Atlantic and Other Worlds: Critique and Utopia in Postcolonial Historical Fiction

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I

Critical discussions of the historical novel and its evolution have until recently emphasized a connection between that form and the modern nation. In his foundational study, *The Historical Novel*, for example, Georg Lukács argued that it was partly Sir Walter Scott's national formation that allowed him to invent this genre in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Scott inhabited that tumultuous, immediately post-French Revolutionary juncture of capitalism's triumph over older forms of social organization, yet did so, according to Lukács, as an *Englishman* for whom the transition to capitalism was relatively peaceful—who lacked direct experience with the kinds of violent upheaval that shook the continent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The uniqueness of this (national) positioning made it possible for him at once to identify with older social forms sufficiently to grasp the terrible destructiveness of capitalism *and* to embrace the latter's triumph as a *fait accompli* of historical progress (32-3). In Lukács's view, it was this coupling of a profound analysis of capitalist destructiveness with an acceptance of its historical mission that made Scott able to invent a form which traced the transformation of pre-capitalist life-forms into modern (capitalist) nation-states.

Recent critics have been divided over this question of historical fiction's national predilections. On one hand, Franco Moretti argues more explicitly than Lukács that the classical instance of the genre played a pivotal role in nation-formation; it helped to discover and “represent [the] internal unevenness” or local differences within a given polity, only then “to *abolish*” that unevenness by refiguring the local as a temporal “past” that progress required the nation to

surmount (40). On the other hand, such critics as Ian Duncan, Katie Trumpener, and Anthony Jarrells have called attention to Lukács's misprision of Scott's "national" identification—his failure to grasp the difference between Scottish and English—while suggesting that the historical novel's attention to the local renders visible *non*-national dynamics that are, implicitly, global in scope.

"Despite very deep connections between the novel and the nation," writes Jarrells, "the genre was also a site for imagining a different kind of totality." This totality was "at once local and global—or, in [Saskia] Sassen's words, one in which we can detect 'the presence of globalizing dynamics in thick social environments that mix national and non-national elements.'" Jarrells marshals these claims about the novel-form for a revision of the *historical* novel in particular, arguing that one can "identify global processes in the complicated social world outlined by Scott and also ... see in such a world those 'materials for a post-national imaginary' described by [Arjun] Appadurai" (109; 126).

It is in the context of these latter formulations that I wish to frame the current essay. My concern is with the emergence in recent years of a *postcolonial* historical fiction. The novels to which I turn suggest that this is a relatively self-standing genre, one whose generic coherence resides in the way its analysis of colonialism leads it to reject the nation as both ground and unit of historical understanding. For however much critics may be right that the historical novel "has never been national" (Jarrells 109), in its postcolonial incarnation this is true in unprecedented and radical new ways. The classical version of the genre sought to "open a totalizing and mapping access to society as a whole," as Fredric Jameson argues (Introduction 7). But that attempt remained constrained by a national imaginary that, even when extending in the "totalizing" direction described by Jarrells, could not yet situate nations in the context of colonial capitalism more generally—in relation, that is, to a supra-national, incipiently global system of domination. This is precisely what the postcolonial resuscitation of the genre aims to accomplish. The genre develops *critiques* of colonialism that are totalizing in their aims—that oblige us to think beyond both the nation and recent, mono-oceanic

paradigms for superseding it. At the same time, the very aspiration toward totality enables books in the genre to uncover traces of previous life-worlds that resist the totalizing aims of capital. These books engage in the *utopian* project of constellating alternative, post-national futures, which they locate in the unrealized residues of a “premodern” past that persists within and disrupts the “homogeneous, empty time” of colonial modernity (Benjamin 261). The urgency of the genre for our present lies in the way it marshals these pasts as resources for imagining novel, transnational alternatives to our neo-colonial globality.

My central examples are two extraordinary sea-faring novels, Barry Unsworth’s *Sacred Hunger* (1992) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2006). The first explores the ever-widening, remorseless devastations wreaked by the African slave trade in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century; the second examines the incursion of agricultural capitalism into the Bengali countryside of the early 1830s, along with the rise of indentured servitude on the Indian Ocean in response to the abolition of the slave trade. I note here that, like all but one of the novels in my archive, these books were composed originally in English.¹ (The exception is Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* [1992], written in exuberant creole French.) My comments therefore pertain to a largely Anglophone set of developments, though my hope is that they prove useful to scholars of other literatures where historical fiction has become newly salient. I’ve also selected from within my archive works that best exemplify inclinations that are of course developed unevenly and differentially in particular texts. I focus on *Sea of Poppies* and *Sacred Hunger*, in other words, because they distill key features of the genre in exceptionally striking fashion. Since those features involve above all the dialectic between totalizing critique and utopian recovery described above, it is to that dialectic that I wish first to turn.

The critique of colonialism can help us counter the general hostility in postcolonial scholarship toward materialist modes of explanation. This hostility has been well documented by Neil Lazarus and Benita Parry (among others), the latter of whom persuasively argues that much

work in the field has failed to situate “the imperial project ... within the determining instance of capitalism’s global trajectory.” Such work has tended to “uproot [imperialism] from its material ground and resituate it as a cultural phenomenon.... [W]here ‘the politics of the symbolic order’ displaces the more demanding politics operating in real-world situations, and a theoretical commitment to rejecting fixed subject-positions as ontologically faulty and dyadic polarities as epistemologically unsound acts to erase structural conflict, there is no space for anti-colonialist discourses which inscribe irreconcilable contest, or for anti-colonialist practices that were manifestly confrontational” (8). *Sacred Hunger* and *Sea of Poppies* are both committed to this grounding of imperialism in capitalism’s global aspirations, as well as to the contestatory view of colonial relations that follows from it. Unworth’s novel attempts, for example, nothing less than a “cognitive map” (in Jameson’s term) of racial capitalism in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century, tracing “the complex chain of transactions between the capture of a negro” on the west coast of Africa “and the purchase of a new cravat ... or the giving of a supper party” in Liverpool (266-7).² In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh engages in a similar mapping of the Indian-Ocean world by way of the journeys of characters from various classes, castes, races, and genders toward (and then on) a ship carrying indentured servants to Mauritius. Both books, in short, focus on colonial *capitalism* as a systemic, transhemispheric phenomenon that linked even as it differentiated geographically far-flung regions of the globe. They show that this process was concerned at heart with conquest, land and resource appropriation, labor exploitation, unbridled commodification, and the destruction of “pre-capitalist” economic systems in the name of their integration into a global capitalist order (see Brown 9-11).

This attention to social totality is especially evident in the books’ capacity to connect the Atlantic and Indian-Ocean worlds. Indeed, one aim of conjoining these texts is to build on recent work that complicates Paul Gilroy’s account of (post)colonial modernity in relation to the Black Atlantic (Bose; Gupta et. al.; Hofmeyr; Lionnet). Gilroy has used the trope of the ship-in-motion to

revise our conceptions of modern identity formation, stressing the significance of “routes” over “roots” and the interracial, transnational processes by which resistant identities and counterhegemonic solidarities were formed. *Sacred Hunger* can itself be read as a compelling fictional enactment of such processes (though the novel appeared the year prior to Gilroy’s book). Placing that book alongside *Sea of Poppies* alters our angle of vision, however. The juxtaposition “expands the ‘black Atlantic’ basin as the crucible of interactive black/nonwhite modernities” (to borrow from Elleke Boehmer). The works *together* “request ... that the notion of outernational formation of modern identity should be transposed and ... adapted to include, for example, the Indian Ocean, and ... the Atlantic Ocean *as linked to* the Indian” (50). Such a revision has the corollary benefit of drawing a region favored for analysis by the subaltern studies collective into dialogue with a region that has not attracted much of their attention. For if Gilroy has enabled us to map the Atlantic world without yet indicating its link to the other main theater of British colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, those influenced by subaltern studies have tended to focus on (and relied on models generated from) the subcontinent at the expense of the Atlantic world. *Sea of Poppies* and *Sacred Hunger*, I’m suggesting, can help us correct for both these misprisions. Their juxtaposition revises our maps of the colonial past by expanding and linking the geographical fields in which the object of postcolonial studies has habitually been constructed.

Yet in both cases, the aspiration toward systemized understanding goes hand in hand with a *critique* of totalization. The critique is partly a matter of disclosing the geographico-systemic disjunctures between each book’s central theater of action and the “other world” that at once informs and remains absent to it. Here my juxtaposition of texts is intended to highlight the supplementary logic between disparate parts of the social totality: a work devoted to the Atlantic world can “know” the Indian Ocean only as a relatively autonomous, subsystemic domain that partly determines its representation yet exceeds the novel’s direct, representational grasp (Derrida 141-57).

Hence each novel contains within it a nodal point at which it opens onto what cannot be fully integrated into its narrative system. In *Sacred Hunger* this takes the form of a conversation between a minor character and Erasmus Kemp, colonial capitalist and champion of the slave trade:

“I am glad of your good opinion,” Moore said with a slight smile. “I take it you approve of the East India trade?”

Kemp hesitated from habitual caution. But this was public knowledge. “My firm supports the Company of Elliot and Son,” he said. . . . “All reports indicate that our new Colony of India is capable of large-scale production [of tea]. The East India Company is doing us a service. The more sugar, the more tea—it takes no prodigious wit to see that.” (412)

In *Sea of Poppies*, the relevant moment concerns the provenance of its main vessel, the *Ibis*:

[S]he had been built to serve as a “blackbirder,” for transporting slaves. This, indeed, was the reason why she had [recently] changed hands: in the years since the formal abolition of the slave trade, British and American naval vessels had taken to patrolling the West African coast in growing numbers, and the *Ibis* was not swift enough to be confident of outrunning them. [T]he schooner’s new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium. In this instance the purchasers were a firm called Burnham Bros., a shipping company and trading house that had extensive interests in India and China. (11)

Without belaboring this point, we can say that such moments highlight the internal limit of each novel’s effort at systematization. *Sacred Hunger*’s account of colonial capitalism in the Atlantic world depends upon its bracketing/including the East India trade and the Indian Ocean—dimensions of eighteenth-century colonialism which can neither be fully represented nor excluded from the novel’s explanatory system. The same point goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for *Sea of Poppies*. Its treatment of opium production and the conscription of coolie labor on the subcontinent gestures toward an Atlantic prehistory that is both constitutive of the novel’s “world” and incompletely apprehensible from the vantage point of that world. The internal admission of this inapprehensibility is a central aspect of each book’s self-critical representational project.

A second element of this self-critique echoes the analyses in recent work on the epistemological dimensions of colonial violence. In his *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom proposes that central to Atlantic world slavery was a market revolution that institutionalized bills-of-exchange as mechanisms for securing the mobility of capital, and that such bills had the effect of transforming slaves “not only [into] commodities” but into “interest-bearing money. They functioned in this system simultaneously as commodities for sale and as the reserve deposits of a loosely organized, decentered, but vast trans-Atlantic banking system: deposits made at the moment of sale and instantly reconverted into short-term bonds” (61). This means that fundamental to the slave trade was a process of actuarial *abstraction* and dehumanizing *typification* (each slave “typified” a given unit of capital) that Baucom suggests were also central to the eighteenth-century novel’s representational project. Hence the novel, a certain kind of historicism, finance capital, and slavery are all in this view of a piece, with the novel and historicism’s deployment of human particularity in the service of a general, abstract significance performing an epistemological variant of the violence inflicted more directly by slavery and capitalism. (There is a second, complicating move to Baucom’s argument, to which I turn in the conclusion.)

Sea of Poppies and (especially) *Sacred Hunger* offer related critiques of the abstractions entailed in totalized understanding. In Unsworth’s novel, the central character at one point thinks: “one builds a satisfactory system only when one is ignorant of the characteristics of the phenomena to be explained” (149). This criticism is later expanded into a critique of the homologies between “totalizing” thought and the typifying processes of colonialism: “Partiklar to gen’ral is story of the slave trade,” as one of the ex-slaves puts it (563). *Sea of Poppies* registers a similar suspicion toward typified abstraction, especially in its emphasis on local knowledges (and mongrel languages) that are practical-preconceptual in their orientation and resist easy absorption into the totalizing logic of system. Yet in both novels, this attention to the dangers of totalization issues from within a

materialist commitment to totality. The books' understanding of colonial capital as a system leads them to resist what Jameson has called the "baleful equation between a philosophical conception of totality and a political practice of totalitarianism" ("Cognitive," 284). Instead they insist on the simultaneous necessity and danger of abstraction-totalization: its indispensability with respect to the project of mapping and hence resisting social processes that are themselves totalizing; and the dangers inhering in modes of thought that, however much they aim to expose or counter the project of colonial capital, must also participate in the departicularizing logic that is one legacy of such a project.

At the same time—and here I arrive at the second component of the dialectic between critique and utopia—within yet counterposing this orientation toward the past, these novels imagine alternative ways of conceptualizing the postcolonial future. They seek to recover from the historical past new resources for the radical imagination. They retrieve from the dustbin of history the inassimilable, heterogeneous traces of stories that resist our dominant historiography—the counterstories of aspiration and solidarity that the colonial and neo-colonial projects have occluded, repressed, and sought to write out of the historical record. This recovery entails a procedure akin to that described by Walter Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin speaks of how the historical imagination can find itself arrested "in ... configuration[s] pregnant with tensions." This "Messianic cessation of happening" refers to moments of historical opacity or interpretive recalcitrance in the historical record. It denotes those places in our national histories where alternative possibilities for organizing social life refuse to be fully expunged or assimilated to the progressivist march of History. Those moments freeze the historical imagination in its methodological tracks; they isolate and congeal themselves into windowless temporal "monads," requiring us to apprehend them as disjunctively contiguous with what comes before and after. They represent "a revolutionary chance" to recover the counterstories contained within them—to render

explicit the “taste” of the till-now “tasteless seeds” of history—and mobilize them for radical projects in the present. Both *Sacred Hunger* and *Sea of Poppies* seize this chance to “blast” such stories out of the “homogeneous course of history,” and hence to constellate, as Benjamin puts it, a “conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time” (262-3).

The novels offer contrasting versions of this utopian recovery. In *Sacred Hunger*, Unsworth extracts the utopian seed from a horrific historical event, the *Zong* massacre of 1781. This was an incident in which the captain of the slave ship *Zong* ordered over one hundred sick slaves thrown overboard so that the ship’s owners could collect insurance on them as lawful jetsam.³ Unsworth retells this story such that—first—the slave ship he calls the *Liverpool Merchant* becomes a typification of the social relations characteristic of racial capitalism in the Atlantic world; but second, the ship’s very hierarchies and cruelties incubate the conditions for new, transnational solidarities and alternative relational possibilities. When the massacre begins, the slaves thus join the ship’s (white) doctor and a radical painter aboard ship in mutinous rebellion; this interracial group of rebels then murders the captain, runs the ship aground on the coast of Florida, and founds a community that aims to embody the radical-egalitarian potential of the modern, Enlightenment discourse of rights. (This utopian aspiration, combined with the representational ambition to map totality, distinguishes *Sacred Hunger* from M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong* [2008]—an extraordinary experiment but one that eschews utopianism and totalization in favor of fragmentation and spectrality.) In *Sea of Poppies*, Ghosh, too, emphasizes how the repressive conditions aboard ship at once typify colonial relations on the Indian Ocean and provide the basis for resistant solidarities and alternative modes of social organization. Yet these solidarities here take the form less of a distillation of the radical potential embedded in modern rights than of a de-sedimentation of “traditional” life-forms that lie secreted in the secular-modern. To these alternative solidarities Ghosh gives the name of “ship-siblings”; they at

once refigure and reenact, within the novel's colonial present, the reciprocal pleasures and obligations of pre-secular kin-relations, which modernity consigns to the "premodern" past but that Ghosh shows to persist "in" the modern as what disrupts its complacent hegemony.⁴

Since utopian thought has been subject to significant critique since the 1980s, it's worth indicating that the books I discuss have incorporated those critiques into their substance.⁵ The alternatives to colonial capitalism they envision are "critical utopias" in the sense that Tom Moylan gives this term: "[T]hese texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream.... [They] dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated [than in earlier utopian works]. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic [their imagined] alternatives" (10-11). Each of these points is key to the project of postcolonial historical fiction. Both *Sacred Hunger* and *Sea of Poppies* emphasize the *dream* of alternatives to colonial capital rather than the imposition of preconceived blueprints; they articulate not the bad utopian fantasy of full mastery over the future, but rather the conjunctural or contingent character of utopia's emergence, the messy process of wresting power and/or establishing alternative enclaves within the dominant order, and the internal, historically determined limitations to such alternatives. Such complexities are evident whether the alternative is a fully embodied social order or the fragile recasting of traditional relations on the modern-utopian model of "ship-siblings." In both cases, the contingency of radical change and the dynamic character of invented alternatives challenge the view that utopia entails the imposition of preconceived blueprints that browbeat the world into "closure" or stasis.

Yet *Sea of Poppies* and *Sacred Hunger* also insist that *some* measure of closure is necessary to utopia's effectiveness as a project. They implicitly reject such positions as Jameson's, in which "the formal necessity of closure" reveals that "all ostensible Utopian content [is] ideological, and that the

proper function of its themes [lies] in critical negativity.... [T]he true vocation of the utopian narrative,” Jameson continues, is “to confront us with our own incapacity to imagine Utopia ... to jar the mind into some heightened but unconceptualizable consciousness of its own powers, functions, aims and structural limits” (*Archaeologies* 211, 293).⁶ Jameson’s commitment to a *negative* dialectics and his skepticism toward the affirmative, incarnated moment in any dialectical movement lead him to underestimate the value of envisioning utopian alternatives. For him the utopian imagination is valuable *only* for the negations it performs. Those negations serve the double function of denaturalizing the current social order and offering the mind, in a photographic negative, the “preconceptual” figuration of a radically “other” order. The representational embodiment of that order will always, however, in Jameson’s view, be undermined by the closures it implies: by the “positive” specification of this or that quality or institution or spatial configuration (and so forth) to the exclusion of others. I am inclined to view this position as a symptom of what Jameson himself describes as “the fear or anxiety before Utopia”: the terror at “everything we stand to lose in the course of so momentous a transformation that—even in imagination—it can be thought to leave little intact of current passions, habits, practices, and values” (*Seeds* 61, 60). But be that as it may, my wager in what follows is that an invaluable lesson of *Sea of Poppies* and *Sacred Hunger* concerns the necessity of concretely envisioning the positive “content” of utopian alternatives. “Critique which disrupts the ideological closure of the present is essential,” writes Ruth Levitas, “but it is even more important to disrupt the *structural* closure of the present” (125). The backward-looking character of these books is part of what enables the latter move: by representing the colonial *past* as the prehistory of our global present, the novelists estrange us from the “now” in something like the negative gesture that Jameson recommends; but within that past they also incarnate alternatives to colonial capitalism, cracking open the closures of our present by imagining the lineaments of other social worlds whose content we could do worse than claim for our own imaginations of the future.

II

Partly in the interest of space—and partly to stress how much of the representational work of the genre is often performed by a single work—I want in the essay’s remainder to focus primarily on *Sea of Poppies*.⁷ That book’s refusal of nation as analytical category and its effort at a totalizing cartography of empire are evident from even a cursory description of its characters’ travels. For all of those characters engage in journeys that exile them from national belonging; and the novel attends to these journeys in order to map not merely the physical spaces thereby traversed but a colonial capitalism whose systemic character alone explains how those places “go together.” The African American, Zachary Reid, for example, joins the *Ibis* in Baltimore before sailing with it across the Atlantic, around the Cape, and on up through the Indian Ocean to Calcutta. In Cape Town the ship takes on a lascari crew; its members “[come] from places that [are] far apart, and [have] nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them [are] Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (13). Paulette Lambert’s father hails from France but has fled to Calcutta because hounded as an atheist and revolutionary. Benjamin Burnham, the *Ibis*’s owner, is an Evangelical free-trader from Liverpool; he “spent some time on a blackbirder, sailing between America, Africa, and England,” worked as a clerk for a trading firm in the Pearl River delta (where he shuttled between the Portuguese enclave of Macao and the bustling, multinational “factories” of Canton), and made his fortune in the transport of convicts from Calcutta to “the British Empire’s network of island prisons” (73, 75). Finally, from almost everywhere “between the Ganges and the Indus,” come the indentured servants who will be the *Ibis*’s cargo. These are the *girmityas* who sell themselves by entering their names “on ‘girmits’—agreements on pieces of paper. The silver . . . paid for them [goes] to their families, and they [are] taken” downriver, past the Sundarbans, around the Ganga-Sagar island, and across the Kala Pani

(Indian Ocean), “never to be seen again” (389, 71).

Central to all of these journeys is a subcontinental variant of the ship-in-motion conceptualized by Gilroy (see Crane 7-8; Mondal 125). Here, however, there are *many* such vessels, not just one. The *Ibis* doubtless looms largest, and I return to it below. But Jodu belongs to a community of “boat people” and lives by ferrying passengers in a dinghy. We first meet the zemindar, Neel Rattan Halder, aboard his palatial budgerow. Paulette is born on a boat in the Hooghly; Kalua saves Deeti from sati by turning his ox-cart into a raft; the opium produced in Ghazipur sails past Deeti on the ghats of Chhapra (on its way to Calcutta); and Ah Fatt’s mother works and lives, first, on a sampan near Canton, then on a “kitchen boat” in those same waters.

The proliferation of vessels is one way in which this book extrapolates from purely spatial to social analysis. For each of these boats and dinghies, each sampan, budgerow, and ocean schooner, encapsulates its owner-occupants’ social location(s) within a complex whole. The novel thus in one sense aims to map the vessels hierarchically: the *Ibis* embodies “Imperial modernity” and stands at the apex, the budgerow says “Indian zemindar” and lies on a rung below it, and the rafts and dinghies array themselves beneath these according to their owners’ occupation, caste, social class, and so forth. At the same time, however, one effect of granting each boat a *narrative* dignity in the plot’s unfolding is to grant it a *social* dignity as well. It is as if Ghosh were insisting at once on the world-historical journey of a ship that typifies colonial modernity *and* on the subaltern, micro-historical journeys that those processes both propel and seek to absorb, cancel, or snuff out. Since, moreover, all of these vessels except the *Ibis* signal the persistence of pre-colonial life-worlds in the colonial present, the multiplication of water-borne crafts embodies the Benjaminian dialectic of temporality alluded to above: it enacts the tension between a homogeneous, historicist temporality in which secular modernity unfolds without impediment, and the inassimilable pockets of time where residues of alternative solidarities persist within and against the modern.

Nowhere is this dialectic more striking than in the book's treatment of the opium poppy. That flower can on one hand be seen as an emblematic substance of the modern. The novel's focus on the *Ibis* stems, in fact, from the way the ship enables it to chart a macro-historical story about the poppy's role in consolidating colonial capitalism in the nineteenth century. "As with many another slave-ship," Ghosh writes (in a passage quoted earlier), "the schooner's new owner had acquired her with an eye to fitting her for a different trade: the export of opium" (11). The *Ibis* thus instantiates a shift in the form of British capitalism—from human chattel to opium, and from the Atlantic-Ocean world to the Indian. This shift is in turn necessitated not merely by the Abolition Act of 1807 but by a trade imbalance that the *Ibis*'s owner is forthright enough to name directly. When Neel wonders if Britain might have something more "useful" to offer China than opium, Burnham replies: "[T]here is nothing [else] they want from us—they've got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But we, on the other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain" (109). Burnham here offers nothing less than a "materialist" insight into the necessity of opium to imperial supremacy.⁸ The necessity is at heart economic: the desire for Chinese silk and tea *requires* a corresponding British export if the "drain on silver" is to be sustainable. So inescapable is this logic that Burnham declares the Empire's willingness "to go to war in order to force opium on China" (112). Finally, against Neel's skepticism, Burnham insists that even "British rule in India could not be sustained without opium—that is all there is to it, and let us not pretend otherwise" (113). The novel in this way not only renders the *Ibis* an emblem for colonial capitalism in its subcontinental "moment," but also reveals the opium poppy as material basis of colonial rule and impetus for imperial warfare.

Sea of Poppies is at its most trenchant in its depiction of these material processes. The novel traces the devastation wreaked by Britain's imposition of opium production on rural Bengal. Poppy

cultivation was once, Ghosh writes, subordinate to an agriculture of the “useful.” Within living memory of a main character, Deeti, the “toothsome” crops of lentil, wheat, and vegetables took precedence over the “luxury” of poppies. The reason for this was that poppy cultivation is so labor-intensive that, in a world of scarcity and the struggle for subsistence, no “sane person would want” to grow more than a few “clusters between the fields that [bear] the main . . . crops.” The East India Company disturbs this state of affairs by imposing a new “rationality” on the peasant economy. That rationality entails, first, an economy of scale—a vast expansion of poppy cultivation that renders central what had been marginal and subordinates “useful” plants to the profitable one. This expansion is effected through force and the subterfuge of debt peonage: “Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else [besides poppy] to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asámi* contracts” (28-9). Second and just as important, this rationality requires a ruthless and proto-industrial efficiency, which Ghosh encapsulates in a stunning sequence that takes place inside the Ghazipur opium factory. (This focus on the factory constitutes, as Anupama Arora notes, a riposte to Orientalist stereotypes of the opium den, with their implication of Asian pathology and criminality [25].) The sequence shows how the factory is organized around principles of a Tayloresque precision. Its different buildings house different parts of the total labor process; each component of that process is, within the limits of a not-yet industrial system, highly regimented and rationalized, with the total labor process broken up into discrete, repetitive tasks: one group of men weighs the “poppy-flower wrappers” (93), another weighs the raw opium brought by individual farmers (while accountants hover to record moneys owed), and yet another group walks barefoot in circles inside a large vat, tramping the sludge to soften it. An army of children in one building fetches orders from “immense shelves . . . arranged with tens of thousands of identical balls of opium” (94). These are then “assembled” in a process “so finely honed . . . with relays of runners carrying precise measures of

each ingredient to each seat, that the assemblers' hands never had cause to falter: they lined the moulds in such a way as to leave half the moistened rotis hanging over the edge. Then, dropping in the balls of opium, they covered them with the overhanging wrappers, and coated them with poppy-trash before tapping them out again. It remained only for runners to arrive with the outer casing for each ball," and the production process is complete (95).

It should be clear that this rational system is, from the peasant's perspective, *irrational*: no "sane person would want" either to eradicate useful crops for luxuries or to submit to the alienating rigors of this new work discipline. Only a system whose universalizing ambition makes it dependent on the production of false needs—on the colonization of desire itself—would call such madness "rational" while developing the economically efficient, humanly destructive production methods necessary to it. Ghosh's description of the Ghazipur factory emphasizes this global trajectory. "[T]he measure of every ingredient was precisely laid down by the Company's directors in faraway London," he writes, and "the drug [would] travel the seas" in the form of identically-packaged casements, "until [each] casement was split open by a blow from a cleaver, in distant Maha Chin [i.e., China]" (95). Such details reveal that the apparently discrete place called "Ghazipur" cannot be thought without reference to a larger, supranational, and transoceanic system of dominion. That system spreads its rationality inexorably around the globe, in an effort to "realize"—to render real—the universality that colonial reason always and everywhere claims for itself.

Up to this point, Ghosh's account of the poppy corresponds with striking fidelity to the process that Marx calls capitalism's "becoming" (*Grundrisse* 459). He means by this, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown, the dynamics by which capitalism *posits* a particular past as "its" past, instituting exactly those breaks necessary to establishing its supremacy—and thereby making it possible to speak of feudalism, for example, as belonging to the "prehistory" of capitalist modernity, as a social formation recognizable within the parameters of capitalism's arising out of its destruction.

Such a view of history is indispensable to understanding capitalism as a world-historical phenomenon; it illuminates in particular the universalist ambition of capitalist modernity, which seeks precisely to colonize history and make it into *its* prehistory, the story of its own, implicitly necessary and implacable coming into being.

Yet Chakrabarty uncovers in Marx a second aspect of capital's prehistory, one that resonates with Benjamin's conceptions and helps us explore the other historical dimension of opium in *Sea of Poppies*.⁹ Chakrabarty calls this History 2 and opposes it to the previous kind, History 1. "Elements" of this other prehistory "are also 'antecedents' of capital, in that capital 'encounters them as antecedents,' but . . . 'not as antecedents established by itself, nor as forms of its own life-processes'" (63). This means that "'antecedent to capitalism' are not only the relationships that constitute History 1 but also other relationships that do not lend themselves to the reproduction of the logic of capital. Only History 1 is the past 'established' by capital. . . . Marx accepts, in other words, that the total universe of pasts that capital encounters is larger than the sum of those elements in which are worked out the logical presuppositions of capital" (64). The implications of this analysis for my reading of *Sea of Poppies* are large. I shall in fact be arguing that, if the poppy is, as already suggested, a figure for what capital turns into an antecedent to its "own life-processes" (History 1), it is equally an instance of History 2, a figuration of a life-world that capital *fails* to integrate and sublimate.

The fullest elaboration of this aspect of the poppy concerns its connection to the pre-secular world of gods and spirits. The life-world Deeti inhabits at the book's inception is one in which the worship of Hindu deities shapes the most basic rhythms of existence. She visits her "shrine room" soon after rising in the morning; later she makes the "noontime puja" by bathing in the Ganga and pouring "tribute to the holy city" of Benares, to the west (4, 7). That the opium flower has its place in this ritually-organized life is clear. The walls of her personal shrine are "devoted to pictures that Deeti had drawn herself, in outline, on papery poppy-petal discs: such were the charcoal portrait of

two brothers and a sister, all of whom had died as children” (9). Poppy becomes here the substance upon which a memory of the dead is inscribed for an expressly religious consecration. The flower emblematic of a modernity committed to *destroying* the past and *desacrilizing* the present is, in other words, also the material basis for the past’s persistence in a sacrilized present. Similarly, it is while making puja in the Ganges that Deeti is stricken with prophetic vision. This is a vision that the novel dignifies with an epistemological and ethical perspicacity not ordinarily granted to the supernatural in fiction (the novel being a secular genre), and one that reveals the *dynamism* of “tradition,” the way in which poppy as an instance of History 2 presents possibilities for modern ways of being that resist the logic of capitalist modernity. “The vision of a tall-masted ship came to Deeti on an otherwise ordinary day,” Ghosh writes,

but she knew instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny, for she had never seen such a vessel before.... Her village was so far inland that the sea seemed as distant as the netherworld.... [H]er eyes suddenly conjured up a picture of an immense ship with two tall masts.... The prow of the ship tapered into a figurehead with a long bill, like a stork or a heron....

Deeti knew that the vision was not materially present in front of her . . . yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction. (3, 8-9)

The passage asks us to see Deeti’s vision as a specimen of the supernatural. The *Ibis* is not “materially present” before her, and she has never seen such a ship in her life. Her vision of it therefore has no secular, empirico-scientific grounds. It is emblematic of the peasant “provincialism” that conflates physical distance with otherworldliness (the ocean as equivalent to the “netherworld”), or indeed, of the premodern religious commitments that lead her to the Ganges to make puja in the first place. Such details link Deeti’s vision of the ship to a life-world animated by the secularly inexplicable presence of gods and spirits.

It’s crucial that Ghosh neither ironizes nor condescends toward this spirit-animation. Deeti’s vision, he asks us to believe, is both supernatural and *true*: the *Ibis* will indeed be her “destiny”; it

really exists, and is “headed in her direction.” Her drawing of it will turn out to be an “uncannily evocative rendition of its subject,” as “even seasoned sailors [will] admit” (10). And since the ship is a typification of opium-based, Indian-ocean capital, the accuracy of her drawing suggests that her “premodern” vision retains an epistemological truth-value with respect to the processes of the modern. It is as if a piercing, temporally heterogeneous experience that the novel associates with the pre-disenchanted provides a unique kind of insight into the substance and meaning of colonial modernity. The political significance of that insight hinges on the “destiny” that the ship represents. In part, that destiny is clearly (and quintessentially) modern. Deeti is forced when her husband dies into a physical rupture with her settled, rural existence; the rupture results in an experience of exile and what Lukács calls “transcendental homelessness” (*Theory*, 41); and the permanence of this condition is marked by her becoming one of the girmitiyas at whose plight she had earlier been horrified (see 71). To the extent that this transformation embodies the “meaning” of Deeti’s destiny, capitalist modernity would seem to achieve a brute, irresistible, and homogenizing victory over the premodern—a victory that rips the peasant away from all pasts not assimilable to capital’s “life-processes,” and one that premodern vision may foretell but that it is powerless to alter or prevent.

But this is not the entire story. Ghosh goes on to insist that Deeti is involved in *making* her own destiny. He indicates that in doing so she lays claim to a subaltern and potentially utopian form of agency. And he suggests that this kind of agency is linked to an appropriation of poppy’s prehistory in the name of a future beyond colonial capitalism—the reclaiming of that aspect of poppy that was both antecedent to capital and inassimilable to its logic.

A critical moment in this sequence occurs when Deeti first meets Paulette on the boat that takes them to the *Ibis*. Paulette is at the time disguised as a girmitiya of upper-caste origin. Deeti asks if she isn’t “afraid of losing caste? Of crossing the Black Water, and being on a ship with so many sorts of people?” There then ensues the following exchange:

Not at all, the girl replied.... On a boat of pilgrims no one can lose caste and everyone is the same: it's like taking a boat to the temple of Jagannath, in Puri. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings—*jahāẓbhais* and *jahāẓbahens*—to each other. There'll be no differences between us.

This answer was so daring, so ingenious, as fairly to rob the women of their breath. Not in a lifetime of thinking, Deeti knew, would she have stumbled upon an answer so ... thrilling in its possibilities. In the glow of the moment, she did something she would never have done otherwise: she reached out to take the stranger's hand in her own. Instantly, in emulation of her gesture, every other woman reached out too, to share in this communion of touch. Yes, said Deeti, from now on, there are no differences between us; we are jahaz-bhai and jahaz-bahen to each other; all of us children of the ship. (348)

This seems to me a stunning account of the radical potential embedded in life-worlds that colonial modernity traduces. The women become “ship-siblings” not through reference to the secular abstractions so central to modern doctrines of rights. What makes the proposal “thrilling,” in fact, is that it draws upon while reconfiguring a concrete and specifically non-secular *practice*—the practice of religious pilgrimage. That practice ordinarily institutes a kind of temporal interregnum; caste differences fall away on pilgrimage because one's identity as pilgrim takes temporary precedence over the contingencies of caste. Paulette seizes on this interregnum for emphatically modern purposes, proposing to make it *permanent* (“From now on, and forever afterwards,” she says) while extracting from the religious practice its radical-egalitarian significance. The indentured servants' coerced subjugation on a secular journey through homogeneous time is thus refashioned as secular pilgrimage, a “worldly” journey that interrupts such time with visions of modern sisterhood based on the non-modern realm of the sacred. The birth of that sisterhood, as the novel shows, entails the exertion of an agency wedded to a new kind of being-toward-others: siblings are responsible to take actions for each other in a way that atomized subjects are not. It also requires the extraordinarily moving consecration of touch delineated in the quoted passage. The women touch each others' flesh in a communion that stands in stark contrast to the abstract equality of secular rights, performing

the bodily rejection of those “differences” around which are structured the social inequalities that the discourse of rights seeks to transcend.¹⁰

This birth of utopian sisterhood is not “ideological” in Jameson’s sense of the term: it neither relies upon premature “closure” nor reveals “that our most energetic imaginative leaps into radical alternatives [are] little more than the projections of our own social moment and historical or subjective situation” (*Archaeologies*, 211). The community marks instead the emergence of bonds that challenge the colonial-modern by retrieving and actualizing its undigested pasts. The orientation toward the past serves as a prophylactic against the urge to subordinate utopian futurity to the narcissistic closures of our present. “Deeti [now] understood,” Ghosh writes, “why the image of the vessel had been revealed to her that day, when she stood immersed in the Ganga: it was because her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden *mái-báp*, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come” (348). The utopian character of this vision resides precisely in the way it foretells a newness that draws upon while reconfiguring a discarded (pre-secular) past. The newness itself marks a transfiguration of the colonial-modern by way of the past that it fails to sublate. Hence the ship Deeti “sees” is at once the embodiment of modernity’s characteristic power relations *and* the “adoptive parent” out of which the counter-community of siblings is born. The destiny she apprehends is one of rebirth into a traditional relationship (pilgrim-sibling) that’s been reconfigured and radicalized through its contact with colonial modernity. What the current passage does is then to link this dynamic to a disturbance in secular-historicist time: the ship-siblings are “gestating” in the ship *before they even arrive there*; they *already exist* on the colonial schooner—in fetal-embryonic form—haunting the *Ibis* with the encysted presence of a past undigested by colonial capital, and promising, too, the birth of a future that violates capitalism’s own “life-processes.”

The emergence of that future turns out to hinge again on the meaning of poppy. At one

point on the journey, a dying girmitiya bequeaths to Deeti three pouches. The first contains marijuana seeds; the second, datura. The third pouch, Sarju says, “contains seeds of the best Benares poppy.... This [the poppy], the ganja, the datura,” she continues: “make of them the best use you can.... Keep them hidden until you can use them; they are worth more than any treasure” (428). A hidden continuity with the premodern past is here the means for germinating seeds of a future alternative to colonial modernity. The poppy seeds’ role in this process provides a felicitous analogue for Benjamin’s project of extracting “seeds of time” from an imperial colonization of the temporal.¹¹ The other temporalities promised by those seeds emerge in the dual valence Ghosh grants to opium: it is “at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful” (439). Opium, in other words, is not *reducible* to a substance of exploitation and destruction; poppy’s prehistory as inassimilable “antecedent” contains as well the future possibility of a sustaining or “bountiful” alternative to such destructiveness. It’s for this reason, too, that the novel describes the opium high as a “gift”; it “works a strange magic with time,” says one character, so that “To go from one day to another, or even one week to the next, becomes as easy as stepping between decks” (423). What can this mean if not that opium is the substance of a disturbance to homogeneous, empty time? It marks the persistence in the modern world of a “magic” that involutes, contracts, and expands the secular temporal register—and one out of which alternative solidarities might someday be realized.

III

It would be possible to show that all of the book’s main characters undergo a transformation similar to Deeti’s, and that the novel’s form, too, enacts a version of this dynamic. I want, however, by way of conclusion, to broach a larger, theoretical problem. The recent variant of Anglophone historical fiction has flourished especially since the early 1970s—the novels analyzed in the longer study of

which this essay is a part span the years 1973 (J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*) to 2009 (Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*). This relatively recent efflorescence raises the question of the genre's place in the evolution of historical fiction more generally. For if, as Lukács and Moretti have differently argued, the classical historical novel emerged in the early nineteenth century as a form for mourning prenational assemblages while affirming the nation-form that emerged from their destruction, and if the genre's revelatory power could not survive the supplanting of the "heroic" phase of bourgeois nationalism by a reactionary, anti-democratic phase (after 1848), how are we to account for the rebirth of this form in the last decades of the twentieth century? What, in short, are the historical developments that have made historical fiction newly trenchant? And what made it historically likely that the genre would take both a transoceanic and an expressly anti-colonial form?

In approaching these questions, Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic* proves especially helpful. It offers a way to link our contemporary world with the era of historical fiction's first emergence. Baucom draws on the arguments of Giovanni Arrighi to show how the material basis of post-industrial societies—the triumph of a *finance* capital that generates wealth from capital itself, from the seemingly infinite mobility and self-replicating character of fictional money—all of this is an intensified reprisal of processes already operative in the heyday of British colonialism. The history of capitalism is here understood as a series of cycles that repeat themselves over time and operate according to Marx's formula MCM^1 (where M = money; C = the transformation of money into commodities; and M^1 = the exponentially greater return of capital from the liquidation of commodities). Arrighi separates this process into two discrete phases: "The central aspect of this pattern [MCM^1] is the alternation of epochs of material expansion (MC phases of capital accumulation) with phases of financial rebirth and expansion (CM^1 phases). In phases of material expansion money capital 'sets in motion' an increasing mass of commodities...; and in phases of

financial expansion an increasing mass of money capital ‘sets itself free’ from its commodity form, and accumulation proceeds through financial deals (as in Marx’s abridged formula MM^1). Together, the two epochs or phases constitute a full *systemic cycle of accumulation* (MCM^1)” (6). Arrighi chronicles the evolution of modernity through four such cycles, each of which corresponds to the hegemony of a specific nation-state within the expanding capitalist inter-state system: the Genoese (1450-1650), the Dutch (1560-1780), the British (1750-1925), and the American (1860-present). He points as well to an additional stage whose “center” is not yet clear but that seems to have begun around 1980.

What interests Arrighi and Baucom especially are moments corresponding to the “abridged formula” of MM^1 ; these are moments of overlap *between* each of the full cycles. In Baucom’s words, such moments “mark out four crucial periods in which finance capital [as opposed to commodity capital] exerts its dominance over an ever-expanding capital world system.... [They] define themselves as the highest moments of finance capital, moments in which capital seems to turn its back entirely on the thingly world, sets itself free from the material constraints of production and distribution, and revels in its pure capacity to breed money from money” (27).

Baucom’s claim is that the “long twentieth century” which we inhabit represents precisely one such moment, and that it stands in an “uncanny” relation to an equivalent era of MM^1 in the late eighteenth century. “Our time,” he writes, “is a present time which ... inherits its nonimmediate past by intensifying it, by ‘perfecting’ its capital protocols, ‘practicalizing’ its epistemology, realizing its phenomenology as the cultural logic ‘of the entire social-material world’” (29). Given what I said earlier about the complicities Baucom detects between the novel form and the abstracting typifications of finance capital, this might seem to imply that the novel of our own times reprises while intensifying that complicity. It’s here, however, that a wrinkle in Baucom’s argument proves illuminating. For if the early novel, the slave trade, and a specific kind of historicism all operate according to a speculative logic that “enacts” the protocols of finance capital, Baucom’s text also

describes a powerful counter-discourse. Against the “disinterested universalism” of liberal historiography he discovers the “interested cosmopolitanism” of abolitionist discourse. Against an “actuarial historicism” that colludes with the insurance table by “discover[ing] in the individual not what is exceptional *to* but what is typical *of* a given historical moment,” he ranges a “romantic historicism” that’s capable of honoring singularity, exceptionality, inassimilability-to-the-abstract. And against the “theoretical realism” perfected by Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, he poses, precisely, the “melancholy realism” of Walter Scott and the historical novel he invented.

This latter distinction hinges on the difference between two types of “type”: “[T]he actuarial type endorses the exchange of the ‘real’ for the ‘theoretical’ life of things by avowing the real existence of theoretical abstractions (hence ‘theoretical realism’); the romantic type, oppositely, implicitly resists the exchange of life for death by seeking to return dead things to life and insisting on the affective reality of the exemplary ghosts it calls from the vasty deeps (hence what I am calling ‘melancholy realism’)” (43-4). I remain unpersuaded that this resistant aesthetic is best described as *melancholic*. Still, the conjunction between a specific regime of capitalist accumulation, the birth of historical fiction as a form, and that form’s critical typifications is extremely suggestive. We might extrapolate from that conjunction something like the following: if the economic logic of the late twentieth century repeats, intensifies, and recuperates that of the eighteenth and early nineteenth—and if postmodern culture in general is that logic’s symptomatic expression—then the postcolonial historical novel stands, conversely, as the inheritor of Baucom’s counter-discourse, repeating, intensifying, and completing *its* powers of critical recovery.¹² The genre is born from the *re*emergence of a speculative capital that “turns its back on the thingly world ... and revels in its pure capacity to breed money from money.” It inherits and radicalizes the legacy of Scott in response to this scenario. Its typifications work to reveal how a central dimension to what postmodernity “disappears” in the triumphal rhetoric of globalization is the history of that earlier, more obviously

sinister, transoceanic order called colonial capitalism. And yet the genre, in revealing this link, also uncovers utopian resources for imagining alternatives to this global formation, based in local, pre-national solidarities that are nonetheless modern—and worldly—in scope.

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¹ The project includes works by American (Toni Morrison), South African (Marlene van Niekerk, Zoë Wicomb), Indian (Ghosh, Hari Kunzru, Arundhati Roy), Caribbean (Chamoiseau, Marlon James), Pakistani (Kamila Shamsie), and British authors (Unsworth, J.G. Farrell).

² My account of the literary mapping of totality is indebted to Lukács, *Historical*, and Jameson’s extension of Lukács in *Marxism* and “Cognitive Mapping.” While Lukács views realism as uniquely capable of such mapping, and while Unsworth’s and Ghosh’s books are clearly (if complicatedly) realist, I would resist Hamish Dalley’s suggestion that postcolonial historical fiction is realist *tout court*, even in the expanded sense he intends with the term “allegorical realism.” See my “Colonial Trauma” for an exploration of modernist examples. The argument of the current essay differs from Dalley’s, too, in the weight it gives to the aspiration toward systematized understanding and the emphasis on premodern residues subsisting within and disrupting the secular-modern.

³ The *Zong* became a watershed case in the history of anti-slavery. See Walvin, chap. 1 for details.

⁴ Despite superficial similarities, this alternative sociality should be rigorously distinguished from what Michel Foucault terms “heterotopias”—a concept whose limitations David Harvey has forcefully described (183-4).

⁵ For a summary of these criticisms, see Levitas, chap. 1.

⁶ Wegner argues that Jameson’s theory of cognitive mapping provides egress from this valorization of the negative.

⁷ A lengthier exposition of my argument about *Sacred Hunger* is in “Arts of Power.”

⁸ For an historical argument to this effect, see Trocki (xiii).

⁹ Ghosh and Chakrabarty engaged in a lengthy public correspondence about *Provincializing Europe*. See Chakrabarty and Ghosh, “Correspondence.”

¹⁰ The “differences” Paulette rejects here are *hierarchical* barriers to equality and communion. The novel is emphatically “for” alterity as a “horizontally” structuring principle of psychic and social life.

¹¹ I’m indebted to one of *PMLA*’s anonymous reviewers for this connection.

¹² While Baucom’s final chapter discusses contemporary novels by Toni Morrison and Fred D’Aguiar, my claim is that his model helps us understand the emergence of a new genre, not just of isolated texts.