on a black stone near the southern coast of Java. Borne along the Otak River by the king of fishes, he was deposited on the edge of the great Southern Ocean, where, overcome by his calling, he appealed to God. Senopati meditated on the edge of the sea causing so much heat that the water boiled, killing the fish, and threatening the Ratu and her court.⁴⁵ Thinking the Day of Judgment had come, she rose to the surface. There she found a man alone, so absorbed he was unmoved by the squall. Recognizing him as her destined mate, she fell to his feet and implored him to stop. He did, reviving the fish and other sea life, and, in an exchange of glances, Ratu Kidul and Senopati fell in love. The goddess bore him down, down to her palace where the pair made love for three days and three nights, and she instructed him in the arts of state. She pledged her armies to defend his kingdom, and to serve as his consort and the consort of all future kings of Java. Having joined himself to Ratu Kidul, Senopati walked home across the sea.

⁴⁵ The anthropologist and Ratu Kidul scholar Robert Wessing points out that this disturbance recalls the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, the great Hindu story in which the Devas (gods) and the Asuras (demons) sought the nectar of immortality by stirring the cosmic ocean with Mount Mandara and the serpent King Vasuki: "The fish that were killed soon floated to the surface, while after a time the mountain being used as a churn became wreathed in flames . . . so that the lions, elephants, and other animals soon fell down dead" (Sutterheim quoted in *A Princess From Sunda* 339, Footnote 13). Such devastation, of course, also recalls the tsunami.

The covenant was enduring. From Senopati's founding of the Mataram Dynasty in 1584, through the split between the sultanates of Yogyakarta and Surakarta⁴⁶ two centuries later; through colonization, revolution, and independence, Ratu Kidul has remained lover to the sultan, and a powerful presence for the Javanese. This presence is made solid in the courts of Central Java. In Yogyakarta, the Taman Sari water castle transports the Ratu's *kraton* to the mainland, with bathing pools fed by a spitting serpent, a sunken mosque, so one might pray underwater, and a room for trysting with the spirit queen. In Surakarta, the *kraton*, blued like the hull of a fishing vessel, surrounds a garden littered with sand from Parangtritis, the beach where the Ratu first glimpsed Senopati and the gateway to her realm. Above the garden stands a tower, white and winnowed—a lighthouse—50 miles from the shore. Each year, on the anniversary of his accession, the sultan climbs the tower steps to a small chamber where he meditates, enfolding himself in the goddess' arms.

⁴⁶ ⁴⁶ Also written *Jogjakarta*—shortened as *Yogya* or *Jogja*—and *Solo*.



Figure Six: Meditation tower, *Kraton Kasunanan*, Surakarta

The union between the sultan and the Ratu binds two religious traditions as well as two kingdoms. Ratu Kidul was once an animist sea deity, sister and rival to the spirit of the rice harvest, Dewi Sri. In Hindu-Buddhist times she was twinned with Kali, Durga, and Tara, and when Islam arrived in Java on ships from India, Arabia, and China in the 15th century, it fell to this “old time” spirit to reconcile local

traditions with the new faith. As the sultan's mystical but still unmarried bride, annually consummating their accord, but always returning to the sea, Ratu Kidul at once authorizes and absents herself from the workings of political power in Java, granting the sultan the appearance of sovereignty while continuing to wield terrific force under the waves. In this way, Ratu Kidul acts a mediator, a midwife, shuttling between past and future, local and foreign, the ocean and the land, her very body serving as a site of negotiation between worlds.

It is worth lingering here in the tidal zone to consider Ratu Kidul's liminality and what it suggests about the Javanese imaginary. Let us begin retrospectively, traveling back to the moment of submersion. From the shore, the Ratu's plunge looks like Anne-Marie Stretter's, an act of despair. It is unclear in the *Babad* or Javanese chronicles whether she sought death in the water or if she was chasing something else, a voice calling her to abandon mortal life and reclaim her realm. Whatever the impetus, a profound transformation takes place when the princess leaves the world of solids to enter the sea below. The transformation is symbolic, but it is also sensorial. We can imagine, for example, the change in temperature, in pressure, the humid air growing denser with fluid. We can observe the alterations to her body, the broken skin mended, the legs gone and in their place the slick fishlike tail. Sound travels differently underwater, and we can hear the waves, the wind, and the singing lizards give way to the warp and damp of oceanic noise. But if these changes take place within the Ratu's body, her dive into the South Sea produces another change which is outwardly directed.

Sight, in contrast to touch or hearing, strays far from the body, straining out of the skull, past the orbital bone, to plunge the perceiver into her view. When the Beggarwoman comes upon the shores of Tonle Sap, for example, the optical change she experiences is not simply bodily, that is to say, in the eye, but in the world: the lake and the village along its banks disappear, the marsh behind her dissolves into a blinding sheet of metal (*The Vice-Consul* 3). In this way, I have argued, the landscape and the weather form a screen between the Beggarwoman and her surroundings, as though she were looking through water. Ratu Kidul also looks, and appears, through water. Like the Beggarwoman, she is a fishly thing, a swimmer. She dives to the bottom of the Indian Ocean to rise as spray or storm and then submerge again. Her visuality—her mode of appearing and the visual field she constructs—is thus marked by the oscillation of appearance and disappearance, of images coming into view and then dissolving, surfacing, eddying, escaping. It encompasses the strange mirror of the water's surface, and also the blank below, the deep liquid world of density and darkness, stray columns of light clouded with particles.

Feminist philosopher of science, Donna Haraway, trawls this aquatic space in her essay *Crittercam: Compounding Eyes in Naturecultures*, a meditation on the underwater optics of *Crittercam*, a television series produced by National Geographic in 2004. *Crittercam* falls within the genre of reality TV, immediately recognizable for its quick editing, the reeling camera and droning voiceover. But the action and milieu of *Crittercam* are anything but familiar. Indeed, the program bills itself as a

portal to another world. The premise here is deceptively simple: strap cameras to the backs of sea creatures—green turtles, humpback whales, emperor penguins—and watch as the animals descend, bearing the apparatus down into their watery worlds (251). That this descent requires marine scientists, a camera crew, equipment of all kinds, is obscured by the producers: “The animals . . . are presented,” writes Haraway, “as makers of home movies that report the actual state of things without human interference or even human presence” (252). Thus unencumbered, the viewer is free, the voiceover promises, to “sense water rushing past, hear the thunderous roar of the wind and experience the thrill of the hunt Dive, swim, hunt, and burrow in animal habitats where humans can never go” (252). In short, she is offered the experience of *immersion*, into the sea, yes, but also into otherness. The viewer is invited to shed her human skin, crawl inside a kind of furred diving bell.

At first glance, the distance between the Goddess of the South Sea and the critters of Haraway’s essay seems uncrossable, an ocean. But Haraway and I share a preoccupation with creaturely dives, as well as with sight, touch, and the sea as a counter-hegemonic field. Far from being unencumbered, Haraway argues, the camera-mounted turtle and whale see with “compound eyes,” eyes which operate not as independent instruments but as nodes in a wider fleshly network and thus use “different refractive indices, different materials, different fluids, to get something in focus” (263). Compound eyes do not see alone, but in concert with other organs, other agents, with whom they are *infolded*, to use Merleau-Ponty’s term (249). Eva Hayward, a student and also a teacher of Haraway, describes something similar with

her term “fingery eyes,” allowing the us to rightly understand sight as an extremely sensitive form of touch. This enlarged faculty reveals “intimacies at surfaces, fast changes in scale, ranges of magnification, and the immersive optics of refraction . . . [a] haptic visual symphony” (259). It is no accident that both Haraway and Hayward locate this symphony in the immersive depths of the ocean. Where the world of solids is a place of separation, of gusts of wind funneling around objects and disappearing, in the liquid world, the drag of the hand produces a surge that can be felt meters, fathoms away. It is a place of profound connection, where one can feel most acutely, perhaps, the join between the embodied being and the environing world, where one cannot help but see differently (249, quoting Don Ihde’s *Bodies in the Making*).

In this chapter, I will suggest then that we consider Ratu Kidul in a similar light, at a similar depth. Departing from the existing anthropological literature, I pursue the goddess as a force and a figure whose visuality, I argue, offers a powerful alternative to the colonial representational regime. Hypervisible in paintings, auratic photography, and in film and television since independence, Ratu Kidul was all but unrendered during the colonial period, and while central to Javanese court and village life, was often “missed” in the Dutch colonial archive. Colonial administrators who attended the *bedhaya* dance which invokes her, for example, mistook the sacred ritual for a “theatrical farce,” and misidentified the goddess as a minor deity. Scholars have attributed the Ratu’s so-called absence pre-independence to fear of her potency, Islamic restrictions on image making, and the male ownership of her image by the

sultan. Against the glut of images related to other Javanese deities, they have tended to read the 19th and early 20th centuries as a period of dormancy for the goddess, an occasion for mourning. But I propose another, less despairing explanation. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theorization of subaltern silence, I explore how the goddess endured and, indeed, enunciated during the colonial period, pointing to the "unseen" as a field of action and representation that resists colonial visibility. In what follows, I explore the field of the unseen as it operates in the figuration of the goddess and in the ornate ritual which seeks to appease her, the *labuhan*. This field, I argue, is not organized according to the European fixations of absence and presence, but is instead fluid, marked by the watery tropes of swimming, surfacing, welling up, fogging, reflecting, refracting, and receding. These metaphors, I show, allow us to read Ratu Kidul as neither manifest nor disappeared, but ephemeral, processual, refusing any fixed visibility.

If the liquidity of the colonial archive is marked by stasis and suppuration, the Ratu's liquid world is one of movement. Flow is an essential element in Javanese aesthetic theory or *rasa*, derived from the Sanskrit system of the same name. Colloquially, *rasa* means "sense" or "feeling," but a fuller translation would include "taste . . . deepest meaning, essence"; in the Indian context, there is an association with sap, water, milk, or juice (Felicia Hughes-Freeland, *Embodied Communities: Dance and Change in Java* 78–79 and G.B. Mohan Thampi, *Rasa as Aesthetic Experience* 75). A productively vague term, *rasa* is often evoked through bodily metaphors, likened to one of the five senses or all of them together, a "substance,

vibration, or quality of what is apprehended and the . . . organ which apprehends it” (Paul Stange, *The Logic of Rasa in Java* 119). *Rasa* is thus essential for understanding corporeal practices in Java, and undergirds the allied worlds of mystical practice, etiquette, and art (Hughes-Freeland 79). It is in this last category, that the term is most useful for this discussion, describing as it does, the dominant mood or “fragrance” of a given piece, something that wells up in the composition and rushes out to the audience. The performance traditions of the gamelan orchestra, court dance, and *wayang kulit*, are all dense with *rasa*; they are also ephemeral forms in which written texts soften, yield in the hands of the performer (Laurie Sears, *Shadows of Empire* 185). The *kraton* itself, where so much of Javanese artistic life takes place, is a fluid structure, a cosmic diagram with the sultan in the center as the axis mundi,⁴⁷ anchoring flows of energy which run ever southward towards death, the Ratu, and the sea (Timothy E. Behrend, *Kraton and Cosmos in Traditional Java* 178).

“Whoever as a child heard the sound of the *kentongan* (slit-drums) along the river Code as the drums accompanied Ratu Kidul on her journeys high above the water to the volcano Merapi learned early on to associate the Ratu with fresh as well as with salt water . . . ,” recalls the writer G.J. Resink (*Kangjeng Ratu Kidul* 315). His personal remembrance, published in a special volume of *Asian Folklore Studies* devoted to the goddess, figures Ratu Kidul both as matter and a set of material processes—the sea, the canals, the paddies, and also the fog and the monsoon. That the goddess is synonymous with water and wateriness has been remarked upon

⁴⁷ *Pakubuwana*, name of the sultans of Surakarta, means “nail of the universe.”

everywhere: “There is no doubt about the close connection of Lara Kidul with water,” anthropologist Roy E. Jordaan observes (*The Mystery of Nyai Lara Kidul* 106). But Resink pursues the connection further, approaching water not merely as substance, but as a kind of vehicle. Though nominally a sea goddess, Ratu Kidul is a rover: joined to or identical with Raja Anjin-Anjin, ruler of the winds, Resink describes how the sprit queen of his childhood rose in a great “cosmic circuit of wind and water in which clouds formed over the silty southern ocean, moved inland with the wind to meet the mountains, and released their waters to feed the springs and rivers that nourished the fields and then flowed back to the sea” (Resink 313).⁴⁸ Unlike her sedentary sister, Dewi Sri, who squats in the fields, Ratu Kidul surges out of the ocean, over the plain. She reigns not only over the Southern Ocean and the Sultanate of Yogyakarta, which shares the longest coastline with her realm, but also high up in the mountain country of Dieng and Tengger (315). The goddess is venerated in West Java, where she was born, and in the East Javanese village of Puger, where she presides over a treacherous channel between an inland bay and the sea (Wessing 103).

This fluidity of movement and domain condenses in the Ratu’s body, a woman’s torso and a fish’s tail, a monster, a mermaid. Her appearance changes with the phases of the moon, “young and beautiful when it waxes, old and ugly when it wanes” (Wessing, *Nyai Roro Kidul in Puger*, 98). In the *Babad*, she is described as having an enormous body with thick hair and sharp, milk-white tusks, and is said to snore in her sleep (Wessing, *Dislodged Tales*, Footnote 10, 533). But in popular

⁴⁸ The idea that rain begins in the ocean is found elsewhere in Asia; in China, the reigning sea spirit is called Goddess of the Sea and Sky (Wessing, *A Princess from Sunda*, 334).

representations, on buildings and the sides of pedicabs, one finds a less beastly image of the goddess: a lovely young woman, revealed and voluptuous, rising on the foam (Strassler 1).



Figure Seven: *Nyai Roro Kidul* by Basuki Abdullah

The Ratu's tail may be rendered as an independent spirit, with its own jaws and teeth; or it may be merely suggested, lurking beneath the surface of the water or mimicked in the movement of her sarong. As a *naga*,⁴⁹ the serpent deity I prescribed as an

⁴⁹ While Ratu Kidul is not universally identified as a *naga*, most scholars locate her within the Southeast Asian pantheon of serpent goddesses; Robert Wessing, for example, anchors this claim by citing Roy E. Jordaan's ethnographic study, in which his Javanese informants referred to her as a *naga* queen (*Dislodged Tales* 533).

alternate reading strategy for the Beggarwoman in the last chapter, she is often shown driving a winged, scaled chariot (Wessing, *A Princess from Sunda*, 322). The *naga* is, as we have seen, an interstitial spirit, sliding between forms, as well as in and out of the sea. The figure who walks out of the waves at Parangtritis is called an *olor* in the *Babad*, usually translated as a “fish-like creature,” indeterminate, unnatural (Roy E. Jordaan, *The Mystery of Nyai Lara Kidul, Goddess of the Southern Ocean*, 108). In this way, Ratu Kidul’s fishliness would seem to resemble the Beggarwoman’s, but they are, I contend, utterly different animals.

While both women are in exile, both driven from their homes by their families, and with both seeking refuge underwater, the Beggarwoman’s animality is terminal, a fixed, finished state. Once submerged, she cannot resurface. Stripped of her hair, her children, and her language, the changes to her body are not a transformation, but a devolution, the unidirectional regress through millennia of silt and sediment. If the Beggarwoman seems to greet Charles Rossett at the lagoon as an upright creature, an almost uttering thing, that flicker of humanity is extinguished when she tears off the fish’s head and slips back into the sea. Though the Beggarwoman travels, from the shores of Tonle Sap to the Sea of Bengal and, finally, the Ganges, her movement is looping, sinking, and non-progressive, like the structure of Duras’ novella or Anne-Marie Stretter’s last day. The Ratu, by contrast, retains her human body, her speech, and, most importantly, the power to assume the form or vapor or woman or serpent at will. In this way, Ratu Kidul’s creaturely turn is not a form of debasement but something enlarging, multiplying.

One way of accounting for this difference lies in the old, colonial question of type and typology, *How is a fish not like a serpent?* Darwin—or Rumphius—might ask. I am not here proposing a simple distinction between snakes and fishes, but rather an exploration of what these animalic cosmologies mean in relation to water, and what each trope allows us to say about relations of power in history. The Beggarwoman’s fish, unlike Darwin’s, will never grow legs and walk out of the water, onto the land. It possesses no amphibian becoming, and is instead condemned to the low, discarded places we met in the previous chapter, where life—the Beggarwoman’s life—emerges irrepressibly, almost mechanically from death and decay. In the flooded country of Tonle Sap and the Ganges Basin, her existence is indeed a wallowing, a “bare life”—she swims, she prattles, she feeds. As a bottom-dweller, something skulking, like the great, slow catfish that trawl the Mekong, her view seldom surpasses the bank; even when she climbs atop the roof of a bus to follow the black Lancia, it is only a brief surfacing. The air, the exhaust, the people walking along the road all disappear when she disembarks, returns to the sea. It is as though the Beggarwoman has lost her lungs and can no longer breathe air. This is a colonial image *par excellence*: the colonized as an awkward, atemporal creature, maladapted and facing extinction. Ratu Kidul, however, suffers no such malady. Instead possessing a multiplicity of organs—lungs, gills, scales, limbs.

This multiplicity precedes the Ratu’s plunge and the coupling of snake and woman. It is inherent, already, in the body of the serpent, strange and sinuous, like a line of script, hard to tell, from a distance, which end is the head, and which the tail.

The snake is all spine and can bend in every direction. Legless, it travels in a series of undulations, tracing ‘s’ after ‘s’ on the ground.⁵⁰ Its skin is scaled but dry to the touch, sloughing off at intervals in transparent sheets. For all its strangeness, the serpent resembles a host of other creatures: the bird with its clutch of eggs, the breathing lizard. It wriggles swiftly over the land and churns water like a blade. A snake is, in short, everything that a fish is not—mutable, adaptive, resurrecting. Its form materializes its symbolic function as a shapeshifter and marker of transitions, actions which make the snake cousin to the sorcerer, the pangolin, indeterminate animals who dwell in the margins (Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 97). Margin, of course, is another word for frontier, the Beggarwoman’s bog or Masaccio’s *Garden of Eden*. The power to transmute, to cross, allows the serpent to dip into this liminal zone without becoming mired there; not caught like a fish, but slippery, free to swarm over the earth. The swarming of the serpent is important. As I showed through Douglas’ reading of Leviticus in the last chapter, swarming is, in the monotheistic traditions, indeterminate, unholy:

Whether we call it teeming, trailing, creeping, crawling or swarming, it is an indeterminate form of movement Swarming things are neither fish, flesh nor fowl. Eels and worms inhabit water, though not as fish; reptiles go on dry land, though not as quadrupeds; some insects fly, though not as birds. There is no order in them The prototype and model of the swarming things is the worm. As fish belong in the sea so worms belong in the realm of the grave, with death and chaos. (Douglas 57)

⁵⁰ *A Dictionary of Symbols* contains a long entry on the snake, including such fascinating morsels of information as its resemblance to a ligament, its common association with the tree, and its formal analogy with the roots and branches of trees (290).

What is an abomination in the West then, a plague and the bringer of sin, is, in the East, something else, equally bound up with death and formlessness, but sought and revered, beloved for its indeterminacy.⁵¹

The existing literature has much to say about the Ratu's liminality. Anthropologists, folklorists, and religious scholars, and orientalists of all kinds, classify the goddess as a chthonic being, a spirit of the underworld connected with water, the birth canal, and the passage between life and death (Wessing, *Spirits of the Earth and Spirits of the Water* 57). That this ambiguity is encoded in the Ratu's body is coolly observed, the connection between snakes and chthonic creatures having long been established (Wessing, *Symbolic Animals in the Land Between the Waters* 208). But what has gone unsaid is how this liminality operates within a wider visual field. In Indonesia, and in Java in particular, the veil between the seen and the unseen is porous, thin. For a thousand years before the coming of Islam, the island had been home to the deities of the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon, their footprint left in the great stone temples that erupt out of the plain like the neighboring volcanoes. As a tutelary

⁵¹ The waters of Southeast Asia are alive with serpents. Whether they arose on the mainland or in the archipelago has long been the subject of debate. In China, a *naga* goddess makes rain and therefore rules the harvest; in India, serpent deities appear as women or their lovers, entering them through their vaginas, like the god Siva seducing the earth (Wessing, *A Princess from Sunda* 325). There is a long-held view of the islands as new lands, volcanic and molten, and the north, by contrast, as the place of origins. The anthropological literature is filled with images of snakes raining down on the Indies, especially from Indochina, where, as we have seen in the last chapter, a *naga* queen gives birth to the state. The Javanese Shailendra and Sanjaya dynasties and Champa, in present-day Vietnam, were closely bound from the 8th century, when Champa was repeatedly raided by Javanese pirates, and, according to a 10th-century Arab writer, may have even come under Javanese control (326). Ties were friendlier during the Majapahit, when a Javanese king married a princess from Champa, and Javanese ports were filled with the kingdom's traders (326). However the myth circulated, in the royal marriage bed or the market stalls or out of some deep, ancestral vat of shared iconography, a powerful snake deity came to string her body across the South China Sea, presiding over the underworld, rising out of the ocean to be the consort of the king.

or guardian spirit and thus, in Javanese terms, a real presence on the earth, Ratu Kidul seeps across the divide between the seen and the unseen in a variety of ways: as weather, in the fullness or scarcity of the harvest, in the fisherman's net, and the ritual and performance traditions of Central Java. But Ratu Kidul's appearances are, by definition, intermittent, ephemeral, escaping; her visuality is uneven, processual. Thus, as we will see, she is difficult to locate, once and for all, in discourses which are fixated on Eurocentric notions of absence and presence.

In the colonial period, for example, Dutch officials often missed the Ratu, failing to register her entirely or mistaking her for a minor deity. In 1726, the Dutch East India Company commander at Semarang, Pieter Gijsbert Noodt, was invited to attend the accession festivities for Pakubuwana II and

was treated to several royal entertainments, many of them with supernatural aspects of which the Europeans were evidently unaware. A performance of what was probably *wayang wong* (dance drama) or *wayang topeng* (masked dance drama) was described by the VOC as "Javanese dances and farces" (*klugtspeelen*). Noodt also saw the Kartasura version of the stately *bedhaya* dance, one of the most sacred of all Javanese dance performances, but of its sacredness he seems to have known nothing (M.C. Rickleffs, *The Seen and Unseen Worlds of Java* 6)

Rickleffs begins his study of the role of mysticism in the court of the last sultan of Kartasura with this episode, underscoring Dutch imperviousness to Javanese sacral life. The sketch is almost comedic, with the Dutch officer playing the part of the *boer* (literally *farmer*), dull and Protestant against the subtlety and abstraction of the Javanese court. There is, of course, a more sinister register here, a premonition of what would befall the insecure monarch who signed over the sovereignty of Mataram to the VOC in a bout of illness, divided his kingdom, leaving the palaces open to

plunder and misuse (269). But this was an early, golden hour. The sultan was young; he had not yet embarked on the ill-fated program of Islamicization that would cripple the Mataram Dynasty, and his accession day was shared with another monarch, a queen from under the sea. Thus, it was not only the reverential mood of the day and its rites that was lost on the Commander, but the fact that the sultan was beseeching a specific sacred figure.

How could Commander Noodt, sitting comfortably in one of the cool marble recesses of the *kraton*, fail to glimpse the Ratu? She was there in one of her most direct manifestations, the *bedhaya* dance which evokes her union with Senopati's grandson, Sultan Agung, and in which she is said to take part. On that June evening, the commander watched as "the king's own troupe of nine very beautifully attired women appeared from the inner precincts of the court to the sound of three cannon shots, and performed to the sound of the gamelan. When they had finished, again three cannon shots were fired and another group of royal dancers . . . performed" (7).

The cannon fire broke the night and the otherwise languid choreography, but Commander Noodt seemed not to hear it.⁵² He did not sense a beautiful and terrible queen directing the proceedings, did not see her join the dancers nor feel her pass, like a raven, over the crowd. That he should miss these events is, on the one hand, unsurprising; he was not Javanese, and lacked the cultural fluency, the refinement of sense organs and manners to read such subtle phenomena. But there is also a willfulness to his unseeing. The power and presence of the dancers, the punctuation

⁵² In the succeeding centuries, gunfire would become a particular feature of the *srimpi* and *bedhaya* dances of Yogyakarta, the militaristic Central Javanese capital that staunchly resisted the Dutch.

of the shots are evacuated by the Dutchman. He drains them, spilling their specificity and integrity of meaning until they are mere atmosphere, rain dripping on the palms in the courtyard or the smell of his cigarette. This then is the law of colonial visuality: that in order for Europe to ascend, the indigenous must recede from view.

The erasure of the colonized is powerfully illustrated in an episode from another island, in another century in the long procession of colonial rule. The Klungkung *puputan* or “finishing” took place in Central Bali on the morning of 28 April 1908. Klungkung was the most powerful kingdom on the island, one of only two independent Balinese territories after 60 years of armed anti-colonial resistance. A Dutch lieutenant had been shot “during a routine march through the town of Gélgél two weeks earlier The colonial army retaliated by destroying the town . . . and bombarding the capital from the sea” (Margaret J. Wiener, *Visible and Invisible Realms* 3). They issued an ultimatum giving Klungkung until noon on the 28th to surrender, and urged women and children to evacuate. But the call went unheeded. Dutch soldiers set out and reached Klungkung by early afternoon; they met no one on the road:

Heavy field ordinance rolled into the crossroads, just across from the high brick walls of the royal residence known as Semarapura, abode of the god of love. It was only then that a cluster of Balinese men and boys appeared, all dressed in white. They charged forward, brandishing lances and *keris* (wavy-bladed daggers). As rifles and howitzers loosed volleys of fire, the Balinese fell in bloody . . . heaps Among them were women, resplendent in gold and jewels, many leading children by the hand or carrying them in their arms. They too fell before the relentless guns as they advanced before the Dutch troops, and so the massacre continued until at least two hundred Balinese lay dead or wounded on Klungkung’s main road. At least the king himself appeared, together with his remaining lords. One more round and it was over (3)

Dutch reports at the time portrayed the Klungkung *puputan* as a tragic anomaly in the essentially benevolent colonial endeavor. They diminished the sacrifice as being “motivated by feudal ideas of honor”—a favorite charge against the colonized—arguing that the event had been “propelled by fanatics who forced a weak-willed king into a . . . bloody confrontation with the superior military and moral force of the Dutch” (4). This sentiment was echoed by Clifford Geertz fifty years later, when he recalled that the Klungkung aristocrats “had died as they lived: in a pageant” (7). Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the *puputan*, and in its postcolonial wake, the act of mass suicide was emptied, reduced to “a heroic gesture that was basically meaningless” (4).

The so-called meaninglessness of Klungkung manifests as an absence in the archive. After the initial reports, the event faded from Dutch speech, Dutch memory. When it was spoken of at all, it was as the “little *puputan*,” dwarfed in comparison to the Badung *puputan*, which had taken place in South Bali a year and a half earlier, and cost still more lives. “For the most part,” writes Wiener, “Klungkung’s fall was surrounded by silence” (4). Silence existed on the Balinese side as well. Brutalized by what they had seen and fearing reprisal (a rumor circulated that the Dutch were planning to build a bridge using Balinese heads), some villagers fled for other parts of the island. With the vanishing of their royal house, those who remained had little grounds for resistance, and the insurrections ceased. This was interpreted by the Dutch as apathy, evidence that the Balinese had tired of their “despotic” kings and

were now compliant colonial subjects (5). The conquest of Bali was over: the action of the Klungkung *puputan* became a non-action, its enunciation, a non-utterance.

Gayatri Spivak has given us a rich set of resources on the question of subaltern silence. Her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* decenters speech as the purview of the privileged, shifting attention instead to blanks and the unsaid: “. . . when it comes to the . . . consciousness of the subaltern,” she writes, “the notion of *what the work cannot say* becomes important”⁵³ (*Can the Subaltern Speak?* 28, my emphasis). For Spivak, the utterance can function only as an index for the “irretrievable consciousness” of the colonized, something radically other and outside (28). Her intervention is, at its core, textual, deeply rooted in the critical traditions of Marxism and deconstruction, but some scholars have interpreted her thesis in a wider, more gestural way. Wiener, for example, argues that the invisibility of Klungkung rests not on the of alterity of the Balinese, but on their *inscrutability*, that long and enduring discourse on the “illegible mystery” of the Orient (Edward Said, *Orientalism* 4). Of course, the survivors of Klungkung continued to speak of, to render the *puputan*; what matters most for Wiener—and for myself—is that the Dutch *could not hear them*. In the *Babad Dalem* chronicle and other local narratives, the event was figured vividly, though subsumed into a longer history of anti-colonial resistance. This history is relayed, submits Wiener, as a “discourse of magic” in which supernatural forces hold sway (9). In this way, the Klungkung *puputan*’s evacuation resembles the Ratu’s. The Dutch could not hear the Balinese render and

⁵³ There are resonances here with the negative, anti-literary aims of *l’écriture féminine*.

remember Klungkung because they were listening for different kinds of enunciations, and because of their own culturally patterned silences (12). There is, I submit, a parallel relationship between the seeable and the sayable; if Spivak helps us to grasp the relationship between discourse and what exceeds it, we may understand visuality in similar terms, with the absence of an image functioning, at times, as the truest index of its force (Rosalind C. Morris, *Photographies East, The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia* 26–27). Commander Noodt *cannot* glimpse the Ratu because to see her would be to acknowledge an authority with strength to challenge the VOC.⁵⁴

Such an omission is characteristic of the colonial archive, from which the Ratu is curiously absent. When I asked Robert Wessing why I could find no images of the goddess from the 19th and early 20th centuries, he replied:

You know, I've never noticed that, and really have no explanation [as to] why she wasn't depicted before, except that even now many artists people are reluctant to do so, as I found out when I wanted to buy some paintings of her. This may have been stronger in the past, when the old taboos had more force than they do now. It is said though that even when a film star wants to play the role of NRK,⁵⁵ she has to ask the Goddess for permission to do so. This may, of course, be filmic hype, but could contain some grains of truth. People really do still stand in awe of her (email communication, 28 March 2012)

Awe and Islamic aniconicism are the most common reasons given by scholars for the Ratu's visual absence pre-independence, but the anthropologist Karen Strassler offers a different explanation. True to her divine nature, she argues, the goddess ruled

⁵⁴ To this day, many Javanese believe that Ratu Kidul will repel any outside forces from illegally entering Indonesian waters (Wessing, *A Princess from Sunda*, Footnote 14, 339).

⁵⁵ Nyai Roro Kidul.

invisibly during the colonial period, “presiding over a pantheon of ghosts, demons, and sprites from the bottom of the ocean, appearing not visually, but by smell or sound: a sudden fragrant wind, or the clamor of pounding hooves—the noise of the spirit horses of her invisible army” (6). Her apparitions were transient, dissolving almost as soon as they appeared; when the goddess did leave a trace it was in the form of disaster, a tide that swallowed a fleet of vessels, an earthquake or a tsunami. Only her lovers, the Javanese kings, could see her (and then only after concentrating their powers through meditation) (6). The sultans, were, in essence, “owners” of the Ratu’s image, subjecting this ancient and originally animist queen to both male and Islamic authority. “Not surprisingly, given this royal prerogative,” writes Strassler, “Ratu Kidul was not a traditional subject of Javanese image-making,” as were Kali, Durga, and Dewi Sri, the heroines of the great Hindu epics. In this way, the absence of the goddess from the colonial archive may be understood as a matter of form and also of gender. But a profound shift occurs in the postcolonial period, when the goddess becomes “democratized” such that she may appear beyond the *kraton* gates, leaking out into the alleyways, the exhaust of the city center, and the green countryside beyond.

In her insightful essay on the goddess’ photographic appearances, Strassler argues that the queen of the unseen world was flung into visibility with the rise of the postcolonial nation state and its regimes of representation. Focusing on the *reformasi* period that preceded Suharto’s overthrow and the “era of transparency” that followed, Strassler traces the history of Ratu Kidul *as image* to suggest that by “infiltrating and

mobilizing the visual technologies of modernity,” the goddess has continued to assert a deep, omnipresent power (4). The Suharto years were a shadowy time, full of secrecy, disappearances, and suspicion. After the president was deposed, Indonesians were in a mood for revelation and indexicality, virtues promised by the modern medium of photography. At that moment, Strassler argues, in this piece and elsewhere,⁵⁶ “the photograph served as a fetish emblemizing a new political order characterized by openness, authenticity, and democratic participation” (3). At times, the new order demanded repudiation—publically, at least—of the “old ways,” mystical beliefs and traditions that stretched back into Indonesia’s pre-Islamic past. A presidential candidate who conducted a ceremony on Java’s south coast in 1999 to ask for Ratu Kidul’s blessing was decried by secularists as unfit for modern governance. And yet, the politician, a blind man, was praised by others for possessing another kind of vision (3). Strassler calls this form of sight “the obscure.” The obscure, she explains, is not “transparency’s *other* . . . ,” but “an alternative political ontology and its attendant visuality” (3). This visuality is condensed in the auratically charged images of the goddess that have proliferated in recent decades—oil portraits by mystics, films and television series chronicling her liaisons, “spirit photos” sold on the beach at Parangtritis in which the goddess seems to appear in the ocean’s spray, an effect of light refracting off water (19). In each instance, Strassler argues, “Photographs are mobilized not as evidentiary traces or transparent windows

⁵⁶ See Karen Strassler’s *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java* (2010).

but as mediums that convey spiritual power from the domain of the unseen into the seen” (5).

Strassler’s contribution is laudable, keenly analyzed and conveyed. But by presenting Ratu Kidul’s visuality as a before-and-after-story, she remains mired within the old colonial conundrum of absence and presence. The complex negotiation of visibility and invisibility Strassler describes, I would argue, is not something which emerges in the “era of transparency”—when the mediasphere allows for the production and circulation of images in new ways, under a new political order—but rather that this is the fundamental character of “the obscure,” a mode of appearance and disappearance that has belonged to the Ratu from the very beginning, she who is forever becoming, never attaining a fixed state, but resolutely non-terminal, with no final appearance.

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Figure Eight: The road to Parangtritis

The road to Parangtritis stretches 30 kilometers south from Yogyakarta, through villages and rice fields, against a low ridge of limestone hills. Once a remote place, Kretek Bridge now spans the River Opak, and on the weekends the road is choked with holiday makers, *bemos* and tour buses, a blizzard of scooters. The town is not much to speak of, just a cluster of shops, roadside stands, and the Queen of the South Sea Hotel, perched on a cliff with a pavilion overlooking the waves.

Parangtritis is the gateway to Ratu Kidul's kingdom, the speck of coast where the goddess and Senopati fell in love, and it retains the erotic charge of their union. A "flirting place," where young people come to make love in rooms that rent by the

hour and prostitution flourishes, the town feels roughly used, an atmosphere that extends out on to the beach. Reached by a narrow lane, the beach rises in a series of dunes scattered with huts selling snacks and bottled water, finally resolving in a stripe of dark sand. On weekends, the sky fills with kites and horse drawn carts trot along the water's edge, skirting the spray; women gather on blankets in their *jilbabs* and the sick immerse themselves in sulfuric baths. But few enter the water. A deep trench lies just offshore, each year pulling a dozen fishermen and beachgoers down with the tide. In the deep past, geologists say, it was a place ravaged by tsunamis. When I visited on Boxing Day, the anniversary of the disaster in Banda Aceh, the beach was empty save a few lonely windmills, a line of fishing boats, shattered coconuts, and old plastic tubing. The wind whipped the sand into sharp funnels around my ankles as I approached the water, watching a single fisherman with his net step into the surf. The waves came often and seemed to stack, one upon another, visually forming a single swell.

In Parangkusumo, just south of the village of Parangtritis, and across from a field of grazing cows stands a courtyard, a white wall, undulating like the body of a serpent and pierced by small Islamic niches. The wall surrounds an outcropping, two "love stones," one large and one small, with an incongruous lamp between them. The rocks, I was told, represent Ratu Kidul and Senopati, though whether the pair sat on these stones or whether their sprits condensed into the mineral went unsaid. The stones were not alone. A family, a father and mother, two grown children and a grandchild, sat huddled on a woven mat before a pair of earthen braziers, burning

incense and making offerings. The man wore a *kain* or sarong with his black fez, his daughter a leopard print blouse. One by one, each family member rose to cover the rocks with flowers, at times kneeling to place a single hand on the stone, eyes cast downward. The offerings had been purchased from an old woman sitting near the courtyard gate. On her table she displayed her wares: offerings wrapped in banana leaves, handfuls of cream-colored and pink blossoms, a basket of radishes, translucent stones for rubbing together to start a fire, two kinds of incense.



Figure Nine: Offerings at Parangkusumo



Figures 10 and 11: Conducting a *labuhan* ritual (above); stone with flower offerings.



The ritual was a small, local version of the ornate *labuhan* ceremonies conducted by the *kratons* of Central Java at Parankusumo, on the slopes of Mount Merapi, and along the southern coast. In Surakarta, the *labuhan* is performed each *Silasa-Kliwon*, sacred Tuesdays when the *Bedhaya Ketawang* is rehearsed, and on the anniversary of the sultan's ascension, when the dance is staged with full gamelan accompaniment in the central pavilion. The *labuhan* involves all members of the royal household, including the *abdidalam* or palace servants. Preparations begin in the kitchen, where cooks ready the following items:

1. a tray made from plaited leaves bearing
 - two cones of white rice
 - two parcels of rice wrapped in banana leaves
 - chicken with sauce
 - soup with small grains
 - accompaniments of beans, chips, and pickles
2. a tray of glutinous rice in four colors (white, red, yellow, blue)
 - red and white rice pancakes
 - a cylinder of palm sugar
 - a cylinder of shredded coconut
3. plaited leaves bearing snacks from the market
4. a dish containing
 - yeast with soybeans
 - fermented soybean paste
 - dried beef
 - fish
 - fried peppers
 - a leaf bowl of fried noodles
 - a leaf bowl of chips
5. blue sticky rice with shredded coconut
6. a cone of rice cooked with coconut cream and filled with egg
7. rice cooked in coconut milk with chicken wrapped in leaves
8. a pair of dolls made of rice flour, one male, one female

This list was compiled by the Dutch anthropologist Clara Brakel, upon attending a *labuhan* at the Surakarta *kraton* in 1983.⁵⁷ Servants in the women's quarters, she observes, prepare other items—bowls of flowers in water, an incense burner, fragrant leaves and blossoms—which are added to the offerings in the pavilion. Sometimes personal effects of the sultan, fingernails, for example, are also added.⁵⁸ For ascension ceremonies, batik cloths decorated with colors and patterns said to please the Ratu are offered; the cloths are kept for the goddess' visits to the palace, and, when threadbare, are cast into the sea (Brakel 267). Batik played an even greater role in the court *labuhans* of the colonial period. A 1925 account lists no fewer than thirty different patterns—the *podhang bird entering into the essence, the overflowing mountain, crocodiles and fish emerging out of the water*.⁵⁹ These motifs reflect Ratu Kidul's chthonic nature, but they are outstripped in number by sheerly floral patterns. With motifs representing jasmine, roses, and hibiscus, a dozen flowers with no English names, the cloths redouble the scent of the *labuhan*'s other fragrant offerings, blossoms and blossom-scented water, resin, incense, cigarettes heavy with tobacco from the Sumatran plantations and laced with cloves.

A flower is central to another *labuhan*, the *plein air* ceremony performed at Pulo Bandhung Donan, an island off Cilacap on the southern coast. Drawing on court archives from the 1930s, Brakel reconstructs the ritual this way:

On 11 October 1939 . . . a female and a male member of the royal family took the clothes of the deceased Paku Buwana X from Surakarta via

⁵⁷ "Sandhang-pangan" for the Goddess: Offerings to Sang Hyang Bathari Durga and Nyai Lara Kidul (1997). I have adapted Brakel's list slightly.

⁵⁸ *Porous Boundaries: Addressing Calamities in East Java, Indonesia*, Robert Wessing (2010).

⁵⁹ Sapardal Hardosoekarto 1925, 23.

Yogya to Kotha Gedhé, where they stopped to make an offering at the grave sites of the royal ancestors. Having spent the night with the Bupati of the royal burial place of Imogiri, they traveled to the Opak River, then south from Bantul until they reached the village of Ngentak. From there the party went on foot; the clothes, placed in approximately five boxes, were carried on the shoulders of workmen in palanquins (*joli*), shaded by royal parasols. Thousands of people are said to have been watching from the roadside.

In a temporary construction (*tarub*) on the beach they arranged the food offering (*sesaji*) that had been brought from Imogiri, and the chests were placed on rafts, still shaded by royal parasols. Then the rafts were carried into the open. The leader of the mission, Raden Ayu Adipati Tasikwulan, and her followers sat cross-legged on the sand, burned incense, and offered the clothes to the Queen of the South in a formal address. When the rafts were abandoned to the waves, they were said to have floated calmly in a file towards the middle of the ocean. (273)

Brakel goes on to describe how the supplicants spent the night in the regency of Cilacap, where they ate a ceremonial meal. Donning all white clothes, “like *hajji* en route to Mecca,” they boarded a small skiff and pushed out into the waves (273). Though the ocean roiled, they reached Pulo Bandhung safely and made their way over the rough terrain. In the middle of the island, it is said, stands a tree without a single flower, a curious absence, so near to the equator. They spent the night beneath its boughs, burning incense and singing hymns. In the middle of the night, the tree began to shine with a special radiance, and the *wijayakusuma* flower appeared. In the morning, Raden Ayu picked the flower, placed it in a box, and turned the lock. After a night spent back in Cilacap, the party sent word of their success to the sultan. A group of courtiers received them at the station. The box with the flower was carried in a royal procession through the palace gates and presented it to the sultan. “Beyond the messengers and the king,” Brakel concludes, “no one knows what the mysterious flower looks like; when the king dies, the flower also disappears” (273).

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In *Sandhang-Pangan for the Goddess* (1997), Brakel compares the offerings of the *labuahan* to those bestowed on the Hindu goddess Durga. While the Ratu represents reunion and reincarnation, Durga presides over what one might call rending processes, the rotting corpse, the sperm that is spilled and wasted, the soul separating from the body at the time of death (278). Noting how the class of offering and ritual space differ from goddess to goddess—Ratu Kidul receives food and cloth in the *kraton*, Durga the blood and flesh of animals in the woods—Brakel concludes that “. . . Javanese concepts of their spirit world are diverse enough to allow for more than one female ruler, with . . . complementary functions” (278–9). Her careful inductive analysis derives from the work of symbolic anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, who regard ritual as “fundamental to the dynamics of culture” (Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 14). Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell posits this style of interpretation as but one moment in a long and complex intellectual history: “The notion of ritual,” she writes, “emerged as a formal term of analysis in the nineteenth century to identify what was believed to be a universal category of human experience. The term expressed, therefore, the beginnings of a major shift in the way European culture compared itself to other cultures . . .” (14). In this way, ritual is an effect, a sediment of colonial encounter, one of Europe’s breathless attempts to establish its difference from and access to its Others (29).

This access culminates in the ritual act itself. In early ethnography, indeed in early travel writing, ritual is constructed as a “window on the world,”⁶⁰ a moment in which the curtain is drawn back a little, and the watcher—a colonial bureaucrat, scholar, or trader—might enjoy a clear and unimpeded view.⁶⁰ Clifford Geertz refines this idea in the 1960s, writing that ritual is “not only the point at which the dispositional and conceptual aspects of religious life converge *for the believer*, but also the point at which the interaction between them can be most readily examined *by the attached observer*” (27).¹ Geertz thus insists on the fundamental congruity of “doing ritual and generating interpretations about it,” a likeness which, for Bell, points to the ways in which ritual became meaningful *to the theorist* (28). The very focus on ritual—through the formalization of anthropology as a discipline and ethnography as its primary activity—reinscribes it as “a window on the most important process of cultural life” (28). Moreover, through the act of witnessing, Bell argues, the ethnographer gains both an object of study and a method of analysis—her very vocation. To this I would add something less concrete, but equally important: the witness to ritual activity acquires the sensation of intimacy, of opening, admission to another world. The implications of this reverie will be explored in the last chapter. For now, it is enough to mark how the observer has grown increasingly active in the ritual setting, a development that reaches its apex, perhaps, with the advent of performance theory and the view that ritual is a collaboration between actor and audience (38).

⁶⁰ This mirrors the hallmark of European optics and painting theory, single-pointed perspectivalism, which affords the watcher a high, penetrating view over all laid out before him.

The trajectory traced by Bell is but one element of ritual as a discursive field, a field which Bell maintains has been overdetermined by the deep habits of its practitioners. While I am not an anthropologist, and this chapter and the next are not examples of formal ethnography, they are, nonetheless, proximate to those traditions, and I am mindful of my pursuit's history as well as the force of Bell's critique. That said, I believe that there are still insights to be made using the old instruments, particularly the analytic frames of thought versus action, process and presence, and the ritualized body. The first two frameworks produce the third: a body that is like that of the goddess it beseeches—flowing and ephemeral, constituting itself and its environment through movement. In the following section, I will take up these inherited modes of seeing, thinking, and writing about ritual to interpret the *labuhan* not so much as window onto Javanese culture, but as an enactment and projection of the Ratu's vision, its fluidity, and perhaps even its decolonizing possibility.

Returning to these old instruments and Bell's treatment of them, what strikes one is that above all else, ritual has been defined as action. Dialectically opposed to thought, it belongs not to the mind, but the body, something habitual and obsessive, like automatic writing⁶¹ or the lists made by survivors in the tsunami's wake (19). Ritual is thus described as *unthinking action*, movements which take place after and separate from ideas (19). In this way, all ritual is made to resemble an important feature of Indies ceremonial life and a special object of fascination for Europeans,

⁶¹ Theosophy was a lively pastime at the court of Surakarta, “a strategic move of a contradicted monarch to accrue power and prestige in a hybrid world” (Laurie Sears, *Shadows of Empire* 16)

communal trance (Margaret J. Kartomi, *Music and Dance in Central Java* 164). Trance goes by many names, but is perhaps best thought of as a kind of impregnation, “. . . a magnetic force, *an invisible fluid*, or some similar powerful agent,” that passes from the body of the deity into the body of the worshipper (Moss, C.S., *Hypnosis in Perspective* 123, my emphasis). In Java and Bali, where communal trance is almost certainly pre-Hindu in origin, practitioners embody spirits of the earth, forest, and water in order to maintain good relations with them, and thus avert all manner of disaster (Kartomi 164). We can see this same impulse at work in the *labuhan*, which is performed to gain Ratu Kidul’s favor and protection for farmers and fishermen, the sultan and the realm. Historically, Europeans have viewed these petitions as cultish; in *Trance and Dance in Bali*, Margaret Mead’s seminal and deeply problematic film on the *kris* or dagger ritual, entranced dancers are shown convulsing, twitching, and collapsing in seizure, falling forward on their blades, epitomizing the colonial idea of ritual as spasm and spectacle. But if Europeans mistook trance and all ritual activity for something involuntary, the *labuhan* reveals a quality of mind and body that is considerably more complex.

The south coast ceremony is elaborate, elongated, physically strenuous. While supplicants must recite from the Koran and make proper offerings, they must also climb the 345 stairs to the royal cemetery at Imogiri, handle the boat’s rudder. The sheer technicity of the ritual requires that supplicants move between states of ecstasy and the mundane. To colonial eyes, such vacillation looked like trickery: Margaret Mead writes fretfully in her journal about the possibility that the Balinese

feigned entrancement, a strange anxiety given that she and her husband-collaborator, Gregory Bateson, had ordered the *kris* ritual from a village in South Bali that performed reliably for tourists twice per week (Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed* 9). Indonesian-American filmmaker and scholar Fatimah Tobing Rony takes the anthropologists to task in her essay, *The Photogenic Cannot Be Tamed*, critiquing their premise that Balinese life was pathological—the film was funded by an academic council on schizophrenia—and the allied notion that trancers who “broke form,” gazing directly into the camera, for instance, were, in Mead’s language, duplicitous, schizoid, fey (9). Instead, Rony highlights the position of the Balinese as self-conscious, politically-situated actors, while arguing that they be granted the fullness and also *the unevenness of ecstatic experience*, something mutable and flowing, as the entranced swing in and out of contact with the possessing spirit. This tidal movement also belongs to the *labuhan*, which demands spiritual alignment with the Ratu *and* an eye that knows the length of wood to gather, a fist that knows how much turmeric to cast on the waves. Both sensibilities, it may be said, are a kind of “unthinking”: the unthinking of being thought, moved by another entity, and the unthinking of everyday life. To understand the latter we must return to Alphonso Lingis and the *sensitive body*, which knows how to arrange itself, work itself into the engulfing world (*Foreign Bodies* 14). It is the body that greeted the lemon in Chapter One; also the hang tree and the terrifying demands of its boughs. This same body performs the *labuhan*, stationing itself before the goddess, beseeching her. Its visions are not the wracking hallucinations sought by Mead, but

rather flashes—the blinding glint of sun on water, a flower briefly ringed by a halo of light.

If the notion of mindless action helps us see the mutability of the *labuhan*, the metaphor of performance illuminates another liquid quality. Extending the discourse of active observation outlined above, performance theory postulates a role for the audience almost equal to that of the ritual actor, while also highlighting the importance of process and presence. This marks a significant departure from earlier modes of analysis, which sought to read ritual as a form of text, solid and unchanging, like the stone temple that frames the action in Mead's film. But as we saw in the previous chapter, even texts can be fluid forms in the Indies; written on palm leaves, the tropical archive devours itself, disappearing into the jaws of insects or in the damp of the monsoon. The codex is thus a kind of performance, durational, ephemeral, a set of processes unfolding in a corner of time and space. In a place where texts once vanished, the ritualist serves a particularly important mnemonic function, her very body forming a vessel in which the sediments of the past inhere (P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* 72). That the vessel is itself transitory lends urgency to the performance: The supplicant is as fleeting as the turmeric she scatters.

This quality of unrepeatable presence exists, paradoxically, within a schema that is conceived as perpetual, lasting, in the Javanese instance, till Judgment Day. Ritual movements must thus be carefully orchestrated; gestures, postures, and utterances arranged in a formal sequence susceptible only to slight variation (44). The result is a stable, but not rigid choreography that can be passed down from

teacher to student, age after age. When the practitioner of the *labuhan* sets off from Cilacap, for example, when she walks or prays or burns incense, she is repeating an action that has been performed in much the same way for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The repetition—and not just the action—is important. Ritual movements are inherently unfinished: always already dissolving, they expire, leaving only a faint outline that must be traced again and again. This rhetoric of re-enactment creates continuity with the past and ushers in the possibility of *bi-presence*, the appearance of “inhabitants of the otherworld . . . in this one without leaving their own” (69). We see this in the liminal figure of the Ratu, who may at once occupy the underworld to the world of men and women, and in the *wijayakusuma* flower. The flower *requires* the supplicants in order to manifest; without their presence, it exists purely as narrative, the memory of an old courtier who rowed out to an island many years ago. Thus, ritual may be understood not simply as a performance and therefore a form of representation, but as something which *re-presents*, making visible, if only for a time, what has vanished (Carolyn Dean, *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock* 7).

This flickering connection between worlds is maintained by and materialized in the offerings of the *labuhan*. Offerings are ubiquitous in the Indies, made throughout the day and the lifecycle, descended, it is said, from when Krisna said to Arjuna in the Mahabharata: “Whoever offers to me with devotion, a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that offering of love, of the pure heart I accept” (Fred B. Eisemann and Margaret H. Eisemann, *Bali: Sekala and Niskala*, 1990, 217). An offering is a form

of sacrifice—of words, of breath, the fatigue in the muscle that has rowed and walked for many hours. It should be given freely, but there is also a principle of reciprocity at work. Again from the Mahabharata: “Enriched by sacrifice, the gods will give you the delights you desire; he is a thief who enjoys their gifts without giving to them in return” (217). The actions and objects bestowed on Ratu Kidul are thus designed to thank the goddess for favors granted, as well as demonstrate the faithfulness of the sultan and the realm. Rereading Clara Brakel’s list above, we can see that the *labuhan*’s offerings are resolutely ephemeral: the fragrant blossoms and incense waft into insensibility; the plaited leaves and cones of rice are quickly subject to the laws of decay. This dispersal may be thought of as the Ratu and the island that is her body *metabolizing* the offering, transforming it into seas full of fish, fields full of rice.⁶²

In this way, the disappearance of the offering in fact ensures a form of continuance, one that entails continual disappearance and reemergence. In *Risk, Ritual, and Performance*, anthropologist Leo Howe draws on the work of E.L. Schieffelin to argue that while rituals are ephemeral, they are also *processes of inscription*, actions which reverberate in the form of “fresh insights, reconstituted selves, new statuses, altered realities” (Schieffelin, *Problematizing Performance*, 198–9). These selves and realities are marks, he maintains, like the white wake of the skiff or the *labuhan* party’s footprints in the sand. Howe’s formulation goes some distance towards dissolving the opposition between text and performance, thought

⁶² This makes the *labuhan* is another instance of the devouring tropics; but whereas the colonial vision of tropical generation is malevolent, a threat to physical and psychic integrity, here the mulching circuit of offering and receipt is the engine that propels and sustains life.

and action. It recasts the body at the center of performance theory as not merely the material or medium of ritual activity, but as a kind of instrument. This instrument presses upon the world, imparts a script which may be read in the movements, habits, and memories of ritual participants, their competencies and their identities (65–66). Bell expresses a similar idea via what she terms “the ritualized body,” a body which, through a series of movements, spatially and temporally constructs the ritual environment while *impressing* these schemes upon the bodies of participants (99, my emphasis). Bell describes these bodies as being invested with a “sense” of ritual that is “. . . not a matter of self-conscious knowledge of any explicit rules of ritual, but is an implicit ‘cultivated disposition’” (98). While this disposition may be cultivated, it is not self-transparent to the ritual actor. Rather, the sense of ritual is founded, Bell argues, on a blindness at its center, “a strategic misrecognition of one’s ends and means” (109).

What then does ritual see, if founded on blindness? Bell’s answer is straightforward: “Ritual is a way of acting that sees itself as a response to a place, event, force, problem or tradition . . . as the natural or appropriate thing to do . . . ” (109). Ritual does not, she emphasizes, see how it actively creates place, force, and tradition, or how it or generates the circumstances to which it responds (109). In this way, participants in the *labuhan* are not, at all moments, conscious of themselves as ritual actors or inheritors of a particular cultural or spiritual tradition. They may think of the rightness of the words said or motions made, but they will not usually dwell on how those actions construct a world or the instrumentality of their place in it. In

order to perform the supremely generative actions of the *labuhan*, to steady the cosmos, no less, Bell suggests, ritualists go through a process that is very like forgetting or washing away. This may sound like Orientalist mystification, a recapitulation of Margaret Mead's racist requirement that trance participants be absolute in their translation, forsaking humanity and modernity. But Bell is getting at something more complex, akin to Strassler's figuration of the obscure. Following her argument, I submit that the non-seeing at the center of the *labuhan* is not blindness per se, but an *othersightedness*, a "third eye," to use the Hindu nomenclature that is at home in this part of the world. We have seen this already in the blind Javanese politician, but the idea, of course, is far older. The chameleon-like Pakubuwana IX, for example, was said to possess mystical sight; in a famous episode from October 1865, the young sultan was attending the reception of the Dutch Assistant Resident, when a *cahya*, a sphere of heavenly light the size of a coconut, suddenly shot out of the southwest sky, settled over the head of a the young woman who would be his bride (John Pemberton, *On the Subject of Java*, 80). Such othersightedness is precisely *not* the colonial blindness of the Dutch, who Indonesians called "white eyes" for their eyes' bluish cast, filmed over, like the eyes of the old; who were, in the end, bewitched, unable to glimpse local life. This othersightedness operates within a shifting, processual visual field of appearing and disappearing, not a static field of presence and absence. The blank space inside the *labuhan* and other ritual performances is thus a site of resilience and cultural preservation rather than a simple emptiness. It meant that even under the gaze of colonial officials, steely like the

North Sea, the Javanese could continue to commune with the spirits of the island, to slip into other worlds.

Chapter Four: Chasing the Goddess

In the mid 2000s, medical anthropologist, Byron J. Good returned to Yogyakarta, where he had begun his fieldwork ten years earlier. In his essay, *Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, and Subjectivity in Java*, Good reflects on a case concerning a young man he calls *Mas Anto*, who lived in a village outside Yogya. He was 19 years old, and had been working a new job in a restaurant for two weeks when, one night, in February 2001, he was late coming home. When he did return, he was agitated, and bristled at his family's inquires. He would only say that as he rode his bicycle past a graveyard, the spirits chased after him, tried to lure him to follow into their shadowy world. Good continues the story:

Anto went to work the next day but did not come home that night. When he did return after two days, his condition had deteriorated severely. He would weep, laugh, and shout without reason, mumbling while counting on his fingers. He had difficulties sleeping because, he said, ghosts were bothering him, and he refused to eat. He became silent, walked around stiffly—like a “zombie”—with a blank look in his eyes, acting frightened. He said that a black pig entered his body, making him root about on the ground. He said that a sensation of centipedes crawling on his body and a large number of red ants attacking him. He was upset by anything with the colors red and black and tried to burn or bury items with these colors. He dreamed of Yogyakarta's South Sea and reported being visited by Nyi Loro Kidul, the great Queen of the South Sea, who hypnotized him (29)

In this way, Mas Anto's apparition echoes visions we have met before across these chapters—the low, rooting animal; the undulating worm; and another swarmer, Ratu Kidul herself. While Good is concerned with diagnosis, I want to dwell for a moment on Mas Anto's vision. These beasts pursue and reach him in an interstitial space, in transit. They are not courted, conjured like the *wijayakusuma* flower on Pulo Bandhung, but instead insist upon themselves, disturbing the night and Mas

Anto's sense of symmetry. The young man's affliction—Good calls it psychosis—recedes in a few months' time, with the dual administration of anti-hallucinatory drugs and holy water (29). When the anthropologist returns, six years later, Mas Anto no longer identifies as one terrorized, would rather talk about the sunny, daylight concern of his search for employment. It is only in casual conversation with a local psychiatrist, remembering absentmindedly the words to a song playing on the radio, that it becomes apparent that he is mourning his dead father, psychological “content,” which, for Good, explains the appearance of ghostly forms.

Anthropologists, he argues, have tended to read outwards into the sensorium, rather than delving into the psychic lives of their ethnographic subjects. The haunting of Mas Anto, for Good, thus becomes an argument for a turn away from the phenomenological and towards psychoanalysis, which he believes offers his discipline “rich resources for reflecting on *what is hidden*” (27, my emphasis).

Psychoanalysis, here, becomes the means of accessing what is hidden in the psyche, with the ghost figured as something superficial and outside, a mere phantasm. But what about these ghosts? Who or what are they?

That human beings mourn their dead parents is such a plain fact of life and literature that it need hardly be spoken. That yearning for the vanished is sometimes accompanied by stalking figures, or a weight laid heavily and warmly on the chest, is likewise certain. But the specters that appear to Mas Anto follow a Javanese ghostly grammar: the low, despised pig that inhabits him; the entrancing goddess, Queen of the South Sea, who would have sent the demon; the plainness of the ghosts in the

graveyard, the banality of their presence, here in Yogya, where it is taken for granted that the dead encounter the living. All this bespeaks a rootedness that is intrinsic to the specter which, despite its ability to pass through walls, is resolutely sited, attached to a specific time and place.

Ghosts are everywhere in Southeast Asia. Wherever there is violence in the region, there are phantoms: “In Indonesia,” the anthropologist Rosalind C. Morris observes, “beneath the rivers where the bodies of the communists were dumped, unhappy spirits threaten passing motorists” (230). These spirits are sediments, remainders of colonial violence that stretch from the first European footfall on the beach at Banten to the massacre at Klungkung, as well as the genocidal forces that swept the country in 1965 and 1966, purges which made the Javanese landscape a graveyard, an estimated one million dead among the paddies. In *Giving Up Ghosts*, Morris describes how it is widely believed throughout Southeast Asia that “a premature death—a death experienced ‘before its time’ . . . generates an unhappy ghost. Such ghosts tend to linger in the place of death and, in fits of vindictive melancholy, are apt to trouble the living, making them ill or even causing their deaths in jealous efforts to gain companionship” (231). Ghosts multiply, she says, in places of mass fright and death, along highways, railways, and in industrialized spaces, where the landscape is scarred by war or disaster, the chewed coast of Banda Aceh where the tsunami struck, and also its inland forests, where the rebels only lately laid down their arms. Like Strassler, Morris notes how discourses of the spectral seem to swell at times when they might be expected to dissipate, after, for example, the

dissolution of Suharto's New Order, when the new era of "transparency" was paradoxically marked an explosion of the obscure, countless films and TV programs featuring Ratu Kidul and her court of spirits, a blind politician appealing to the goddess at Parangtritis, demonstrating his possession of another kind of sight (Strassler 2).

Postcolonial Indonesia is thus a doubly haunted space, awash with phantoms new and old. The islands are crowded with people and spirits, the local pantheon mingling with the more recently arrived specters of brutality. As I write and remember what it feels like to be there, I am struck again by the oceanic and the figure of suspension, how a single drop of seawater contains a world of matter. So it is in Java, where seemingly empty space is dense with presence. In this chapter, I will approach ghostly appearances as upwellings of memory, like treasure sifted from the wreck of the *Geldermalsen*, a Dutch galleon that sank in the South China Sea in 1752, spilling its hull, leaving the seabed studded with Chinese porcelain. My focus in this chapter will be with often unseen world of these specters and spirits, taking them seriously and reckoning with them, with Ratu Kidul's spectral appearances as my throughline. Extending the work of the previous chapter, I will read Ratu Kidul's apparitions not as indicators of either her presence or absence, her speech or silence, but rather as visions which point to her processual becoming, her way of appearing to disappear. Ghosts, after all, are nothing if not fluid, suddenly coalescing and

suddenly dispersing, announcing themselves as shadow or a dancer's double.⁶³ These apparitions erupt within a variety of formal contexts: a photograph, a film, a dance. Each medium has its own phenomenology and so each appearance will be handled differently. My meditations on a photograph of a ritual held at a Javanese sugar mill in the 1920s and the compilation film *Mother Dao* are, in fact, re-readings of texts that have been analyzed by other scholars; texts which I revisit in order to show how they are altered by the spectral presence of Ratu Kidul. In the final section, I perform a loosely ethnographic reading of the *bedhaya* court dance in which the goddess is said to take part. In this way, the chapter progresses from still to moving apparitions of the Ratu, from artifacts of the colonial archive to an indigenous practice that predates contact and extends beyond independence.

The photograph, it is often said, has a special intimacy with the ghostly, the trespassing on the present of those long dead. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes locates its uncanny power in the way it joins, as if by "umbilical cord," a body located irretrievably in the past to a body in the present: "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here" (83, 80). In Barthes's analysis of the photograph, there is, as scholars such as Karen Strassler have rightly underscored, something akin to *corporeal* contact (note the figure of the umbilical cord, and even

⁶³ It is interesting to compare Ratu Kidul's doubling of the *bedhaya* dancers with the mirrored relation between the Beggarwoman and Anne-Marie Stretter. Where the Beggarwoman disappears into her white double, the *bedhaya* dancers, performing in what might be termed an "altered state," become members of the Ratu's underwater court while maintaining their identity as dancers, each with her own preparation rituals, relationship to the performance space, and to the material and otherworldly elements of the choreography.

an “emanation” that manages to *touch*) taking place across a profound distance in time, a contact between the viewer and something or someone now dead and gone. This contact is achieved, Barthes suggests, as if by magic, and thus the photograph has a kind of supernatural power; “the photograph,” he writes, “has something to do with resurrection” (82). Yet, at the same time, the fact of this contact means for Barthes that the photograph is a wholly *authentic* trace of that which is no longer present in the here and now. It has the value of authentic testimony, he suggests; a “certificate of presence” that guarantees that “what I see has existed” (87, 82). Thus photographs attest to what once was visible, and proffer the image of a kind of specter, but they can also, I will argue, retain the imprint of things unseen.

In his essay *The Ghost in the Machine*, the anthropologist John Pemberton reads one such image, a photograph he unearthed in the archives of the Mankunegaran *kraton* in Surakarta. The photo was taken by an unknown photographer at the Tjolomadoe (‘Mountain of Honey’) Sugar Mill in Central Java⁶⁴ on 21 May 1928. The photo depicts Netherlands Indies Governor General ACD de Graeff stationed before the mill’s first machine, his long, white arm extended, his palm facing down. He is blessing the offerings laid carefully on the metal surface, about to be drawn by conveyor belt into the gears. Behind him stands Prince Mangkunegara VII, dressed all in white, like the Europeans flanking him, radiant white, something burning, as from a star.⁶⁵ The ladies are in their better frocks and

⁶⁴ The mill had a long life, closing in 1998 after nearly a century in operation; the municipality of Solo had spread, and there was no more room or reason to grow sugarcane.

⁶⁵ Marguerite Duras remembered this radiance. In *The Sea Wall* (1958), she writes:

soft, molded hats; the men are dressed smartly, their hair oiled, faces upturned. The mill itself has been transformed: the windows, all right angles, are dressed with garlands; the pilasters covered with plant life as though the jungle had been let inside. Framed in this way, the scene has an air of the theatrical. de Graeff presides stiffly at the center in the role of priest or *dukun*. His gesture conveys solemnity and also power; it is he—and not the prince, pointedly—who is authorized to arrange his body in such a manner, erect and self-possessed, acknowledging the moment of sacrifice (Pemberton 30).

Staring at the picture, I cannot help but wonder what de Graeff made of his errand. Ceremonies were (and are) an everyday part of life in the Indies, even industrial life. At Tjolomadoe, rituals were conducted at the beginning of each harvest season, setting the machines into motion, ensuring that they would run profitably and, it was hoped, without accident (29). Though born in Holland, de Graeff was part of this world; if he knew less of “native rituals” than the men on the floor—Javanese machinists, Chinese chemists—he knew enough to understand there was no getting round the rite (34). To Pemberton, he seems a calm officiant, reassured and reassuring, but I wonder if there isn’t a whiff of farce about his performance. The Dutch are a pragmatic people, spiritually and aesthetically

In that epoch—the early twenties—the white districts of all the colonial cities of the world were always of an impeccable cleanliness, as were the white inhabitants. As soon as the whites arrived in the colonies, they learned to take a bath every day, learned to be as clean as children do. They also learned to wear the colonial uniform, suits of spotless white, the color of immunity and innocence. With the assumption of this costume the first step had been taken. From then on, the distance augmented by that much, the initial distance being multiplied, white on white, making distinctions among themselves and the others who were not white. The others washed themselves in the rain from heaven and in the muddy water of the streams and rivers. White is, in effect, a color very easily soiled. (135)

Protestant; the history of their painting is a discourse on the seeable—the plain, open faces of a farmer and his wife; light streaming through a half open window, reflected on a marble floor. As we have seen, the Dutch viewed the Javanese belief in an unseen world as superstition, the complex ritual life of the island as farce or pageantry. Thus, at the very least, there is an *insensibility* to de Graeff. Recalling Barthes, Pemberton calls him a “specter,” his gesture embalmed by the camera, “suspended, ceremonially buoyant” (33). But de Graeff is also ghostly in his failure to see, to recognize what is before him; his pale eyes fixed on his task, missing the presence of another phantom.

The ghost missed by de Graeff haunts Machine Number One. As a spirit, she eludes traditional narrative methods and must be sketched indirectly.⁶⁶ Pemberton evokes her this way:

This ghost does not have a name, or at least her name was no longer known by the time the photograph was taken. She is a spectral presence that appears momentarily, sometimes as a detached head, vaporously projected and enlarged within the cogwheels of the machinery, sometimes as a well-dressed figure, wholly intact, suspended in midair. She is Javanese. She never speaks. She wears a watch. Her sudden appearance threatens to induce distraction that turns fatal. Grasp slips, a machinist is drawn into the cogs, and the sugar for a while runs red. (29)

The ghost flashes on and off, sometimes solid, sometimes a mist. She has no name and does not speak, hoarding her identity and the reasons behind her appearance. Her ethnicity, by contrast, is certain: she is Javanese, as old as the once-modern machines themselves, and also somehow older, a visitor from the island’s deep, pre-colonial

⁶⁶ See James T. Siegel’s *Curse of the Photograph* (2005) for more on the escaping qualities of ghosts and history.

past (29). The only other known detail about her is her watch. There is something intensely temporal about this spirit and about all spirits; she appears, reliably, in the moments before an accident, functioning both as a warning and a siren, distracting the machinists, jamming their concentration, the fluid movements of their bodies, and the machine itself as she lures them into the gears.

The watch is central to Pemberton's argument. For him, the hazy female figure resists the colonial extraction project and its attendant forms of mechanized labor—the routinized, synchronized operation of machines and bodies under the control and “objective” temporality of the clock. The ghost's fleeting, occasional appearance disrupts that regime, as evidenced by her association with the machine's breakdown. de Graeff does not see the ghost, thus her “premodern” intrusion goes unacknowledged by him and the wider colonial administration. But the relationship between ghost and colonizer laid out by Pemberton is not a simple opposition. In the end, he argues, the repetition of mechanized production *intersects with* the repetition of Javanese ritual, and it is this proximity—and not difference—that must be disavowed by the colonial authority. Moreover, given that mechanized labor is haunted by the possibility of accident, a risk intrinsic to the icons of modernity explored in the essay—the machine, the railway, the photograph—these technologies become spectral, they contain other dimensions, as Barthes already saw. Thus the apparent antagonism between the modern (machine) and the premodern (ghost) begins to break down, and Javanese rituals and calendrical practices are shown to mirror, rather than resist, the colonial logics of routinized time.

Pemberton's claim is compelling, advanced across a series of sensitive visual readings. But there is a non-seeing at the heart of his claim, that, I contend, redoubles de Graeff's oversight. The essay begins with a vow to take ghosts seriously; the Governor General is tasked for being unaware of the specter, evidence for whom, Pemberton argues, abounds: in the ritual punctuation of the milling year; in the sacrificial offerings that fill the factory, severed water buffalo heads, placed with the same care and regularity with which the machinists throw the switches, grease the gears; the machinists maimed and killed; the red sugar that is proof and product of the accident; and finally, the testimonies of the workers—some of which date to as recently as the 1980s. The ghost is everywhere, Pemberton seems to be saying, and the Dutch were fools not to see her. But the refrain of the essay undercuts his indignation, his argument for the reality and meaning of the specter.

Throughout the essay, Pemberton punctuates descriptions of the ghost with lines such as, “. . . the ghost never speaks. Her name is never revealed” or “Yet still the ghost is not exposed” (36 and 52, respectively). These statements seem, at first, to gesture towards the slipperiness of the specter, her refusal to signify, to give herself up, as it were, thus preserving the alterity of the unseen world. But there is a more specific *visual* argument inside Pemberton's figuration: “This lack of certainty derives . . .” he explains, “. . . from the fact that the ghosts of Tjolomadoe do not speak but simply linger in the factory, silent, *disappearing just as quickly as they appear*” (42, my emphasis). There is a faint memory, he grants, that the ghost once had a name and could be summoned by mantra. “But that was a different time. What

remains is the space of a spectrality now generalized” (42). In short, because ghosts possess a fluid visuality, because they flicker on and off, they are, in the end, a cascade of disappearance, a vanishing. This makes ghosts opposed to the photograph, argues Pemberton, which never vanishes, always leaving a trace:

The appearance of a ghost, like that which emerges near machine Number One, is momentary, fleeting. Its being does not depend on, much less derive from, its preservation, but just the opposite: a disappearance which is a sudden as its appearance. It is just this sort of passing—this coming to pass, without a trace—that so eludes photography. While the photograph recalls an absence and acknowledges, even foreshadows a passing, it does so by material means. Something is left behind, a trace. A photograph remains A ghost, on the other hand, simply flashes past, in a photographic instant, as if mimicking the camera (49–50)

For Pemberton, the photograph persists by virtue of its materiality. This is, of course, the conventional view. However, to attribute endurance only to the physical object is to drain the ghost of materiality, to make it without weight or substance, a nothing. Pemberton’s image and incantation are beautiful, but there are political costs, I would argue, to such a figuration. Ultimately, his ghost of Machine Number One, like the Beggarwoman, is dispossessed, emptied out so she may stand in more readily for the trope of repetition. By generalizing the specter, he evacuates her name, voice, and specificity. As soon as the “she” becomes the figure of dispersed, indigenous, ostensibly premodern ritual more broadly, she becomes genderless, disembodied. This ghost has no specificity for the simple reason that it is everywhere. The ghost thus becomes a symptom of the complementarity between Javanese ritual practice and modernity, rather than a genuinely disturbing presence. In the end, Pemberton, like de Graeff, does not believe in the specter. To truly take

the ghost seriously would be to attend to the specific mode of her ghostly form and embodiment, and to think her and her cosmology through, from one end to the other.

I, by contrast, would like to seek and to find the Ratu, try on the hypothesis that she was there; read the photograph not as a material remainder, but as an index of the goddess' presence and work in the late colonial period, a time when she is believed to have gone unrendered. Pemberton has rounded up much evidence to support this view. He begins by invoking Nyai Pulungsih, the female founder and guardian of Tjolomadoe, entombed just east of the mill. Her name, like Ratu Kidul's, is synonymous with the Central Javanese courts, recalling the myth of a woman "who dreams she devours the moon and begets future kings" (35). In monthly séances, Pulungsih is remembered as the figure who ruled the fields and procured the earliest crude means of production, whose magical powers were invested in precious amulets, agate stones whose centers swam with serpents (35).⁶⁷ Then comes the suggestion that the ghost may, in fact, be the Ratu herself:

It is also speculated that the spectral appearances within the milling machinery emanate from (as do many other commanding spectral forces in Central Java) Ratu Kidul, spirit consort of the kings and legendary, all-powerful empress of Java's southern coastline and waters. This possibility is reconfirmed by the fact that Central Javanese palaces were known to have engaged this spirit queen's army of protection as guardians of the royal walls, sealing off inside from out. But again, the ghost in Tjolomadoe never reveals her identity and shows no outward signs of Java's famous spirit queen—none at all. (36)

⁶⁷ Rumphius devotes an entire *Herbal* entry to snakestones, introducing a list of stones of various kinds with the following:

Beside the Ceylonese Snakestone, there are other Snakestones in the Indies, and about them are told strange as well as true things, so that I don't know what I should hold to be true. Since they are not often found and seldom seen, one cannot describe them in full but has to make do with whatever is told among the common people. They are not of one but of several substances, colors and shapes, and also derive from various snakes; likewise, I will present them one after another, since various kinds came into my hands . . . (73)

While there may be no physical resemblance—it is hard to imagine the Ratu deigning to appear with a severed head—there are deeper resonances between the ghost and the goddess that call for our attention. Both, first and foremost, are female. This is no small thing: As queen of the spirit realm, there is a way in which all feminine presences in Java may be said to flow from Ratu Kidul. Both spirits are shapeshifters; as we have seen, the Ratu may appear as wind or wave, and has been yoked by scholars to a range of goddesses from the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons. Both Ratu Kidul and the ghost of Machine Number One are seducers, luring men to their deaths, collecting payment for their protection in the form of sacrifice. Though ancient, both figures are entangled with modernity: the ghost who wears a watch and communes with machines, the goddess who is as likely to appear on television as among the stones at Parangtritis. If the ghost is not the Queen of the South Sea herself, Pemberton offers, it is possible that she “was once a member of Ratu Kidul’s spirit entourage and sought out by Mangkunagara IV as a guardian of the factory, but who then developed a special late nineteenth century fondness for machinery, parted ways with her commander, and began to operate with powers all her own” (36). The ghost is thus inextricable from the local cosmology, one which cannot be separated from Ratu Kidul.

Finally, Ratu Kidul is evoked in the animals sacrificed at Tjolomadoe, and in the ghost’s “familiar,” snakely consorts which emerge without warning from the bowels of the machines:

The ghost in machine Number One was not the only presence completely uncaptured by the . . . photograph,” writes Pemberton. “Embedded within much of the machinery of Tjolomadoe—underneath boilers, at the base of electrical terminals, along rail tracks, in the chained sprockets, ratcheted wheels, and pitched runoff troughs—were heads of water buffalo . . . decapitated vestiges of sacrifice.” (38)

Water buffalo are named by Robert Wessing as interstitial creatures, animals of crossing, like the *naga*, the turtle, and the crocodile, which, as we have seen, stitch together the soggy underworld and the world of solids above (*Symbolic Animals in the Land Between the Waters* 208). The *carbao* may seem far off from the domain of swimmers, but its predilection for water, for immersing itself in shaded pools, gives the impression that it is surfacing from the river the Javanese believe flows beneath the surface of the earth (214). There is an association, in Java, between water buffaloes and the sultan—for centuries, the royal carriage was drawn by a white buffalo—and an especially intimate connection exists between the animal and the court of Surakarta (215). Here, in the city near the mill, where the cult of Ratu Kidul is strongest, water buffaloes have long been the chosen animal of sacrifice (216). A water buffalo was sacrificed at the founding of the *kraton*, and one is sometimes offered in a forest grove dedicated to the goddess Durga (216).

The presence of serpents at Tjolomadoe deepens the animalic connection between ghost and goddess. Pemberton describes how “the snakes . . . appear occasionally, always one at a time They go through the milling machinery unharmed, completely intact, and then just disappear. A snake appears on a boiler and two hours later the machine stalls, is repaired, then stalls again. The spectral snake’s appearance signals breakdown and thus serves . . . as a warning to those able

to maintain a certain distance, momentarily reflect on the sighting, and in so doing, recognize the premonition” (39–40). An especially large or crowned serpent, he reports, may herald a spectacular accident; in 1984, a senior machinist recalled how a large serpent had floated over the milling rolls, stunning his colleague who fell and was skewered, left to dangle on a metal rod (40–41). In auguring, almost coinciding with and thus authoring the accident, the snake performs the same function as the ghost herself. This signals an exchangeability between serpent and specter, a self-similarity very like that of the *naga* and the Ratu.

What would it mean for Ratu Kidul to have been at Tjolomadoe? This goddess who swims along the southern coast and roams the woods. What might her apparition signify if transposed, inserted into a world of noise and steam? If the 1928 photograph does not capture the image of goddess—as the photos sold on the beach at Parantritis purport to do—could it not function instead as a index of a ghost which is still very much present, manifest, even if it remains unseen? A ghost which is doubtlessly feminine, agitating within the patriarchal space of the mill and the wider colonial apparatus. Pemberton leaves the ghost unnamed, but there are signs of a powerful female spirit at work (he uses the pronoun ‘she’ throughout). This specter is different from but not opposed to the machinic, fully “up-to-date” in its entanglement with the gears and with mechanized labor. The goddess, who does her own bodily work, requiring the heads of *carbaos* and the bodies of laborers, who each year make the sugar run red. The photograph is something of a trace, but a trace that testifies to the power of the unseen: How a spirit can make white men act, stop work, preside

over rituals they don't believe in. There are parallels here with a case in Malaysia in the 1980s famously documented by Aihwa Ong in *Spirits of Resistance*, in which what is at stake is equally a form of haunting, possession as a feminine form of protest.

I have engaged, over the course of a few pages, in a kind of purposeful conjecture. We cannot know the identity of the ghost of machine Number One; she is, by definition, not fully present and thus, absent from the scene. For Pemberton this uncertainty is generative, allowing him to argue for a correspondence between ghosts and machines, Javanese rituals and the repetitive click of the camera and clock. It is an honorable impulse, aimed at showing the technicity of the spectral, at making ghosts modern. But by dispossessing this specter of her name and voice, the very outline of her body, Pemberton also drains her of the power to resist. I have offered a different interpretive strategy, one which tries to attend to the ghost in all her specificity, rather than leaving her an open cipher.

I am assisted in this reading by Morris' powerful essay, *Giving Up Ghosts*, in which she argues against reading ghosts and ghost stories as mere symptoms of trauma (232). In this, she is allied with Pemberton, but Morris takes the ghost more seriously than her colleague, attending carefully to local articulations rather than blurring those details towards a generalized spectrality. Examining cases of haunting across Southeast Asia—widow ghosts killing Thai construction workers in Singapore, spirit mediums in Thailand—she comes to a much different articulation of ghosts and modernity than either Pemberton or Good and his analysts. While ghosts and

ghostliness have long histories in the region, for Morris, they are not strictly territorial, the marooned occupants of accursed places, but result from unforeseen and unpredictable convergences—what she calls “the accidental” (236). Accident, she explains, is the experience of occurrence without reason: Mas Anto’s father falls ill and is never seen again; a worker at Tjolomadoe hears a woman’s voice and is drawn into the machine. “But accident is not always trauma,” Morris cautions, “or not always only trauma Sometimes it is also the condition of possibility of a political or ethical opening to the future, one without guarantee, to be sure, but also one whose form is not determined a priori. Hence it may also be the name of a certain kind of freedom” (236). Thus, while it is tempting to read ghostly appearances in blood-soaked Southeast Asia as wounds, Morris dares us to ask what else a confrontation with death might engender. To explore this question, she turns to the Southeast Asian resistance movements of the 1980s and 1990s, events which were characterized by amorphous crowds that seemed to form and disperse almost by accident, “like smoke or ghosts” (242). These ephemeral mobilizations, Morris argues, offer an alternative figuration the spectral, one that restores the ghost’s power not only to mourn but to “spook,”⁶⁸ to startle us into thinking differently not just about the past, but also about every possible future.

I sought and found the Ratu in another upwelling from the colonial archive, the film *Mother Dao: The Turtlelike* (1995). Here the presence of the goddess is not so much rejected as submerged, buried in another cosmic figure. Before this figure is

⁶⁸ See D.S. Marriott’s essay “Spooks” in *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (2007).

introduced, we see a stream of seemingly disparate images. A young boy with a dark face, a white shirt, and a white hat, looks intently into the camera, smiles a little, shrugs his shoulders, and looks down. Bombs detonate over islands in the Pacific. Village life continues “as it always has,” somewhere on the eastern edge of the archipelago. Smoke rises from a volcano as people carrying parasols make their way carefully around the rim. The audio track behind these images is odd, discordant: a chorus singing in an unknown language; liquid sounds that curdle and ooze. Then a woman begins speaking. She is telling the story of Mother Dao, the creator-goddess of the people of Nias, a small island chain off the western coast of Sumatra. Mother Dao fashioned the earth from dirt she collected from her body and kneaded into a small ball on her knee. She became pregnant, and gave birth to a man and a woman, the first people. She is called “The Turtlelike” because the inhabitants of Nias see the horizon as curved, like a turtle’s shell. The story ends and the view changes. The surf is crashing, rolling over the broad bodies of water buffalo, the feet of a boy who stands with his back to the camera, holding a spear. He is looking out to sea.

Mother Dao is a film composed of other films, colonial propaganda reels shot by the Dutch Colonial Institute, the Tobacco Bureau of Amsterdam, the Dutch sugar industry, and the Catholic church between 1912 and 1933. The filmmaker Vincent Monnikendam dove into the vaults of the Netherlands Film Museum, and emerged with more than 200 documentaries to cut, shuffle, and reassemble. This collage-like method yields what is called a compilation film, a film built of preexisting images with roots in the found-footage experiments of the Surrealist movement (Fatimah

Tobing Rony, *The Quick and the Dead: Surrealism and the Found Ethnographic Footage Films of Bontoc Eulogy and Mother Dao: The Turtlelike* 130). Compilation films proceed not according to linear narrative, but through the accumulation of images, producing meaning through the staged accidents of chance, disruption, and dislocation (130). “Once selections are made from the raw material,” explains Laura Mulvey,” a new narrative and a new consciousness emerge out of the old footage” (*Compilation Film as ‘Deferred Action’: Vincent Monnikendam’s Mother Dao, the Turtle-like*). It is in this staged accident, I submit, that the goddess, ever stealthy, manages to appear.

The images that accumulate in *Mother Dao* have a particular character and a particular content, derived from another cinematic form of the period, the early ethnographic film. Photography and anthropology emerged at the same modern moment, and 19th- and early 20th-century ethnographers employed the medium, alongside calipers and measuring rods, to discover and document the mystery of race.⁶⁹ Early ethnographic films extended, animated this zeal, and certain cinematic conventions soon came to mark the genre. As with popular films, there was a preoccupation with the theme of vanishing exotic worlds, and the “South Seas” proved a particularly lurid site of ethnographic fantasy (Rony 135). The films relied on, reveled in the “shock of the savage,” lingering over scenes of animal slaughter and bare-breasted women (136). As a form of inscription, the images were “necessarily accompanied by the words of the ethnographer,” dressed in his colonial

⁶⁹ See Christopher Pinney’s “The Parallel Histories of Anthropology and Photography” in *Anthropology and Photography 1860–1920*, E. Edwards (ed.), 1992.

whites and his pith helmet, bearing his notebook and his camera, retiring each night to an expertly pitched tent (135). The ethnographer soon dropped out of frame, thus preserving the seeming naturalism of the footage—as though no one were watching—but he remained a persistent, even omnipresent aural presence. “There was a fear,” writes Fatimah Tobing Rony, “that the image of the Ethnographic might not be easily contained, and thus the scientist must always speak for what was represented” (136).

The propaganda footage culled by Monnikendam traffics in the same kind of colonial imagery: a European dressed all in white fords a stream on a tiny horse, his porters following close behind; another man in white—they all seem, somehow, to be the same man—stands in the middle of a crowd of villagers, his helmet gleaming; a woman bathes beneath a bamboo pipe; goats and chickens are sacrificed; a marsh full of crocodiles thrash as they are roped and clubbed; a festival procession winds through karst hills to a place where buffalo are tied to bamboo stakes; the animals’ throats are cut, and they lie in still heaps on the ground. *Mother Dao* has generated a considerable amount of discussion and analyses that read the film as an explicit critique of the colonial project carried out via the method of re-assemblage. For scholars such as Laura Mulvey and Fatimah Tobing Rony, the compilation produces a searing, almost unraveling commentary on its subject, and attests to the need for working through the traumas of the past.

The footage, it must be said, is beautiful: carefully composed frames parade one after the other; there is a feeling for light and for shadow. This is what one might expect, Rony observes, of filmmakers who were well-trained, who hailed from the

land of painters (146).⁷⁰ From this found material, Monnikendam makes something new. He is like a sculptor at work in the studio: combining, suturing, and lopping off. The finished work may be said to contain three kinds of images: exotica in the form of ethnic groups, dance, and ritual; colonial extraction projects such as deforestation, factories, and machines; and the colonial institutional apparatus of education and medicine (144). These themes are not explicitly linked, but slide imperceptibly, one into the other, in an associative stream. The images are often brutal, brutalizing, but Mulvey reminds us that they were “filmed with the complacency, celebration and self-congratulation of the masters” (Mulvey 111). One thus imagines the Den Haag matron, out for the evening and attending a viewing party held by the Ministry of the Colonies, how she might have seen these images. How she would have delighted at the good work being the done “out there”; felt acutely the need for still more, still larger donations; and especially the sense of transport she would have experienced, a flight, a fancy, taste of the nearly 30 days on an ocean liner, bearing her through Suez, round Bombay, to another world.

Nearly a century later, Monnikendam scrambles the images seen by the matron and the reverie they once produced, not whisking his viewer across the water, but bearing her down. The sequencing and transitions between images are one way he does this. Through his editing choices, he imposes a sense of otherworldliness, taking the viewer on what Rony calls a “dream voyage”: “Monnikendam’s transitions

⁷⁰ Rudolf Mrázek writes eloquently of the Dutch as a painterly people in *A Certain Age: Colonial Jakarta Through the Memories of its Intellectuals* (2010), noting how Rembrandt, Hals, and others all had sons and grandsons in the Indies.

act like an undertow: they do not state the obvious, but lurk just below the surface” (146). What lurks beneath the surface of these images is—something about brutality exposed] Nothing is explained, but, frame by frame, the heart sinks and Monnikendam’s critique mounts; in one searing example of his method, a man with weighted ears meets the gaze of the camera and quickly looks down. Then we see an image of trees falling.

The sounds that accompany—and do not accompany—these images are important. There is no telltale gamelan music to announce that This is Java or This is Bali.⁷¹ Instead, Monnikendam uses a mix of unexpected sounds:

He layers sound that is diegetic, that is, the sounds of synchronous reality: the ambient sounds of water, a train, a factory pounding out metal boxes—an effect that gives to the footage a sense of immediacy and present-day-ness. But he also uses the sounds of poetry: the origin story for the Nias, contemporary Indonesian protest poetry by others such as Rendra, and startlingly revolutionary Javanese songs called *tembang*, traditionally associated with picturesque dance . . . (146)

The effect is at once naturalizing and startling. The eruptions of poetry and song make the film aurally polyphonic, but sparsely so. Overturning what is perhaps the most important convention of ethnographic film, there is no narrator in *Mother Dao*; the images are presented without voiceover, allowed, in essence, to speak for themselves. It is an enactment of Spivak’s injunction not to wring speech from those who have been silenced. “With the absence of verbal commentary,” writes Mulvey, the film avoids any attempt to provide the colonized people with a retroactive,

⁷¹ Indeed, there is an apparent preference for images from farther flung reaches of the archipelago, places that ethnographers and colonial bureaucrats of the time would have deemed to be without “marks of civilization.”

retrospective ‘voice.’ On the contrary, the absence of speech becomes an eloquent statement that bears witness to loss of control over meaning, or in Lacanian terms, a lost ‘symbolic order’ that characterizes colonial conditions (Mulvey 111). The ambient sounds recede into the background, and one has the uneasy sensation of desertion, of being left alone with the images. Rony and Mulvey arrive separately at the same conclusion, that the world figured by *Mother Dao* is haunted. In dredging up the past, they argue, Monnikendam’s film, with all its spectral resonances, stages a visitation in the present; it brings us into contact with so many restless ghosts. Writes Tobing Rony: “Watching the found ethnographic footage in . . . *Mother Dao the Turtlelike* is like is akin to coming face-to-face with phantoms” (130).

I have already written of photography’s uncanniness, its propensity to haunt. For Barthes, this haunting depends on the immobility of the photograph. Photography, he argues, is founded on the pose, the moment of arrest, when action is ensnared and preserved. It is this cryogenic aspect of the medium that he finds so astonishing, describing, for example, the moment of being photographed as a moment when, “to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death . . . I am truly *becoming a specter*” (144, my emphasis). By contrast, Barthes dismisses cinema as a non-spectral art, being about passing not posing before the camera, and thereby creating the illusion of a perpetual present, rather than an embalmed past. Yet, one could equally take issue with Barthes, as scholars such as Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane have done, in order to argue that film is ghostly *precisely because* of this

illusion: by reanimating something that is no longer present, film encroaches on the uncanny, the ghostly.⁷²

There are copious details in *Mother Dao* that attest to film's function as a trace of the past. The ephemeral images in the opening sequence—the explosions, the smoke winding out of the volcano—and the later scenes of crowds, trains, and people getting on and off—all are canonical motifs of early cinema. Images like these were chosen by filmmakers of the period to show how film could be an authentic archive of the world and the living present, capturing what was otherwise imperceptible. They filmed trains not simply because trains are modern—as Pemberton argues—but because *trains move*. It is this sheer motion, unfurling, unraveling in time, which makes film ghostly, film theorists argue; by putting the photograph in motion, they say, film has the power to revivify, to create the illusion of bringing back the dead. This then is the effect so masterfully produced in *Mother Dao*: It is as if the still image of ACD de Graeff had come to life, as if his raised arm began moving.⁷³

The haunting quality of cinema is, in part, what leads Mulvey and Rony to read *Mother Dao* through the lens of trauma theory, as a testament to, a mourning of past traumas. “Helplessness pervades the images of *Mother Dao*,” Mulvey observes (115).

⁷² See Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2009) and Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002).

⁷³ For me, the granddaughter of Eurasians who lived in the Indies at the time the raw footage was shot, the experience of watching *Mother Dao* was astonishing, like watching a family album become animated.

For Mulvey, the double time structure of the compilation film in particular opens the door to psychoanalytic theory, with the filmic past and the filmic present mirroring the complex negotiation between the unconscious and its later interpretation (110). This raw material, Mulvey argues, may bear witness to past traumas, allowing a new narrative and a new consciousness to emerge through the encounter with the old footage (110). The psychoanalytic theory of trauma was, of course, developed for the individual psyche, with the analysand comfortably reclined on the analyst's sofa, but Mulvey believes the theory may be extended to the collective, even national experience. Rony is less clinically-minded, but makes a similar case, arguing that *Mother Dao* recapitulates in the present the atrocities of the past: "This is not the 'that has been,' she writes. "This is the "that is being done." She is referring to the footage of babies and children with smallpox, scabbed and swollen, "dying even as their images are being taken" (149). She is daring contemporary viewers to face and metabolize their suffering, to take responsibility for the fates of the dead (152). For both scholars, *Mother Dao* may thus be thought of functioning for the contemporary Dutch viewing public as a form of postcolonial reckoning. This may very well have been Monnikendam's intent in making the film and presenting it to Dutch audiences in the 1990s, a time when the country was reexamining and wrestling with its colonial past.⁷⁴

In viewing *Mother Dao* as traumatic residue, Mulvey and Rony both fasten on the faces of Indonesians. The camera's gaze is a gaze of power, with white people

⁷⁴ See Vincent J. H. Houben, *A Torn Soul: The Dutch Public Discussion on the Colonial Past in 1995*.

free to arrange themselves before it, to perform the role of their choosing: a Dutch family sits in great rattan chairs on their veranda; merry colonials ape before the camera, mimicking the movements of Javanese dance (150). “The indigenous people,” on the other hand,” writes Mulvey, “are the objects of the camera’s gaze . . . [they] can neither return its look nor acknowledge its presence (115). The averted looks of the colonized are visibly inscribed in the process of filming, she goes on to say, small, individual gestures which show the way of life demanded by the colonial system, and the voyeurism and sadism of its scopic regime (115). If Mulvey focuses on the unmet gaze, Rony, who is Indonesian-American, attends instead to the ways in which Indonesians look back at the camera, registering, however briefly, their awareness and agency: “A girl glances into the camera,” she writes. “A coolie looks into the camera. An older man looks into the camera. And then a little boy, who we saw in the very beginning of the film . . .” (152). They are the regards of ghosts, she observes. For Rony, these looks reverse the relations of the viewer and the viewed, as the audience suddenly finds itself watched by the eyes of the dead (152). In this way, *Mother Dao*, becomes, in the end, a film about mourning, about the necessity of attending to the ghosts of the past, which, despite appearances, are not simply dead and gone.

There is justice to this view, deep and furious, but I would like to suggest that other interpretations are possible. Just As Morris works to disentangle trauma from the ghostly, there is a way of reading *Mother Dao* that points to a different, less monolithic tale of loss, one that makes room for contestation, appropriation,

struggle—survival. One method for locating the political possibility in *Mother Dao* is to bring forward the other goddess buried within the text, Ratu Kidul. More than 35 minutes into the film, a small boat appears, rowed by a man with a single oar. The skiff traverses a narrow waterway, a floating market perhaps, with boats crowded along both banks. The camera is mounted on or, more likely, carried at the boat's rear, the position of the passenger who has paid for the crossing. In between the camera and the man who rows but never turns is a bound parcel. There is the sound of water, displaced with each stroke of the oar, and the constant sense of propulsion, as what was once in the distance—palms, buildings with pitched roofs, a bridge, crossed intermittently by people on foot and bicycle—nears. In time, one has the sensation of ducking under the bridge and coming into shadow. The sound of crickets rises and the view changes; we are now looking out from the boat at the houses along the bank, and then again, at a woman sitting inside a boat and beneath a basket, curved like a boat's bottom; she is sheltering from the sun. Then a voice whispers:

I am the fish from the primeval sea
stranded on the rocks of Parangtritis
gasping for water

I am the poet
All but bereft of language who can discern no sense.
Inner wind which can make stone sing.

I am the mystical bird
Feathered with the wind.
The fish from the world's beginning
whose fins are the sea.

The poem is by Sitor Situmorang, born in Sumatra in 1924, but it is the Ratu speaking. Here, on the black stones at Parangtritis, where I watched the family pray and lay down their offerings, the goddess lies beached and thirsty, felled by the brutality of the colonial regime. In this posture of defeat, and with language placing her at the earth's origin, the goddess is easily mistaken for Mother Dao, the creator deity whose myth forms the film's frame story, and who we learn, in the final voiceover, has sacrificed herself in the water, letting herself ". . . sink without trace." This is a standard transaction of the creation myth genre—the dissolution of the creator's body so the creation might live—but the choice of such a story to surround the narrative of colonization in the Indies has powerful effects for the way that history is represented and remembered. By appointing Mother Dao to act as "a residual trace of pre-colonial culture," writes Mulvey, Monnikendam ". . . creates a counterpoint . . . to the film as a whole contributing to the sense of loss or mourning running through it" (111). And yet, this spectral, sonic eruption in the middle of the film would seem to tell a different story. The fish stranded at Parangtritis is *not* Mother Dao; in fact, while the filmmaker takes pains to collapse the two figures, neither naming the Ratu nor acknowledging the complexity and density of the spirit world, smuggling her in, as it were, in another guise, the two deities could not be more different.

Mother Dao is a minor actor in the Indonesian cosmos, not widely known beyond Nias.⁷⁵ Ratu Kidul, by contrast, while native to Java, has come, through the proliferation of her image, to stand not only for that island, but the entire nation state.

⁷⁵ Many Indonesian viewers were perplexed by the Dutchman's appointment of a little-known figure to stand for the nation.

This is, of course, a product of Javanese hegemony, and the often violent suppression of other parts of the archipelago, but it endows the Ratu with a legibility and a reach not approached by Mother Dao. As a maternal figure, Mother Dao performs the act of self-sacrifice for her children; Ratu Kidul is a lover not a mother, demanding payment in the form of young men to satisfy her appetites and stave off her wrath. If both deities are chthonic, emerging from the underworld's dark waters, it is Ratu Kidul who surfaces again and again in a cycle of eternal return, not sinking like a stone or Anne-Marie Stretter, "without trace." In short, where Mother Dao encodes the film's tale of physical and cultural decimation—those images of teak forests being razed—the Queen of the South Sea tells a different colonial story. With roots in the deep animist past, she has been recoded and reclaimed by Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims of all kinds; she has reigned through occupation and its aftermath, ascending as a national figure long after the invaders fled. On my reading, the eruption of Ratu Kidul's displaced voice within *Mother Dao* disturbs the mood of mourning and hails a possible future unmarked by the film or its maker. We can see this at work in Situmorang's poem. At first glance, it reads like a requiem, a verbal condensation of the funerary scene that Rony identifies as the heart of *Mother Dao*, revealing it to be a film about perishing and death (149). But look closer, and one will find life in the poet's stranded, fishly figure, who still possesses the power to animate and transmute, undivided from the sea which is her medium, able to assume the form of a wave, a bird.

Finding Ratu Kidul inside *Mother Dao* allows us to read the whole of the film and also particular sequences differently, against the grain of Mulvey's or Rony's lamentations. There is an astonishing scene, for example, of workers in a kapok factory. Rony describes it this way:

A lone woman stands in profile in a sea of white clouds. There is no perspective, no more achingly deep space here. The cloud of white looks like sky, as we see many men and women tossing up *kapok* cotton that hangs in a their hair and mouths. They use their bodies to pound the cotton, jumping up and then disappearing as they sink down. Four men walk around and around on a platform of cotton that looks like a gallows, the light from above illuminating this theater of torture. (149–150)

On first watching, I was inclined to read these images in much the same way: The kapok makes the controlled interior space of the factory into something alien, an otherworldly place like salt flats or the depths of the sea. Out of great white banks, tall as the waves at Parangtritis, human bodies surface and resurface, and one recalls the boy with the spear at the start of the film, standing in the surf. The tufts of down fall and the room is revealed again as itself; the swimmers become laborers, winnowing the kapok with the full force of their bodies, not tarred, but feathered, and, all the while, an odd Theremin-like sound droning (149). For me, the sequence is resonant with a scene in *Trance and Dance in Bali*, when the trancers are shown in slow-motion and at close range, hurling their unbound hair backwards and forwards, like great black birds. Both sequences are at once horrible and beautiful, indeterminate. How many times have I stared at the lone woman in profile, watched the kapok workers dive into the pile until even their hands stretched overhead are submerged? For Rony, their descent is a drowning, a symbolic death that shows how

Dutch colonialism exploited the bodies of Indonesians for capitalist gain (146). But, remembering the Ratu's dive, I have looked closely and glimpsed something else. Can you see it? There, in the face of the woman, just before she disappears. It is, to my eye, something like elation, a sense of play.

Mother Dao does not court ambiguity, preferring instead sharp, black-and-white contrasts, like the tones of the film. Although the critique it articulates is urgent, necessary, the result is a flattened history, with little room for indigenous agency. Indeed, the film reads visually like a chronicle of settler colonialism, that genocidal imperial form which seeks to depopulate a territory and resettle it with whites.⁷⁶ This was not the case in the Indies, where hundreds of thousands of Dutch people were born and died, but always dreamt of “returning home.”⁷⁷ In 1949, more than 400 years since the first VOC ships appeared as black spots on the horizon, they did go home, expelled by the revolution, and Indonesians went on, under Sukarno, to build their independent state. When the young boy in the white hat reappears in the last moments of *Mother Dao*, we are indeed being watched by the eyes of the dead, but we are also, very likely, being watched by one who survived. He meets our gaze, smiles at us, and wriggles his shoulders. Now, early in the 21st century, a hundred years after the original films were made, the boy has surely vanished, but his death

⁷⁶ Of course there is survivance in cases of settler colonialism as well—Australia and North America, are but two examples—appearances that are made to look like disappearances in the master-narrative of white supremacy.

⁷⁷ The pesky presence of a large Eurasian population, for example, was intentionally left out of the raw footage, and consequently is also absent from *Mother Dao*, creating a falsely dichotomous picture of Indies life.

need not only be an open wound, to be grieved forever without ceasing. His ghost might have had, might still have, something else to say.

*

Sitting in Ibu Suharti's living room, the table laid for tea. Pieces of Delft porcelain and butter cookies are interspersed with cups of ruby liquid, *jahe bandrek*, sweet, slightly viscous, and scented with cinnamon. It is the morning of 26 December 2011, the last day of my trip to Java and anniversary of the tsunami; in the afternoon, a friend will help me make the drive south to Parangtritis. Birdsong and the sound of a passing vendor carry gently through the open window. Ibu Suharti is a senior dance teacher and dance scholar. She comes from a long line of famous dancers, and her family has old ties to the Yogyakarta court. During the war, dances were moved from the *kraton* to the home of the Dutch Resident; her aunt traveled there in a horse and carriage. Her grandmother was wet nurse to the sultan. I ask her about the Ratu and the *bedhaya*, the sacred dance the goddess is said to have choreographed at the bottom of the sea. "[She is] always there," Ibu Suharti says, when the music and dancer stop, for example, or when the body moves without effort. Her daughter, Tuti, sees visions at every rehearsal; she sits and talks with them. These visions can take the form of a dancer or a teacher. Sometimes the audience can see them. At the 2002 performance of the reconstructed *Bedhaya Semang*, not staged in full since the 1910s, a double set of dancers appeared: "Two dancers . . .," Ibu Suharti explains, "and then four"

*

I traveled to Java in search of Ratu Kidul and the *bedhaya*⁷⁸ dance that recalls her union with Sultan Agung, Senopati's grandson, greatest sultan of Mataram, who reigned from 1613 to 1646, at the start of the Dutch Golden Age, as the VOC began its murderous push into the Banda Sea, and the naturalist Rumphius was born. As the most sacred dance in the feminine repertoire of the courts of Central Java, once performed in seclusion for the sultan alone, the *bedhaya* remains elusive, draped in secrecy and difficult to access. You will not find it in the tourist programs at the Yogyakarta or Surakarta *kratons*; to attend the annual ritual performance at Surakarta, you must receive an official invitation from the court. My first glimpse of the *bedhaya* came via the ethnographic film *The Dancer and the Dance* (1987) by the anthropologist Felicia Hughes-Freeland.⁷⁹ The film follows Susinda Hati, a palace dancer from Yogya, documenting her evenings at home with her parents, her days at secondary school, and her dancing life, the hours spent learning the floor patterns, the relative angles of the body, how to submit to the regime of instruction and the teacher's careful corrections. In her room, Susinda demonstrates the choreography for the camera, bending deeply from the hips, explaining the difficulty of the slow, sustained movement. The film ends with a rehearsal of the *Bedhaya Gandakusuma* at the *kraton*: the room is brilliantly lit, surrounded by the dark night. The women enter together, their eyes downcast. They move slowly and in unison, lifting, turning the *selendang* with their feet, their wrists, wielding a slim dagger in the air. In my notes I

⁷⁸ Pronounced and sometimes written *bedoyo*, according to the old transliteration of the Javanese.

⁷⁹ A segment of the film was screened in Professor Boreth Ly's course, *Introduction to the Art of Southeast Asia and its Diaspora*, at UC Santa Cruz on 17 May 2011.

wrote, “Heavy, round like the gong cycle. The monsoon, the sea.” Having traced the Ratu’s ghostly appearances in the photograph of de Graeff at Tjolomadoe and *Mother Dao*, with the *bedhaya*, I turn towards one final apparition, one which I had to approach directly. Unlike the others, the *bedhaya* is not a European production; it is not a trace, pressed flatly into a strip or plate, but an ongoing practice that takes place in three (or four) dimensions. Staged in the breezy open-air pavilions or *pendopos* of the *kratons* of Central Java, the *bedhaya* constitutes a spectral space full of bodies and sensations, as well as spirits. It is a liquid world that can be dived into and swum inside.

The *bedhaya* is one way that Ratu Kidul has been continuously rendered, indeed, has been manifest, throughout the colonial period and afterwards. Not a single dance, but rather a class of dances, it is the most elaborate and difficult form for women in the court repertoire for its slowness and duration, with performances historically lasting up to four hours (Hughes-Freeland, *Art and Politics: From Javanese Court Dance to Indonesian Art* 475). The *bedhaya* epitomizes the aesthetic of *toya mili* (“flowing water”), with nine dancers conveying the effect of a single wave. They do this by moving as smoothly as possible, without effort and without ceasing: the large gong strikes, punctuating the end of a movement cycle; a wrist turns, a torso (476). Dancers learn to achieve this sinuous but controlled movement by focusing on the neck, which is said to move like that of a lizard or a *naga*. Together, they evoke Ratu Kidul’s underwater attendants and the nine orifices of the male body. The body is also fundamental to the choreography, with five dancers

representing the trunk flanked by four dancers representing the limbs. These corporeal elements are situated, according to scholars, in a conflict that resolves through the dance, reflecting the Javanese view that life is characterized by shifting, complementary spiritual forces. These oscillating elements include thought and feeling, male and female, and, as I will show, the visible and invisible.

The *bedhaya*'s function as a spectral space is mirrored in the aesthetics of the dance, in its cosmology, and in its mobilization of the body. In Java, the person is understood as multiple, with an outer body, the *lair*, and an inner, invisible body, the *batin* (Hughes-Freeland, *Embodied Communities* 21). The *bedhaya*, may thus be thought of as being danced by both bodies, at once doubling the assembly, even before the arrival of the Ratu and her court. Beyond the dancers are the watchers who also constitute the space, the gamelan players and the guests, as well as the drone of the music, the scents of perfume, incense, and rose petals (21). The *bedhaya* is thus a crowded affair, like the island and the drop of sea water. The *pendopo*'s open walls contain not simply a performance, but a world of presence and of presencing.

Of all Ratu Kidul's mystical marriages to the sultans of Mataram, it is upon the one with Agung that the Javanese historical traditions dwell (Nancy Florida, *The Bedhaya Ketawang* 23). According to the *Babad*, "the Queen of the South was so devoted to Sultan Agung that shortly before his death, she tempted him to cheat fate and remain forever with her under the sea" (23). When he refused, as a Muslim king with earthly obligations, she begged him to release her from her spirit form so she might live and die with him on land. The Sultan was powerless to help her,

condemned as she was to wade forever in the tidal zone. But he promised her that on Judgment Day, as the world burned, she would regain her mortal body, and that they would be reunited in Paradise. “Sultan Agung then carried the sorrowful queen off to the gardens and to bed When it came time for him to return to his earthly palace, the goddess accompanied him, staying with him at Mataram before returning to her underwater realm” (24).

Ratu Kidul’s liaison with Sultan Agung is perhaps her least emancipated, the episode in which she appears most hemmed in by male and Islamic authority, and messianic time. But her role as a creator—she is a fertility goddess, after all—resists this narrative. While she and Agung were under the waves, it is said, the Ratu choreographed the *bedhaya* to repeat her passion “for her first Mataram lover . . . Senopati, and—through performance—to reactualize that passion in her serial . . . unions with each of her successive lovers” (24). If Ratu Kidul is a consort, a “still unmarried bride,” she is also an author, a maker; after 400 years, her creation continues to punctuate the ritual calendar of the court and the cultural life of Central Java; threading back through the centuries and the cosmic diagram of the *kraton*, considered by the Javanese to be the navel of the earth (Behrend 182). In this way, the *bedhaya* may be said to resemble its sister ceremony, the *labuhan*, performed each *silasa kliwon*, when the dance is rehearsed in Surakarta. Both rituals are forms of inscription, to be traced and retraced and never finished, and both rituals delimit a sacred, spectral space. The *labuhan*, however, does not directly summon the goddess; its performance merely creates the conditions by which the queen may appear by

proxy, as a flower. The *bedhaya* on the other hand, recalling earthly as well as unearthly love, allows her to reenter the *kraton as herself*, her body coming and going between the dancing figures; wrists bent and eyes cast downward, moving without stopping.

The history of the *bedhaya* is only slightly less murky than the creation story with which it is entwined. All of the dancers I interviewed⁸⁰ spoke of the dance's Hindu origins, pointing to the clockwise *pradaksina* movement of the dancers, at times invoking Majapahit-era temple rituals of which little is known except that women once performed in the inner sanctum, amidst offerings and incense, music which no one recalls.⁸¹ The word *bedhaya* is sometimes translated as “dancing angel,” evoking a rainbow ladder of *apsaras*, maidens from the court of Indra who knit together the sea and sky, like the body of the *naga* (Ibu Suharti). What we know for certain is that the number of dancers has varied across the centuries, that sometimes five, sometimes seven dancers have formed the Ratu's earthly court, before both *kratons* settled on the sacred number nine. The dance was once performed exclusively by princesses, daughters of the sultans, and was at other times

⁸⁰ I conducted interviews in Central Java between 17 and 25 December 2011. My interview subjects were senior dance teachers Ibu Tia and Ibu Suharti in Yogyakarta; former Surakarta court dancer Ibu Linah; and Gusti Mung, princess of Surakarta, member of parliament, and director of the royal dance academy. Alan Feinstein, a Southeast Asia editor, translator, and cultural worker based in Bangkok and Yogyakarta, generously served as my translator. Interviews were conducted in a mix of Bahasa Indonesia, English, and Javanese. Professor Boreth Ly was also in attendance. The interviews took place at a number of sites—at the respective *kratons* themselves, in private homes, and in hotel lobbies. They lasted, on average, two hours and addressed the following topics: the dancer's background and training, the formal aspects and bodily practice of the *bedhaya*, the dance's connection with Ratu Kidul, and the goddess' ghostly appearances. All interviews were recorded.

⁸¹ In India, a similar mythic narrative surrounds the national dance, the *bharatanatyam* (“Of Words and Flowers: Adorning the Body of God in Tamil Hinduism” lecture, Archana Venkatesan, delivered at UC Santa Cruz on 7 November 2011 as part of Boreth Ly's *Visual Cultures and Religions of South Asia* course).

danced by males (Felicia Hughes-Freeland, *Embodied Communities* 154). In the recent past, women of menstruating age were barred from participating in performances and even rehearsals, but this restriction has been lifted, and today if a key dancer bleeds unexpectedly, a special ritual may be conducted to ask the Ratu to allow the woman to take part (Gusti Mung). Beneath this dynamic surface, however, there has been steadiness to the *bedhaya*, a depth and a constancy, like the gaze of the dancers upon entering the *pendopo*. The dance has been performed since the arrival of the Dutch and other European powers, through both world wars and the Japanese occupation. When I asked Gusti Mung,⁸² a princess of the Surakarta court and lead teacher at the royal dance academy there, if there had been any breaks in the *bedhaya*'s performance since its inception, she said briskly, "Since Sultan Agung until now."

A rupture did occur in 1755, when the Treaty of Giyanti split the kingdom of Mataram into the separate realms of Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Over the next two and a half centuries, the rulers of each kingdom have claimed to enjoy a special relationship with Ratu Kidul, and maintained that their version of the *bedhaya* is closer to the dance devised by the spirit queen.⁸³ After the split, the *Bedhaya Ketawang* fell to the Surakarta *Kraton* and Ratu Kidul's "other" sacred dance, the *Bedhaya Semang*, to Yogyakarta.⁸⁴ Both forms are considered to be among each

⁸² Gusti Mung's name came up repeatedly in my interviews with other dancers, who told me over and over that the princess "understands other realms."

⁸³ Gusti Mung, for example, stressed that the *Bedhaya Ketawang* is the true *bedhaya*, that they do "something similar in Yogyakarta, but it is not the same thing."

⁸⁴ Ibu Suharti told me that Yogyakarta once had three heirloom *bedhayas*: *Bedhaya Semang*, *Bedhaya Babar Laya*, and *Bedhaya Rambu*, the manuscript for which has been lost.

respective kingdom's *pusakas* or royal heirlooms, a golden menagerie including a goose, a peacock, and a crowned serpent. Each kingdom's *bedhaya* is marked by its own special characteristics: in Surakarta, the dance is renowned for its fluidity, its indiscernible, one might say "legato," transitions from section to section, while in martial Yogya, the movement is crisper, at times punctuated with firing pistols, the same shots missed by Commander Noodt.

The two enduring *pusaka bedhayas* have not had even paths nor equivalent resources. During the revolution, Yogyakarta sided with the nationalists, Surakarta with the Dutch. When independence came, Yogyakarta was rewarded with filled coffers and "special status" such that the sultan now serves as governor, wedding ceremonial with actual power, like the sultans of old. Surakarta, by contrast, has languished, without adequate funds or favor; its cultural programs teeter on the edge of solvency, and its beautiful *kraton* has fallen into disrepair. The *kraton* was further decimated by a fire in 1985, when the central portion of the palace burned to the ground:

Some witnesses to the fire, claiming to see Ratu Kidul dancing in the flames over the main pavilion as it crashed to the ground, interpreted the fire and her dance as the queen's final desertion of the Mataram dynasts—as the end of the last age . . . And yet not three months after the fire . . . Pakubuwana XII was again ritually reenacting the old alliance, sitting enthroned on an alternate throne in an alternate throneroom before another performance of the *Bedhaya Ketawang* (Florida 24).

Perhaps because of such tales of desertion (or near-desertion), there is something touching about the fidelity to the Ratu in Surakarta. "There is a strong belief," said Gusti Mung gravely, "that there is a power out there, and it is that power—and this

ritual—that allow the *kraton* to continue.” Yogyakartaans mock such reverence, and accuse Surakartans have “their heads in the clouds” (a pun on *ketawang*) (Hughes-Freeland 151). And indeed, the Surakarta *kraton* is an unearthly place, a kind of Atlantis, powder blue and so symmetrical that to pass through its halls is to feel as though one were moving through a mirror. The long corridors that flank the central garden are hung with chandeliers, some bundled up in great nets, stowed away, and giving the impression of a place and time suspended. And yet, ritually, culturally it is a very live place.

It was not in Surakarta, then, that the long thread of the *bedhaya* was severed. Sometime before 1920—records and memories are unclear—the *Bedhaya Semang* ceased to be performed in Yogyakarta. A number of explanations for what has become known as “the cessation” have been offered; some say that the dance was abandoned as a ritual form in response to the death of Hamengkubuwana VII, the calamity of World War One, or the push to modernize under subsequent sultans educated in Holland and keen to put forward the face of modernity (Ibu Suharti). Others, such as Hughes-Freeland, have suggested that the dance may have been abandoned due to discomfort with a performance form that appears to have been danced exclusively by males in the 18th century and perhaps at other times (154).⁸⁵ In any case, the *Bedhaya Semang* went unperformed for decades, becoming a kind of spectral presence itself, a memory, a figment. A revival was attempted in 1972, but the production was beset by problems; the cost of offerings soared, dancers

⁸⁵ Men performing as women, it should be mentioned, is an extremely common practice in Malay Archipelago performance traditions (Hughes-Freeland 155).

menstruated at inauspicious times, and the mood was so spiritually dangerous, that the woman typing up the musical score had to cleanse herself at the end of each day (153). The Ratu, it was believed, was displeased by the proceedings; there was a terrific flood in the court in the midst of rehearsals, and recordings were damaged by humidity (153). A successful revival was finally staged in 2002, under the direction of Ibu Yudanegara and Ibu Suharti, not as a ritual offering, but a form of historical retrieval and cultural heritage. This has been the course of things for the *bedhaya* in Yogya, with dances being choreographed and performed throughout the year—to mark special occasions, like a royal wedding, or, as when I was visiting, the conferment on the sultan of an honorary degree. Yogyakarta is a cosmopolitan place, home to a famous university, and an arts center, awash with international practitioners and scholars. Here, a secularized *bedhaya* has flourished, free to assume new and unexpected forms, another instance of the goddess enduring where she seemed to disappear.⁸⁶

Whether staged in Surakarta or Yogyakarta, the *bedhaya* comprises certain structural aspects that make it instantly recognizable, apart from every other court dance. While the basic structure is flexible, dancers I spoke with cautioned against cutting away at the core staging and choreography, elements which must be preserved lest the *bedhaya*-ness of the dance be lost (Ibu Tia). First there is the physical appearance of the dancers, dressed as brides in a red *dodots* or ceremonial sarongs six

⁸⁶ The dancer-choreographer Didik Nini Thowok, for example, has created several innovative *bedhayas*, including one danced exclusively by men, and another that marries Javanese court dance styles with Japanese *noh* theatre (“Masks and Selves in Contemporary Java: The Dances of Didik Nini Thowok,” Jan Mrázek, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 36 (2), pp 249–279 June 2005).

or seven meters long and bearing the *alas-alasan* batik pattern of forest motifs—a deer, a bird—representing the world. Each dancer wears a dark green *kemben* or breast cloth, arm bands, and a headdress, festooned with ostrich feathers in the time of Hamengkubuwana XIII as an homage to the can-can dancers he had admired in Paris (41). What we know of the appearance of 19th-century *Semang* dancers comes down to us through a set of photographs taken by Kassian Cephas in 1865. Cephas was the court photographer at Yogyakarta under Hamengkubuwono VII and died in 1912. He is believed to be the first, or among the first, Indonesian photographers, the medium having arrived in the Indies in the mid 19th-century. His *bedhaya* photographs depict nine female dancers, arranged precisely in the floor patterns of the dance. The dancers are young, younger than they are today, their small bodies folded delicately, like birds, their delicate headdresses seeming almost to move, blown by a long-extinguished wind.



Figure Twelve: *Bedhaya Semang*, 1860, Kassian Cephas

Formally, the dance is in the refined (*alus*) feminine mode, marked by slow, anchored movement and serious expression. The *bedhaya* serves an important pedagogical function, teaching young female dancers to comport themselves, order their bodies and minds in a “properly Javanese way” (Ibu Tia). This process begins before the first gong strike, as dancers prepare by rehearsing the steps and floor patterns, by meditating and fasting. Ritual preparation is especially important in Surakarta, where the *bedhaya* remains a sacred *pusaka*, a collective offering of meditation undertaken by not only by the dancers, but by the sultan, his family, and

the royal household. Ten days before the performance of the *Bedhaya Ketawang*, the dancers make offerings in the four cardinal directions, a tray of food, flowers, and traditional cosmetics carefully prepared by a servant from the village (Ibu Linah). They ask God to help them carry out the dance properly, to dance well together, to be able to hear the music clearly, and the voices of the chorus. The dancers I spoke with reported feeling lighter after such preparations, calmer and more peaceful; nearly all of them used the word *meresap* or “settled” to describe this sensation, a term connoting material in solution that has drifted to the bottom of a glass (or the bottom of the sea) (Ibu Linah).

This sense of grounding or sinking is enhanced by the music that accompanies the *bedhaya*, which contains no lively drumming as in other dances, and by the dancers’ breath. Breath is the foundation of Javanese court dance: the “Javanese . . . experience [court] dancing not as shared text or meanings, but as shared breathing” (Hughes-Freeland, *Art and Politics: From Javanese Court Dance to Indonesian Art*, 484). In the *bedhaya*, the breath is slow and patient, like the rhythm of life, I was told, *like water, you know? It flows . . .* (Ibu Suharti). This fluid breath sustains the movement of the *bedhaya* which is continuous, with no visible pauses or breaks from beginning to end. The choreography is complex and has been described in great detail by Brakel and Hughes-Freeland, both of whom studied the dance as practitioners over long periods. For my purposes, which are more figurative and less technical, well outside the bounds of traditional dance ethnography, I want to focus

on two related aspects of this choreography: the roles of the dancers and one important movement sequence.

As I have indicated, together the dancers function as a composite body, with each woman representing one of nine orifices. The roles are allocated this way:

1. *Batak* (leader; head)
2. *Endhel Pajeg* (follower; heart)
3. *Jangga* or *Penggulu* (neck)
4. *Dhadha* or *Pendhadha* (chest)
5. *Bunthil* (rear)
6. *Apit Ngajeng* (forward flank)
7. *Apit Wingking* (rear flank)
8. *Endhel Wedalan Ngajeng* (front follower)
9. *Endhel Wedalan Wingking* (rear follower)

The cosmology of the dance, its layers of meaning and obfuscation, will be plumbed in a moment. For now, let it suffice to say that the dancers in these roles represent the opening and closing of the gateways of the body, though not, as we shall see, in a mimetic sense. This sort of practice is common among the meditative disciplines to which the *bedhaya* may be said to belong. "It's not just any dance," cautioned Gusti Mung. "Other dances are called *joged*, but this dance is called *bukso*. The word *buk* means to control or to be able to control passions, desires, hopes." This inner work, she explained, is akin to arts of self-defense, to the process of taking a danger in, defending against and expelling it (Gusti Mung). The work is subtle, internal to the dancers, invisible. The audience cannot see it, cannot glimpse what is going on behind the cool expression and the downward gaze. What they *can* see is the way the dancers shift in formation, appearing, by turns, in staggered lines, in groups of three, and stylized conflict of the duet.

In the middle section of the *bedhaya*, *Batak* and *Endhel* leave the others to meet in the center of the *pendopo*. They circle one another, cross their flashing daggers, and embrace. The identity of this pair varies from *bedhaya* to *bedhaya*: the Ratu and Senopati, the Ratu and Sultan Agung, Janaka and the nymph Suprabawati. Some dances mine the *Babad* and other historical sources to dramatize warring kingdoms; Hamengkubuwana IX created a *bedhaya* to commemorate an attack by Mataram on the Dutch (Ibut Tia). But whatever the surface narrative, scholars and dancers emphasize that the conflict enacted in the *bedhaya* is allegorical, allowing for dense and shifting meanings. In *Bedhaya Gandakusuma*, for example, the conflict between Janaka and Suprabawati represents the unification of thought with *nur ilahi*, the divine light of God (Pak Senu, *The Dancer and the Dance*). Ibu Tia said that *Batak* was Hindu and *Endhel* Buddhist, and that their pairing represents the unification of the two streams. Though the dance is, of course, a bodily practice, its themes are thus often described as cerebral, remote. This seeming duality emerges, it has been suggested, from the Hindu-Buddhist notion that the material body is the necessary vehicle for transcending the body, a matter that must be dissolved for the soul to take flight (21). Hughes-Freeland, as we shall see, sees this ascetic principle at work everywhere in the contemporary *bedhaya*, denuding what she argues what was once a lusty enterprise (143). But I submit that the *bedhaya* retains a potent, if indirect, sense of the erotic.

That the duet and the *bedhaya* as a whole are sensual is without question; the origin story, after all, is a tale first and foremost about the *shakti* or feminine force of

the Ratu, and the sexual potency of Javanese kingship. But the dancers I spoke with were hesitant to use the word “erotic”; they stressed again and again that the sexuality of the dance was veiled, abstracted, and that the degree of sexual feeling or expression depended on the observer. “. . . you may see things that . . . remind you of . . . physical love,” Said Ibu Tia, drawing my attention to the *nglayang* or reclining gesture that punctuates or seals the movement sequences, as well as the tender embraces between *Batak* and *Endhel*. But erotics vary in intensity, and may be expressed obliquely as well literally. For me, the most sensually potent moments of the *bedhaya* are the opening and closing processions, when the dancers advance shoulder to shoulder, swaying in unison, their eyes fixed straight ahead. I mentioned this to Ibu Tia, saying that, for me, it was a moment of tremendous female power. “Obviously you were able to feel what they were feeling,” she said. “They were feeling it properly; otherwise, it wouldn’t have transmitted to you.”

What was lost on me at the time, and what was perfectly clear to the dancers themselves, is the erotic charge of the *bedhaya*’s sung component, which they train their attention on with each slow step, letting the words guide their movements. The text varies between dances, but we may take as our example the highly romantic litany of the *Bedhaya Semang*.⁸⁷ The complexity and sophistication of the song’s structure, its layers of allusion and wordplay, are beyond the scope of this essay, but even in translation, at great remove from the original text, one cannot help but feel the

⁸⁷ An excellent translation of the song of the *Bedhaya Ketawang* was undertaken and published by Nancy Florida (“The Badhaya Katawang: A Translation of the Song of Kangjeng Ratu Kidul,” *Indonesia*, Vol. 53 (Apr., 1992), pp. 20–32.

depth of Ratu Kidul's passion for her earthly lovers, and her despair at being torn from them:

Swan-necked
Glowing in this "war of milk"
"Parasols" meet thus in passion.
Lustful joy leads to love's honey.
As the splendor of song makes supple the maiden.

Florid songs like crushed flowers
Flowers of fame bloom everywhere
Their suppleness I read as a sign
Beauty among the maidens
Reaches the flower's opening
In abundance, look me at my darling, look at me, your love.

The fine rain falls, the flowers fade, flashes of lightning
Heavenly storms, wind of passion, wrestle and pull in total chaos
Topped the tree tops
The gods are confused, so strong and swift the shaking "storm"
Look to the east, see the high-rising peak
The sea, see to the sea stretched out
Screaming, succumbing in difficulty, a terrifying tumult!

The sexual imagery, acts and emissions even, are clear, as is the movement from war to the "tumult" of intercourse. Tumult here is expressed in meteorologic terms, a trace of the literary tradition's Indic origins.⁸⁸ The rain falls, the storm remakes the sea and the land, and it seems we are back in the swirl of the tsunami. That the bare sensuality of lyrics is concealed by the delicate, abstract exchange between *Batak* and *Endhel* demonstrates, again, how the engine of the *bedhaya* is opposition, and how its meaning through concealment, rather than revelation.

⁸⁸ This etymology was traced in Archana Venkatesan's guest lecture, "Words and Flowers: Adorning the Body of God in Tamil Hinduism," given on 7 November 2011 as part of Boreth Ly's *Visual Cultures and Religions of South Asia* course at UC Santa Cruz.

When I asked about the meaning of the *bedhaya*, I was met with circular answers. “Yes, there are meanings,” said Gusti Mung, but she did not specify what those meanings were, instead looping around the themes of the dance’s cosmic importance, its relation to internal practices that cannot be named. What I thought of at the time as evasion, I later came to understand as instructive. The *bedhaya* does not mean in conventional terms; “. . . it’s not like language,” explained Ibu Suharti, “It’s . . . a feeling. If you have the feeling, it will flow automatically into your limbs.” As Hughes-Freeland and others have argued, allusiveness is a key characteristic of Javanese “high art” and of the surrounding noble culture, *adiluhung* (123).⁸⁹ Indeed, it is a fundamental quality of Javanese-ness itself, of the character and manners one must cultivate in as a proper Javanese person, the kind of person the *bedhaya* is said to produce.⁹⁰ “Dance movements are thus named for a *quality of movement* identified with a specific kind of tree, flower, or animal,” Hughes-Freeland explains. “They are not identified with *the thing itself*, but with the *feelings* evoked by the movement of the object,” the areca palm blowing in the wind (*pucang-kanginan*), for example, the skittering sand bank (*wedi kengser*), or the waves of the sea (*ombak banyu*). These movements are at further remove by virtue of layers of literary and historical associations; the action of an elephant rolling its trunk (*gajah ngoling*), for example, evokes “the colonial practice of sultans keeping elephants on the south square for ceremonies,” and to how the elephant would kneel and wriggle its trunk in salutation

⁸⁹ I cannot help but think how opposite this is of Dutch culture, language, and communication styles, where directness, bluntness even, is prized.

⁹⁰ It is often said that children in Java are not “born Javanese” and must acquire their culture through training and participation in the ritual life of the community.

(122). In this way, the task of the dancer, therefore, is not to “move like a tree” but rather to express something inside or beneath in the movement; a content that exceeds, overflows the form.

Such indirection and abstraction border on a preoccupation of *kejawen* or Javanese mysticism which Hughes-Freeland calls “the vanishing point of being” (141). Javanese metaphysics are complex and have been written about for centuries; they were a special object of fascination—and at times derision—among the Dutch.⁹¹ Exactly how Javanese thought systems are embodied by the *bedhaya* has been debated, with scholars and practitioners arguing for the centrality of a range of indigenous mystical practices, Buddhist and Hindu tantrism, and Sufi Islam. But whatever their origin, the figures of “Waves of water,” “areca palm in the wind,” and “looking in a mirror” all share a “boundary breaking quality of expansive energy, expressed in the metaphor of fumes and refraction,” writes Hughes-Freeland (141). This unruly energy, which floods the figures that seem to contain it, is precisely the energy of the goddess the *bedhaya*’s movements honor and summon. Thus, we are once again in the presence of spirits, of forces which flicker on and off. This flickering, as we have seen, is impossible stabilize, like trying glimpse the nape of one’s own neck in a mirror, the mystical metaphor *par excellence* for bringing of the gross and subtle bodies into accord:

Like fumes expanding beyond their source, sense spills out beyond signs,
beyond material knowledge to spiritual bliss, transcendence As with

⁹¹ See Douwe Adolf Rinkes’ *Abdoerraef van Singkel: Bijdrage tot de kennis van de mystiek op Sumatra en Java* (1909) for colonial era examples, as well as Clifford Geertz’s *The Religion of Java* (1960). *Malay Magic* (1900), while rooted on the Malay Peninsula, and not in the archipelago, is another important early work in the genre.

images of dispersing scent, the mirror metaphor goes beyond singularity and containment, and becomes an image of resonance and redundancy. It doubles what need only be single, just as *srimpi* dances, performed by two pairs of identically dressed dancers performing in unison and usually portraying a duel, reduplicate a single fight. (141)

I have been tracking such figures of doubling all along: the tree and the hanging body, the Beggarwoman and Anne-Marie Stretter, and the swarming snakely figure of the Ratu. Here in the *pendopo*, as in those previous examples, it becomes difficult to comb out the copy from the original, as though one were caught in a hall of mirrors, the same illusion I experienced at Surakarta *kraton*.

For Hughes-Freeland the relentless movement towards abstraction, like water eddying down a drain, unsexes bodies, generalizes them into nothingness (142). She illustrates this with a scene from a short story by the writer Danarto, a *bedhaya* dance at a wedding that went on for hours until “The seventeen dancers . . . disappeared. They reached the unreachable horizon. They seemed to be swallowed up by the skyline. Dissolved” (quoted in Hughes-Freeland 142). The dancers’ disappearance, Hughes-Freeland argues, mirrors the way the *bedhaya* has been transformed by religious discourse into a metaphor for mystical union: “The . . . dancers are twice disembodied . . . first, choreographically, as ciphers in the dance formation; and, secondly, as a sign of the story of the path to perfection” (143). This has the effect of lopping off the generative dimensions of the body, its gendered dualities, its sexuality; in short, *lair* is excised from the *lair-batin* person (143). Hughes-Freeland pins this disembodiment on scholars such as Brongtodiningrat, whose 1975 government-commissioned explication of the *bedhaya* translates the dance into an

allegory for spiritual progress, “assimilating but transcending the feminine” (143).

She places his and allied texts in historical context, arguing that

After Indonesian independence there was a general move to abolish female performance that was not strictly controlled by men as ‘culture.’ Contemporary *adiluhung* court culture as exemplary culture rested on a transcendental, nonmaterial ideology of honor as the basis for exchange, an ideology which is connected to the dissimulation or deflection of any physical expression of sexuality. By the 1980s, the formalization of the ‘inside’ (*jefor*) coincided with the formalization of the feminine dance mode in the court as the only dance mode for women . . . the resulting aesthetic—*subtle and oblique*—has rested on the absence of any signs of eroticism (144, my emphasis)

Without question, this atmosphere of austerity has had profound effects on Javanese performance worlds and on the life of the courts (154). Gusti Mung told us that, in Surakarta, the court had been called a “nest of infidels” by reformist Muslims, including by the imam of the mosque facing the *kraton*, for adhering to the old ways and continuing to affirm the relationship with Ratu Kidul. She said that she had called the imam and reminded him that her ancestors had brought Islam to Java, that before the first stone of the palace was laid, they had built a mosque, and that Islam has always been at the heart of the Mataram dynasty. She had invited the head of one of the country’s largest modernist Islamic groups to give a joint talk with her in the *kraton*’s central *pendopo*, explaining, again, how Sultan Agung had brought Islam to the Indies without imposing Arabic culture, but by making Islam Javanese. All this is true, of course, but the need for the court to proclaim it, to surround their ritual life and the alliance without which they believe the kingdom would fall with another religious narrative conveys the peril of the present. Hughes-Freeland laments this turn of events and what she sees as the effective absence of Ratu Kidul from the

modern *bedhaya*, the wafting of the goddess into a sheer and denuded symbol, the interpretation of her power at such a remove that any notion of feminine saktic energy or sexuality is either silenced or turned into a different, lesser kind of force (145).

Hughes-Freeland's claim is well-founded and not far off from my critique of Pemberton. She and I both worry that the general and the formal have a way of emptying out gendered bodies, of spilling sexuality, and disappearing the Ratu from zones in which she has historically held sway. But I contend that, as at Tjolamadoe and beneath the images of *Mother Dao*, something is happening in the courts of Central Java. If the contemporary *bedhaya* seems a severe, heady affair, bent on controlling and defending against an unwieldy power, is that not the surest sign of that power's force? The anthropologist herself grants that Ratu Kidul remains "a force to be reckoned with," citing the persistence of the *labuhan*, as well as her own apprehension of the goddess during the ritual performance of the *Bedhaya Ketawang*, an undeniable flash of green across a dancer's forehead (148). The goddess' feminine energy may be subtle and oblique, as Hughes-Freeland observes, but that does not mean it has been extinguished; these qualities have marked her appearances all along, this furtive queen, who seemed to hide while Commander Noodt was watching, who animated the great wave and the earthquake, the serpent who slithered under the door at night to seek and find the tender white flesh. This, I have argued, is the seeping, suffusing power of the spectral; not abstracted into oblivion, but pervasive, like the Ratu herself. Departing from the argument of the last chapter, we may read the goddess' ghostly, "flickering" mode of appearance not as a sign of her effacement,

but as another moment of her wafting in and out, of her particularly complex form of presence and visibility. It is precisely the Ratu's fluid visibility that allows her to survive in what Hughes-Freeland and Strassler, to a lesser extent, characterize as our contemporary patriarchal moment (Hughes-Freeland 142–145, Strassler 3). That the archaic feminine and the old ways are embattled is certain, but they have not been snuffed out: they continue to adapt, elude, and conceal; to dive and resurface.

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We had been received on the veranda, between the blue pillars and the dark colonial furniture of the Surakarta *kraton*. The chairs, the tables, and the picture frames were all marked with an X, for Sultan number 10, her grandfather. We shook hands beneath a portrait of her brother, the current sultan, a hundred feet from the Ratu's tower. The heat was ferocious, and in a short while we moved inside to the courtyard surrounding the garden, strewn with offerings and black with the sand from Parangtritis. We were swarmed by mosquitoes, but a cool breeze was blowing, as from the sea. The tea was served hot in tall clouded glasses; the recorder ran and we talked. Halfway through the interview, I asked about the goddess and her relationship to the Surakarta court. A pause; Alan, our translator, listened for a while. Then he leaned forward. "She wants to know," he said, "*Do you believe there can be another world?*"

"I do," I said quietly, and the princess continued: "There are certain things about her and the way she appears that only the children of the king know and cannot talk about" My conversation with Gusti Mung was marked by such moments of

speechlessness. The sacrality of the dance has meant, continues to mean, that only portions of the choreography, the litany, and the cosmology are written down, and that other elements are omitted or veiled. What comes down to us is therefore partial. When I asked the princess whether specific sequences or movements evoked the Ratu, she bristled: “This is a very special dance,” she said,

a very special ritual. There are only certain things that can be described about it, talked about This is not the sort of thing that can be disseminated, it shouldn't be something that's just entertainment on TV or DVD or something like that. And it's very important to maintain the transmission, but it's also important . . . that it shouldn't go too far. It shouldn't be open to everyone.

How different all this is from the colonial representation regime, what a different form of bodily labor. Where images from the colonial archive are frozen, iconic, the body of the *bedhaya* dancer moves; where the Indonesian body rendered by Europeans suggests an excessive sexuality, the *bedhaya* recalls erotic union through abstraction and allusion, reflecting a complex vision of desire in the cosmos. In the colonial schema, the body of the native is laid out for the viewer's delectation, but the *bedhaya* dancer is impervious to the watcher's gaze; even while the Dutch were in attendance, pushing their food about their plates, the dancer's reverie went unpunctured. This one might reduce to the colloquial “fourth wall,” the convention by which performer and audience are usually separated. But in the case of the *bedhaya*, in the case of all ritual performances, the boundary is a spiritual one—transparent, impenetrable. To watch the dancers move through this screen is to feel

as though one were looking through glass, as though the *pendopo* had become a kind of aquarium.⁹²

This is not as fanciful an idea as it would seem. In 1882, a company of 14 male gamelan musicians and four female dancer-singers from Yogyakarta were engaged at the Royal Aquarium in London, performing four times daily for more than three months (*Performing Otherness: Java and Bali on the International Stage*, Matthew Isaac Cohen 11). The Prince and Princess of Wales took in an evening showing, as did the critic John Ruskin. One reviewer wrote that the music resembled the noise made by the kitchen utensils of a Margate steamer in a storm (11). The late nineteenth century is within that brutal timeframe when human beings were routinely displayed as curiosities, exhibited in zoos or the miniaturized pavilions and temples of world fairs. To site the Yogyakarta performers at the Royal Aquarium then is unremarkable; indeed, it shows a certain lack of imagination, an expectedness of course. It is also deeply symptomatic, a very literal enactment of the colonial liquid world. I do not know if the program that season contained any elements from the *bedhaya*, if the female dancers ever moved in unison, like a wave, or contrasted the liveliness of *wayang wong* with something slower. But if they did, there would have been something strangely apt about their surroundings, the fountains and the cisterns, tanks of snails gathered off waterfalls in the Keralan jungle, and borne carefully through Port Said. The *kraton*, as we have seen, is also a fluid structure, circled by a

⁹² This idea surfaced for me in conversation with Edward (Ted) Warburton, Marlene Millar, Philip Szporer, and Chung-Chieh Yu while screening footage for their stereoscopic 3D film bridging contemporary choreography and BaGuaZhang, a Chinese martial art form.

moat that stands for the endless ocean and with a flooded chamber at its center; the sultan's heart (*sanubari*) is said to be "oceanic," embracing the whole of the realm (Behrend 175). To sit on the cool marble floors of the *kratons* of Central Java, watching the *bedhaya* dancers move against the falling rain, is to enter a senseworld very like a cistern or the Ratu's sunken palace: the gamelan chimes its slow, steady rhythm; the dancers sway together like Rumphius' sea trees.

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I arrived in Yogyakarta in mid-December, on the back of insular Southeast Asia's monsoon; the rain that had been falling on Indochina since September had traveled south over the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra to drench the Javanese plain. Mornings were grey, but by midday the sun would split the clouds, drilling down so fiercely that one walked from shadow to shadow, or hid in the dark of one's room. By late afternoon, however, the skies would open, and I would find myself ankle-deep in the grey gritty water that coursed through the *gangs* or alleyways surrounding the *kraton*, and there was rain on the roof all night. My research companion and I had only learned of the *bedhaya* rehearsal that morning, and had arranged a last-minute flight from Jakarta.

It was nearly 5:00 when we arrived at the Yudodiningratan, the sultan's brother's palace, home to the royal stables and a center for the performing arts. There were several horses and a groom in the yard, the usual fleet of scooters. The palace looked very like the *kraton* itself, with green pitched roofs and gilded columns; there was a spindly old coach at the far end of the *pendopo*. Our translator, Alan, who had

flown in from Bangkok, was sitting on a green Oriental-style rug that ran the length of the tiled floor. This *bedhaya*, the *Bedhaya Amurwabumi*, we learned, had been commissioned by the current sultan, Hamengkubuwana X, in honor of his father, a nationalist hero known colloquially as “Number Nine,” and on the occasion of the son’s receiving an honorary doctorate. The rehearsal was attended by three senior teachers, Ibu Suharti, Ibu Daruni, and Ibu Tia. The women moved swiftly between the rows of teak chairs, where they could take in a full view of the proceedings, and the dais. They made gentle adjustments to the dancers’ bodies, touching a back, an elbow, coaxing it gently into proper position. The sounds of traffic, of birds and vendors, blew in with the rain through the open walls. Then the gamelan began to play.

The orchestra was accompanied by a snare drum, a vestige of contact from the colonial past. It clattered and the chorus listened, their hands and mallets in their laps, waiting for their cue. In time to the music, the dancers entered the *pendopo*. They were dressed in t-shirts and sarongs, with gauzy *selendangs* tied about their waists. They walked very slowly, in a stately procession, their arms outstretched 30 degrees from their bodies, their eyes fixed straight ahead. Together they extended their *kains* with a single hand, swaying very slightly as they walked. Then their heads and necks began to move. The movement was small; it seemed to begin underground and to wind up the body, turning like a screw. Viewed together, the dancers conveyed what seemed to me to be a wall of power, yet each seemed wrapped in privacy, as though there were no one watching. The dancers assumed a seated

posture and pressed their palms together in the *sembah* gesture. I found myself aware of rain steadily falling, of it dripping off the coconuts in the palms in the yard. The voices of the chorus—women’s voices—rose and the dancers arranged themselves in lines. It was as though a current or a gust of wind were passing through their bodies, turning their heads, necks, and hands, blowing their fingers into *mudras*, like the stone sculptures that cover the plain, as though they had climbed off the temple walls.⁹³ The dancers exited the *pendopo* in the same dignified procession, the sole of the foot hovering, then meeting the floor. I watched a dancer brush a mosquito from her neck and exit the *pendopo*. The sun was setting; the call to prayer carried over the rooftops and the evening traffic. The rain had stopped, but there was dripping everywhere, from the roof tiles and the palm fronds. The sky was full of pink clouds, the air abuzz with departing scooters.

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Surakarta is 60 kilometers from Yogyakarta. Often called “Solo,” for the river that marks its eastern border, inspiration for the famous song, which my mother sang to me as a child, *Bengawan Solo, riwayatmu ini* Like its neighbor, Surakarta sits in the shadow of the volcanoes Merapi and Merbabu, which erupt with frightening regularity, covering the town and the surrounding countryside with a veil of ash. But the city is equally influenced by the long-dormant Mount Lawu, a cosmic mountain from which the river flows, dotted with tea plantations and the tantric temples at Suku and Ceto. Like Parangtritis, the Gunung Lawu is a place charged

⁹³ Other scholars have remarked on this. See Alessandra Iyer’s *Prambanan: Sculpture and Dance in Ancient Java* (1998).

with erotic power—the *linga* and the sacred spring at Ceto, the birth canal-like cleft in the rock at Suku, through which the visitor ascends, gaining a view of the hill towns and the plain, a stripe of blue atmosphere suggesting the sea beyond. Yogyakarta's rival since the 18th century, Surakarta has the reputation of being less cosmopolitan, more conservative, and more devout; there are more minarets and louder calls to prayer than in Yogya, which echo across the city at sunset, filling one's ears with Arabic, a flood of ecstatic sound.

We had been invited to attend a rehearsal of the *Bedhaya Ketawang*. The rehearsal took place, again, not at the central *kraton* but at the Mankunegaran palace, where Pemberton had unearthed the photo from Tjolomadoe. It was a diverse gathering, with the young woman dancing the role of *Batak* hailing from Japan and others visiting from various parts of Southeast Asia. We were among a number of Western guests, including the sons of the wonderful historian of Indonesia, Rudolf Mrázek. Jan Mrázek is a Singapore-based Indonesia scholar in his own right, with performance roots in Central Java; he was playing in the gamelan and sweating heavily. Gusti Heru,⁹⁴ a senior dancer teacher and member of the royal family who founded the Soerjo Soemirat dance studio, was directing the proceedings. When we arrived, five dancers were rehearsing the *golek montro*, a coquettish dance depicting young women adorning themselves before a mirror. The dancers broke form intermittently to giggle and rearrange their hair. The center of the *pendopo* was open for the rehearsal, but its recesses were filled with heavy colonial furniture. We sat to

⁹⁴ Sadly, Gusti Heru passed away from a heart attack only seven months after the rehearsal, on 31 July 2012.

one side, across from the gamelan. A *cicak* and an imam sang simultaneously, and Gusti Heru teased us, playing at being wounded by a phantom arrow. Then the duet began. *Batak* and *Endhel* each bore a *kris*, a small dagger with a wavy blade. They held the daggers lightly, almost limply, as though they might fall, then handed them off. The musicians pinched their instruments to damp the sound and the drum was slowly beaten. I kept my eyes on the tip of the blades. A cat heavy with kittens strode across the courtyard and the prince lay his quiver at my feet. The rehearsal was over. Cakes were passed and the dancers assumed their daily bodies, chatting and drinking tea. Two young boys played a video game at the far end of the *pendopo*, and wind moved in a dancer's hair, seeming to animate the dark colonial mirrors.

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The *bedhaya* is a living, lived tradition. Night after night, the dancers arrive at the *kraton*, dismount their scooters and put up their hair, tie the *selendang* in a gentle knot. This happens throughout the year in Yogyakarta, in advance of important cultural events. And it happens annually in Surakarta, at the ritual performance of the *Bedhaya Ketawang*, and every 35 days at Silasa Kliwon when the *labuhan* is also performed, the boat unmoored and the turmeric scattered. Everyone is welcome; come to Mangkunegaran between 7:00 and 10:00 in the evening and you will find the dancers there, their heads and necks turning. There is a dailyness to all this, the recapitulation of movements the women have made since childhood, training first in the less-demanding *bedhaya srimpi*, and then around the age of 12, the first public performance. All of the dancers I spoke with came from dancing families and

had spent their lives with the *bedhaya*, first as students, as dancers in the palace corps, and later in life as teachers and scholars; Ibu Suharti, now in her 60s, recently defended her doctoral dissertation based on her study of the dance, and the reconstruction of the *Bedhaya Semang* she helped to produce. This is the *bedhaya* in postcolonial modernity: at once sacred and secular, surrounded by night, the sounds and smells of the city leaking in. In the colonial period and before contact, the *kratons* were politically independent and dancers were servants of the court (*abdi dalem*); they received salaries, lived, went to school, and trained in the palace. They bore the royal heirlooms and weaponry, and were considered the female soldiers at court (Gusti Mung). Today dancers come from outside and receive a small government subsidy, just 120,000 rupiah per month, less than 12 dollars. They must want to learn the court repertoire, to dance the *bedhaya*, and their families must be able spare them in their afterschool hours. But still they come, retracing the floor patterns as dancers have done for centuries, moving in unison in accordance with the chorus and the gong.

Repetition, as we have seen, remakes the body and the space it delimits. Like the participants in the *labuhan*, *bedhaya* dancers are ritualists, making the movements the Ratu first performed underwater, inscribing the air with a script that has never entirely been written down. Choreography is, by definition, a kind of mnemonic; the dancers learn the steps, the angle of the chin and its relation to the hands, and the peculiar movement of the lizard, how to keep the body turning turning turning. They learn how to make their movements fluid, how to dance without ceasing or the

appearance of strain. The rhetoric of re-enactment connects these *bedhaya* dancers to all who came before them, young women (and men) who danced in the *pendopo*, for the sultan alone, and later for strange invaders from across the sea. And it ushers in a very specific form of bi-presence, inviting the participation of another, tenth dancer. If *bedhaya* dancers may be said to operate from a blankness or blindness at their center, an unawareness of the instrumentality of their actions, then perhaps it can be located in the feeling of *iklas*. *Iklas*, I was told, is the proper feeling with which to dance the *bedhaya*; indeed, it is the proper feeling with which to live one's life as a Javanese person and, especially, a Javanese woman (Ibu Linah and Ibu Suharti). A foundation of Javanese mystical practice, *iklas* is a complex term that is perhaps best translated as “surrendered” or “willing”—the state of being ready to receive whatever comes.

What comes, often enough, is the Ratu. The reality and force of the goddess were apparent in all of my interviews. All the dancers I spoke with took her presence for granted, an expected and familiar feature of the *bedhaya*, like the sound of the gamelan or the heavy colonial furniture. All of them told “ghost stories.” Not every dancer had seen the Ratu herself, but each had been present when sightings occurred. “[She is] always there,” said Ibu Suharti. “Every time—performance, rehearsal—she always comes.” Ibu Linah described the appearance of doubles, twins during performances of the *Bedhaya Ketawang*. She said she had a sense of watching herself dance, not really a vision, she explained, but a sensation, the feeling that she

was outside herself. “Even now,” she said, “though I am too old to dance, I watch the *bedhaya* and I can see the waves of the sea, waves from the South Sea.”

Across this chapter, I have traced Ratu Kidul’s ghostly appearances: her haunting of the young man, Mas Anto; her jamming of the machines at the mill at Tjolomadoe; and the eruption of her voice inside *Mother Dao*. All of these apparitions are figures of a kind of disturbance, an untimely disruption registered in a photograph, a scrap of archival film. I have turned, finally, towards the *bedhaya* and the dancing goddess because I believe they add another dimension to this disturbance. The space of the *bedhaya*, I have argued, is full: the volume, weight, and warmth of the dancers mingling with those of the musicians, singers, and guests; an assembly multiplied by the dual nature of the person in Java, and by the presence of spirits. If we accept, for a moment, Hughes-Freeland’s charge the *bedhaya* has ceased to be sensual in conventional terms, then we may understand the dance to be marked by another, subtler erotics, what one might call the erotics of presence and of presencing. The Ratu may not be visible “in the flesh and blood,”⁹⁵ as Derrida, terms it, but she is still bodily; this goddess who comes in love for Senopati and all the kings of Mataram, falling in line with the human dancers as she has always done, dragging her transparent figure through the thick night air.

⁹⁵ See Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Polity, 2006) 115.

Coda: The Waves

Seawater is a suspension; in it hangs salt leached from the soil, waste, ash, all manner of fishes, ear-tender anemones, and plumes of sand. On the morning of 26 December 2004, the sea-lane off the coast of Banda Aceh came to hold an altogether different balance of particles. There was a sound before the earth shook—a fisherman thought a ghost was in the waves. Then the tide ran out. Within thirty minutes, billions of tons of water invaded the shore. The water was heavy: slabs of concrete, felled trees, sheets of glass, and manacles of wire dragged their sharp bodies across the landscape. A ship lurched into the city's center, barely missing a mosque. Another rested absurdly in the parking lot of the Medan Hotel. Everything was out of order, animate and inanimate, human and non-human tangled together. The surge ripped water buffalo, deer, and egrets from the surrounding countryside, dropping them swollen and terrified on an airstrip over a mile away. Livestock screamed as they impaled on the posts of their holding pens. Then there were the fleshtrees: human bodies draped among the durian

*

Two weeks after the disaster, on 10 January 2005, animal welfare activists from the Humane Society International's Asia branch arrived in Banda Aceh. They were on their way to see the Minister of Agriculture and the head of the Indonesian Veterinary Association in Jakarta, but their first task was counting. Traveling through eight ravaged municipal districts, they recorded the numbers of living and dead. This is how the report begins:

Two thirds of Banda Aceh is completely destroyed. That two thirds has been almost completely razed to the ground. This is no exaggeration. Think of the pictures of Hiroshima after the atom bomb and you begin to get the picture. The reality is that where there is devastation there is no life human or animal, except for maybe a few dogs, cats, and chickens.

Published quietly on the Humane Society website, the document continues on in this vein for five brutalized pages. The eye that surveys the ground is never individuated—we are not told whether the observations are HSIA director, or those of her colleagues. What we are told, strangely, is that, in a state of total devastation, where there is “no life human or animal,” dogs, cats, and chickens survive. Under what conditions is a dog not an animal, one wonders, especially to members of the Humane Society. When is a dog’s endurance not a life? In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben invests his idea of “bare life” in the bodies of two insects: a tick, dangling without hunger or host for eighteen years, and a bee, severed at the abdomen, insensate of its own lack. These creatures do not “live” or “die” in the conventional sense; they can be killed but not murdered, removed but not mourned. This makes the insects cousins to the dogs, cats, and chickens, whose appearance in the yards and alleyways of Banda Aceh is nothing in the face of so much death. The animals’ negation is an act of violence, but it is also a symptom: halfway through their inspection, the team sits down to cry. When what is most present is most like Hiroshima, the order of things, the order that makes things, breaks down. 10 January becomes a truly *postdiluvial moment*: after the flood, before the next world.

It is from another planet that the team relays that the street dogs fed off the cadavers, that the cadavers were leaking, and that a tiger and a crocodile were swept

from their enclosures at the provincial zoo. Mostly, though, they report the tallies. The following, recorded near Iskandar University, is typical: *Live: one dog and eight chickens; Dead: one goat, four chickens, and one fish washed in six kilometers from the sea*. There is a hypnotic, incantory quality to the lists; as Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*, “The act of counting . . . has a fixed place in the landscape of emergency; and when the count is favorable, counting and recounting are also one of the deepest sources of pleasure” (192). There is little to savor in this Banda Aceh, but to be charged with measuring animal welfare is to feel useful, and even unfavorable counts can provide relief. Enumeration is a simple, rocking operation, performed without effort since childhood; its yield, a neat exchange for catastrophic death. Hayden White observes a similar contraction in the *Annals of Saint Gall*, a list of disasters three centuries long (*Content of the Form* 6). White offers the chronicle as an example of historical narrative that refuses the linearity and fictive hallmarks of conventional history writing (a central subject; a beginning, middle, and an end; an identifiable voice) (6). Instead, the *Annals* unfold as a series of events without author or agent, cause or effect. Entries include:

712. Flood everywhere

725. Saracens came for the first time. (7)

This slight, vertical imaging of the world, White argues, “immediately locates us in a culture hovering on the brink of dissolution, a society of radical scarcity, a world of human groups threatened by death, devastation, flood, and famine” (7). The proposition here is that disaster winnows narrative, winnows speech; with no named

recorder or date of recording, disorder itself becomes the figuring force, and lush, “writerly” details, such as where the flooding was or what brought the Saracens, are purged. Visually, the chronicle is rendered as two columns: numbers (*anni domini*) on the left, words on the right. The ratio is not 1:1. Many years appear without embellishment—1045. 1046. 1047. 1048. 1049. 1050. 1051. 1052. 1053. 1054. 1055. For White, “The fullness of the list attests to the fullness of time” in the Christian calendar, a stark contrast to the meanness of the place (11). This, precisely, is what is so comforting about the list, the log, the register, the tally—the chance of infinitude. But as the Humane Society team enters the ruined coastal zones, the stream of numbers runs out:

. . . The devastation has completely leveled the area as far as the eye can see We were told that this was a very wealthy neighborhood. The body bags increased in numbers along the side of the road such that within about two minutes we counted 150 body bags. This did not even include the ones in the rubble [sic] that we could not see. We stopped counting.

Like the activists, one doesn’t want to linger over bags and their bodies. But what can be found there? Amidst the rot, these chapters have suggested that there are deep habits of representation at work. From the first days of European contact, the Asian body has been rendered in calamity. The danger is both mortal and moral; Edward Said describes it this way: “Why the Orient still seems to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate . . . (*Orientalism* 188). At first glance, the link between the destruction in Banda Aceh and Said’s evocation may be dim, even salacious. But in response to this question asked more

than thirty years ago, I submit that the bodies by the side of the road and the bodies of the concubine and the coolie are contiguous, that they have been made contiguous by the long tradition of the Southeast Asian body's abjection by the West. The casting out has not been haphazard. It has a grammar, remarkably consistent across the centuries and lines of empire. And it has a texture: sopping, seeping. One may read the "deep generative energies" that haunt the Orientalist fantasy in a range of watery forms that are not restricted to the body: drenched canopies, malaria in the mangroves. Lay this mostly colonial vapor alongside the Indian Ocean tsunami, and one arrives at a thoroughly modern vision of the Asian sublime, a place beautiful and terrible not for its emptiness of space, but its fullness of bodies. This excess, coupled with the persistent drip of liquidity, has been my focus across the preceding chapters.

News of the earthquake and tsunami reached me like a long, slow wave. As a diasporic Dutch-Indonesian with roots in Java, family in Bali, and an aunt from Medan, the province south of Aceh, I met the disaster with a mix of intimacy and distance. The images of devoured coastline and drowned mosques, a fisherman wrapped around a palm tree, struck me sick and dumb. They were also strangely familiar. I seemed to have a schema, a memory deep in the muscle, for encountering these images. They were *The Raft of the Medusa*, the films and novellas of Marguerite Duras. And there was a sensorial dimension to the devastation, something slick and full. I felt that dimension needed chasing down; *A Liquid World* is my attempt at chasing. The tsunami, I have argued, is a moment that allows us to see, once more, the Orientalist gaze on this part of the world, its eroticization and

abjection in a time of destruction and transformation. I have read the continual framing of this space from the outside as part of a long colonial enterprise. I demonstrated how the tree operates as an icon and instrument of colonial violence, and turned towards the *upas*, liquid and lethal at its core, as an antidote to paradigmatic trees' cruel hierarchies. I traced the animalization of the Beggarwoman in *The Vice-Consul* to expose and critique the West's zeal for eroding the Indochinese female subject, and offered the *naga* as an alternate reading practice that might restore her to a Southeast Asian imaginary. Both figures, I have argued, help us to see how liquidity structures colonial projections of disaster on the tropics, its landscapes and its peoples. But my project has equally been to traverse a very different waterway.

Midway through the dissertation, I turned my attention from colonial figurations of the Water Indies—the name used by Rumphius—to indigenous articulations of Indonesia's liquid world. I dove into the Indian Ocean with the Queen of the South Sea, Ratu Kidul, to explore how her immersion produces a visuality not marked by the colonial fixations of absence and presence, but something ephemeral, processual. I followed the goddess out of the waves to trace her apparitions in a range of contexts, arguing that the ghost is another fluid form that resists the colonial representational regime, an emanation from the deep past that opens up the possibility of thinking differently about the past and the future. Finally, I explored the sacred *bedhaya* dance haunted by the Ratu as an aquarium-like spectral

space in which the goddess continues to signal her endurance, appearing and disappearing, diving and resurfacing.

Through these readings and meditations, I have sought to counter the ongoing narrative that Indonesia and the rest of the tsunami basin is a swollen space, a fetid space, space of excess. We can see how the visualities of Southeast Asia are still in the grip of European representations in the recent news coverage of the floods in South Asia, and in less literal deluges, the so-called unruliness of Asian bodies reflected in UN Population and Social Integration data and in epidemics like bird flu and SARS. As durable as these figures are, however, I hope to have shown that there is an equally durable resistance to colonial visibility, and indeed to visibility itself, with its own power and politics. I felt this power while walking the halls of the Yogyakarta *kraton*, where my great-great-grandmother, Leonie, was once in residence. She is buried nearby in a royal graveyard for Eurasians and Chinese. As a child, I visited and tended her grave, brushed cobwebs from the tin awning that stood over the headstone, watched my grandmother clear years of debris from the L, the E. On this visit, however, we could not find the cemetery. It seemed as though my ancestor had flown, that she was playing hide and seek, like the Ratu herself. In this way, a project that began with the recognition of horror, of obscene and obsessive image-making, gave way to something else: the discovery of a force still more enduring, an upwelling from times long past, from the river believed to be flowing beneath the surface of the earth.



Figure Thirteen: Waves at Parangtritis, December 2011

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